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Vulnerability, Invulnerability, and the Mechanism of Disavowal

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I defend the view that, contrary to popular opinion, vulnerability is not merely susceptibility to harm but also openness to unanticipated change and transformation. Drawing on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Erinn Gilson, Gilles Deleuze, and Benedict Spinoza, I also aim to show that vulnerability is not a static property of some individuals but rather a relational process that is *both* universal *and* differently distributed. My original contribution to vulnerability studies is to trace the mechanism of disavowal across 20th and 21st century figures in philosophy: from Heidegger's account of disavowing our existential finitude, to Beauvoir's account of disavowing our fundamental ambiguity, to Butler's and Gilson's more politicized accounts of disavowing our vulnerability. Toward the end of the dissertation, I propose that by combining a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the affects with perspectives from disability studies that challenge common stereotypes and assumption about what it is like to be disabled, we can better understand vulnerability in general and our societal reasons for disavowing it. This, in turn, will enable us to respond more ethically to our and others' shared vulnerability.

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Introduction

At the California Men's Colony, inmate Samuel Baxter helps dementia patients with intimate daily tasks such as showering, shaving, and changing adult diapers. Baxter, who was convicted of murder, is a member of Gold Coats, a program that trains volunteer inmates to care for prisoners with dementia. To qualify for Gold Coats, inmates must have a record of five to 10 years of "clean behavior" in prison; and while the volunteer work looks good on a prisoner's record, it does not guarantee parole.[1] The program was initially designed to save money, but it has also led to a change of heart in many prisoner-caregivers. In a video interview, Baxter describes how caregiving transformed him: "A year ago, I couldn't have said, 'You know what man, I'm going to help this grown man…get in the shower, who just, you know, had an accident…it humbles you."[2] In another scene from the video, a dementia patient insists he "never take[s] a shower." Caregiver Montgomery assures him that "As a matter of fact, you take a shower almost every day." At first, the dementia patient remains doubtful, but after some mild encouragement, he gives in: "Alright, if that's the truth…then that's what I have to do."[3]

Sara Bartlett and Arlene Stepputat, directors of the Alzheimer's Association who train inmates to be Gold Coats, initially doubted whether violent felons could provide

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[1] Nancy Donaldson, Todd Heisler, Soo-Jeong Kang, and Catherine Spangler, "Dementia Behind Bars," *New York Times,* February 21, 2012. Video, 7:48, https://www.nytimes.com/video/health/100000001367225/dementia-behind-bars.html?smid=url-share. Cited in Lisa Gunther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 248-49.

[2] Donaldson et al, "Dementia Behind Bars."

[3] Donaldson et al.

compassionate care.[4] They were thus pleasantly surprised when they found inmates to be more receptive and easier to work with than many of the people they trained to care for relatives at home. The inmates, in turn, were grateful to be entrusted with this extraordinary responsibility. As one inmate put it, "Thank you for allowing me to feel human."[5]

What these examples are meant to illustrate is that *vulnerability* is not tantamount to injurability, but rather ambiguous through and through. Adriana Cavarero refers to this ambiguousness as the "two poles of the essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability: wounding and caring."[6] Like Judith Butler, Erinn Gilson, Ann Murphy, and others, she argues that, as embodied creatures, we are inevitably open to both responses. Indeed, in contemporary feminist philosophy, there has been a recent intensification of interest in the theme of corporeal vulnerability and its relationship to ethics.[7] Yet, as Gilson notes in *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* the meaning of vulnerability is often taken for granted, and it is presumed to be largely negative—synonymous with weakness, powerlessness, and passivity.

In this dissertation, I defend the view that, contrary to popular belief, vulnerability is not merely susceptibility to harm, but also openness to unexpected change and transformation. Put differently, vulnerability in and of itself is neither good nor bad but fundamentally ambiguous. Drawing on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Erinn

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[4] Pam Belluck, "Life, With Dementia," *New York Times,* February 25, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/health/dealing-with-dementia-among-aging-criminals.html.

[5] Belluck, "Life, With Dementia."

[6] Adriana Cavarero. *Horrorism*: *Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 20.

[7] For example, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* London and New York: Verso, 2006; Adriana Cavarero. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence.* New York: Columbia, University Press, 2009; Ann Murphy. *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2012; and Erinn Gilson. *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice.* New York: Routledge, 2014.

Gilson, Gilles Deleuze, and Benedict de Spinoza, I also aim to show that vulnerability is not a static property of some individuals, but rather a relational process that is *both* universal *and* differently distributed. My contribution to vulnerability studies is to trace the mechanism of disavowal across 20th and 21st century figures in philosophy: from Heidegger's account of disavowing our existential finitude, to Beauvoir's account of disavowing our fundamental ambiguity, to Butler's and Gilson's more politicized accounts of disavowing our vulnerability.[8] While the first two thinkers examine disavowal through an existentialist lens, the latter two explore some of the harmful political consequences of avoiding and disavowing vulnerability. Toward the end of the dissertation, I propose that by combining a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the affects with work from disability studies that challenges common assumptions about what it's like to be disabled, we can better understand vulnerability in general and our societal reasons for disavowing it. This, in turn, will enable us to respond more ethically to our and others' shared vulnerability.

The theme of corporeal vulnerability is articulated in the recent work of Judith Butler, whose books *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* have been, and continue to be, incredibly influential on feminist theorizing about vulnerability. In these books, Butler develops an ethics of vulnerability that is grounded in two distinct but related ideas: (1) a recognition of a generalized condition of precariousness and (2) an acknowledgement of one's own capacity to inflict violence on others and of the possible ramifications of such actions.[9] Although her ethics is one of non-violence, it is unmatched in its emphasis on ambiguity. While it would be

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[8] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie, New York: Harper and Row, 1962; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York: Citadel Press, 1976; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso, 2004; Butler, *Frames of War: When Is a Life Grievable?,* New York: Verso, 2009; and Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, London: Routledge, 2014.

[9] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 58.

less complicated to argue that caring, as opposed to wounding, is more fundamental to being human (or vice versa), this approach, according to Butler, would provide too easy of a solution to the problem of the ethical encounter. Instead, she argues that an apprehension of vulnerability in and of itself does not guarantee ethical action and can in fact provoke violence and aggression. In other words, both wounding and caring remain possible responses to the recognition of another's vulnerability. Although Butler acknowledges that vulnerability has variable meanings, her account of it focuses almost exclusively on its connection to violence. This is where Gilson's work comes into the picture.

In *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* Gilson argues that thinking vulnerability predominantly in relation to violence leads to a reductively negative understanding of the term. When vulnerability signifies mere weakness, powerlessness, and passivity, it is often repudiated and projected onto others with whom one disidentifies. Thus, if we are committed to reconceptualizing vulnerability as not wholly negative, then it needs to be thought apart from violence. For instance, it can also be linked to love, creativity, resilience, and joy. Moreover, it is important to recognize that vulnerability and dependency are closely related (but not identical) concepts and that an adequate account of the former must include a discussion of the latter. As Butler states in *The Forces of Nonviolence,* "The relational understanding of vulnerability shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible. In other words, because we cannot exist liberated from such conditions, we are never fully individuated."[10] For instance, as infants, we would not survive without our mother or primary caretaker and, as adults, we are fundamentally dependent on others and on infrastructures for the continuation of our lives. In what follows, I briefly

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[10] Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), 150-152, Kindle edition.

summarize the topics addressed in the main body of this dissertation, beginning with a general overview, and then shifting to a more detailed synopsis of each chapter.

I begin my dissertation with an overview of several philosophical analyses of unsettling truths about our existence and our tendency to disavow or evade these truths: Heidegger's concepts of anxiety, indeterminacy, and death (Chapter 1); Beauvoir's notions of fundamental ambiguity and moral uncertainty (Chapter 2); and, finally, Butler's intersecting concepts of precariousness, precarity, and corporeal vulnerability (Chapter 3). Next, I examine which aspects of Butler's account of vulnerability Gilson inherits and which she rejects, and then elucidate the latter's unique approach to conceptualizing vulnerability. This involves an extensive examination of our societal disavowal of vulnerability, which is closely associated with the unattainable, but alluring, ideal of invulnerability. Finally, I discuss the relationship between (in)vulnerability, stigma, disability, and a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the affects (Chapter 4). More specifically, I show how Spinoza and Deleuze's unique conception of the body in terms of its dynamic capacity to affect and be affected can help us combat dominant stereotypes and assumptions about disability. Such a conception of the body also supports my larger goal of highlighting the ambiguous, non-static, and relational nature of vulnerability.

Chapter 1 of my dissertation explores Heidegger's emphasis, in both his early and later work, on the related themes of uncertainty, openness, and receptivity. In *Being and Time*, he argues that the basic state of Dasein—that is, human existence—is "being-in-the-world," which stands for a unitary phenomenon. Rejecting Descartes' view that we are subjects set over against objects, Heidegger asserts that we are always already immersed in a world of practical involvement. In an everyday sense, this immersion might appear to be seamless. For

example, when we are familiar with a particular task or activity, we often perform it with ease. Put simply, it becomes second nature. Yet, Heidegger insists that although the basic state of humans is "being-in-the-world," we are simultaneously defined by our fundamental uncanniness or "not-being-at-home-in-the-world" (*Unheimlichkeit*). Like a square peg in a round hole, we will never seamlessly fit into our world. He argues, moreover, that this is revealed most vividly in the mood of anxiety.

According to Heidegger, it is through a mood that we first find ourselves in a world. For him, mood is the most basic and important—yet often overlooked—kind of intelligence; indeed, it is the precondition for thought itself. He also argues that we are *always* in a mood. Anxiety, however, is a uniquely disclosive mood because it is inextricably linked to our fundamental uncanniness. Primarily and for the most part, we attempt to flee from (or disavow) our anxiety by losing ourselves in the publicness of the anonymous, conformist "they." As Heidegger puts it, the "they" ceaselessly "accommodates the particular Dasein by *disburdening* it of its Being."[11] Yet, when we experience a collapse of our world of significance—or what Heidegger calls existential "death"—this anxiety becomes conspicuous. When our world collapses, what we formerly took for granted now seems strange and obtrusive. Technically, the world is still there, but we are radically dissociated from it. In *Being and Time* and "What Is Metaphysics?" Heidegger describes this profoundly unsettling experience as a kind of hovering in which pure Dasein (as project-less projecting) is all that remains. This is where Heidegger's contribution to the theme of vulnerability comes to the fore.

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[11] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 128. My emphasis.

Drawing on Heidegger's unique conceptions of anxiety and death, I argue that insofar as we are vulnerable creatures, that is, beings who are open to unexpected change and transformation, we face the perpetual threat of a collapse of our world of significance. Although we can certainly deny or avoid this ongoing threat to our being, our efforts will ultimately prove futile. Indeed, as the COVID-19 pandemic has so vividly demonstrated, no one is impermeable to a breakdown in intelligibility. As for the other option, we can choose to recognize that existential death or world collapse is possible at any moment and endure this constant threat. In Heideggerian parlance, anxiety is the mood that can hold open this threat rather than seeking to deny, flee from, or otherwise conceal it. Moreover, a genuine acknowledgement of death requires "anticipatory resoluteness," a sort of active passivity wherein we open ourselves to the impossibility of determining when death, as the collapse of our world of significance, will befall us. As I demonstrate in the latter half of Chapter 1, this notion of openness is also central to later Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit,* which he defines as "releasement toward things" and "openness to the mystery."[12] Thus, both resoluteness and *Gelassenheit* require us to freely choose to undertake our finite existence, which means that neither of these concepts implies mere weakness or impotency.

In Chapter 2, I examine Beauvoir's notion of the fundamental ambiguity of human existence, while tracking the movement between her ontological and ethical claims. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* she argues that there will always be an unsettling, ineliminable distance between us and the world, and that it is impossible to fully extinguish the desire to remove this distance. To assume our fundamental ambiguity, however, we must affirm, rather than *disavow*, this tension. While attempting to conceal our fundamental ambiguity might seems

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[12] Martin Heidegger, "Memorial address," in *Discourse on Thinking,* trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 54-56.

like the best or easiest solution, Beauvoir argues that this unsettling truth will always eventually come to the surface. Thus, since we cannot successfully flee from this truth, we might as well try to look it in the face.[13] Like Heidegger's concepts of resoluteness and *Gelassenheit*, Beauvoir's notion of "assuming ambiguity" entails an attitude of "letting be"; indeed, all three of these concepts involve the experience of witnessing, but not being fully in control of, the emergence of meaning. This, in turn, can be connected to the reconceptualization of vulnerability as an openness to unanticipated change and transformation that, as I stated earlier, is not simply either good nor bad but fundamentally ambiguous.

As Beauvoir tries to show us, our fundamental ambiguity extends beyond the realm of an existentialist ontology and into the realm of ethics. She argues that, insofar as we are humans, we depend on each other for our survival. Put differently, one cannot be free unless others are free. Moreover, she contends that the idea of such an interdependence is frightening; for the fact that we humans are simultaneously separate and bound to each other makes conflict inevitable. She calls the paradoxes that inevitably arise in human interaction the "antinomies of action." Still, she gives us the following principle for choosing whom to serve: we must strive, above all, to safeguard the indefinite movement of freedom. Hence, we ought to ask, before making an ethical decision, whether we are acting in a way that seeks to uphold the other's freedom. Yet, Beauvoir's ethics never allows us to rest assured that we are fighting the good fight; instead, we must live with the unease of never being entirely certain that we made the right ethical decision.

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[13] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 9.

Beauvoir's notion of our fundamental ambiguity and the moral uncertainty it implies is, in many ways, a precursor to recent feminist accounts of vulnerability. Yet, her ethics of ambiguity lacks an account of the body. Toward the end of the chapter, I argue that Butler's recent work on precariousness, which stresses that one's survival is socially bound up with the survival of others, both emphasizes the importance of ambiguity and avoids Beauvoir's shortcomings regarding the body. Like Beauvoir, Butler suggests that our constitutive interdependency and exposure to others is ambiguous in that it constitutes both a promise and a threat; however, her emphasis on the corporeal nature of vulnerability allows for a richer understanding of the relationship between ambiguity and vulnerability than found in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. According to Butler, acknowledging that we are vulnerable creatures does not, in itself, guarantee ethical action. Still, she suggests that our shared vulnerability can motivate, and even serve as a basis for, ethical action.

Chapter 3 expands upon some of the major themes addressed in the latter part of Chapter 2. More specifically, it seeks to (1) clarify which aspects of Butler's account of vulnerability Gilson inherits and which she rejects, (2) elucidate the latter's unique approach to conceptualizing vulnerability, and, finally, (3) enhance this approach by examining the relationship between vulnerability and disability stigma, the latter of which can be viewed as a form of disavowal. I begin the chapter by exploring Butler's distinction, in *Frames of War,* between precariousness and precarity. On the one hand, precariousness refers to the shared tenuousness of life, to the way our lives can be eradicated at will or by accident. On the other hand, precarity designates a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from inadequate socioeconomic networks of support and thereby become differentially

exposed to violence, injury, and death.[14] This distinction is crucial for Butler because it shows

how precariousness can be maximized for some populations under certain political conditions.

In *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* Gilson further develops this line of thinking and shows how it

can contribute to a more expansive conception of vulnerability.

According to Gilson, there is an importance difference between vulnerability and

precariousness. Although Butler does not explicitly distinguish between the two terms, Gilson

argues that such a distinction is a logical implication of the former's understanding of

precariousness. To support this claim, she cites Butler's assertion in *Frames of War* that the

aim of "positive social obligations" is to minimize precariousness and its inequitable

distribution.[15] So, while precariousness refers to the shared tenuousness of existence—to the

fact that our lives can be eradicated at will or by accident—vulnerability has a broader

meaning. By making this distinction, Gilson avoids what she calls a "reductively negative"

understanding of vulnerability, one that limits its connotation to loss and injury.[16] As she

makes clear in her writings, it is not her intention to dismiss or ignore the association of

vulnerability with injury and loss. Like Butler, she thinks that an apprehension of a common

human vulnerability does not guarantee an ethical response and can, on the contrary, solicit

violence and aggression. She notes, however, that although Butler acknowledges the

variability of the meaning of vulnerability and how it is experienced, the latter's account of

vulnerability focuses almost solely on its connection to violence. Furthermore, Gilson

maintains that although there is truth to the connection between vulnerability and violence, it

is a lopsided truth. Linking vulnerability with violence promotes a dualistic understanding of

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[14] Butler, *Frames of War,* 3.
[15] Butler, *Frames of War,* 22.
[16] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 5.

the former as a quality that "can only be had by one party to an interaction."[17] By framing

vulnerability in dualistic terms, we miss the opportunity to view it in a more nuanced manner.

What is more, if vulnerability is understood merely as susceptibility to harm, then it becomes

something negative, something to be avoided. Invulnerability, its perceived opposite, is

viewed as the ideal to which we should aspire.

      An additional problem with viewing vulnerability as mere susceptibility to harm is that

it tends to foster an "Us vs. Them" mentality. On the one hand, there's *us*—the normal, able-

bodied, autonomous individuals; and then, other the other hand, there's *them,* the abnormal,

weak, dependent individuals. In other words, viewing vulnerability as a wholly negative or

undesirable quality transforms it into a stigma. Vulnerability is seen as a source of shame,

something that should be concealed or avoided. Just as we flee from anxiety in the face of

death (Heidegger), or attempt to mask the fundamental ambiguity of human existence

(Beauvoir), so too we try, in various ways, to disavow our common bodily vulnerability.

Gilson argues that if we want to break with this negative understanding of vulnerability, then

we must imagine other occasions for thinking and experiencing it.[18] Still, she finds Butler's

distinction between precariousness and precarity useful because it supports her claim that

vulnerability is both a universal condition and a politically mediated condition of those in

specific circumstances.

      The latter part of Chapter 3 addresses Western society's pervasive disavowal of

vulnerability and shows how this gives rise to the related myths of sovereignty and

invulnerability. I argue that connecting this problem to the notion of stigma, especially as it is

addressed by disability studies scholars, sheds light on our tendency to repudiate perceived

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[17] Gilson, 66.
[18] Gilson, 67.

weaknesses and limitations in ourselves and others. For example, many non-disabled people believe that life with a disability would not be worth living; for such people, becoming disabled is simply unfathomable. Yet, as Harriet McBryde Johnson contends in her essay "Worth Living," almost all of us will depend on others for care at some point in our futures. Whether such a dependency stems from an illness that overtakes us, a tragic accident, or simply the effects of aging, we will come to rely on this crucial support. Moreover, disability and dependency need not signify an unhappy life. As Johnson puts it, "If you're lucky, as I have been, the nightmare you fear could become the unexpected dawning of your best day yet."[19] Hence, avowing our common bodily vulnerability and dependence on others can not only reduce stigmatization but also enhance our quality of life.

The fourth and final chapter of my dissertation further explores the relationship between vulnerability, invulnerability, and disability. I begin by examining Deleuze's engagement with Spinoza's account of the affects in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza,* and "Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought." Following Spinoza, he argues that insofar as we are humans, we are subject to chance encounters, which can be good or bad, that is, increase or diminish our power of acting.[20] Hence, an encounter that leaves me feeling powerless or humiliated will decrease my power of acting, while an inspiring or confidence-boosting encounter will increase that power. Drawing on a claim Spinoza makes in the *Ethics* about our ignorance regarding what a body or mind can do, Deleuze states, "you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given

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[19] Harriet McBryde Johnson, "Worth Living," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2002): 76-80.
[20] Gilles Deleuze, "Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought" (*The Deleuze Seminars*, 24 January 1978), https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/spinoza-velocities-thought/lecture-00.

encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination."[21] By reminding us that we still have much to learn about our bodily capacities—a task that requires ongoing experimentation—Deleuze encourages us to open ourselves to unexpected change and transformation.

If we apply this emphasis on our ignorance regarding the body to our discussion of stigma, disability, and dependency in Chapter 3, then we can see that a disidentification with disabled others at least partly results from falsely assuming we know what a particular body can do. If we want to counter this presumptuous tendency, then we need to adopt an attitude of what Gilson calls "epistemic vulnerability," which entails embracing the possibility of not knowing.[22] To illustrate the everyday significance of this claim, I show how an attitude of epistemic *in*vulnerability contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of disabled people. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Barnes argues in *The Minority Body* that the ableist tendency to reject the testimony of disabled people about their own wellbeing constitutes a form of testimonial injustice. Indeed, if we cling to our preexisting assumptions about what it's like to be disabled, then we foreclose the possibility of learning something new, which could very well conflict with these assumptions.

Another problem I address in Chapter 4 is how to simultaneously affirm our common bodily vulnerability and acknowledge that some individuals and populations suffer from an unjust or heightened exposure to harm. Although both forms of vulnerability are important in their own right, we need to be able to distinguish between positive and negative forms so that we can become more ethically responsive to the suffering of others. As Beauvoir succinctly puts it, "I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth."[23] For

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[21] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books), 125; Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics,* trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Books, 1996), III.P2s.
[22] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 93.
[23] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 72.

instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge of vaccine nationalism among richer countries at the expense of poorer ones. Instead of acknowledging that borders are porous and that a global pandemic requires a global solution to end it, these wealthier counties keep attempting in vain to secure themselves from outside influences.

As of March 2021, high- and upper-middle-income countries had acquired more than six billion out of 8.6 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines.[24] Yet, as epidemiologists warned, the unfettered spread of COVID-19 in countries with low vaccination rates soon led to viral mutations that spread like wildfire in not only those countries, but countries across the globe— regardless of their income. Nonetheless, as Stephen Mein puts it in "COVID-19 and Health Disparities," "pandemics have the unique ability to amplify existing health inequities, disproportionally affecting socially disadvantaged groups, including racial and ethnic minorities and low-income populations."[25] In other words, while none of us are entirely safeguarded from harmful external forces, some of us are less safeguarded than others. This unequitable distribution of harmful vulnerability is clearly not a problem that can be solved overnight, but acknowledging the fluid, dynamic, and relational nature of vulnerability is a good starting point.

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[24] Aisling Irwin, "What it will take to vaccinate the world against COVID-19," *Nature* (2021), https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00727-3.

[25] Stephen Mein, "COVID-19 and Health Disparities: the Reality of 'the Great Equalizer,'" *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 35, no. 8 (2020): 2439–2440, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7224347/.

Chapter One: Heidegger on Indeterminateness

The task of this chapter is to draw attention to the vital role of the indeterminate or indefinite in Heidegger's work, which, for him, is inextricably linked to our fundamental "uncanniness" or "not-being-at-home" in the world (*Unheimlichkeit*). I begin by briefly outlining Heidegger's notion of care (*Sorge*) and then examine his claim in *Being and Time* and "What Is Metaphysics?" that anxiety is the most revelatory of moods and the harbinger of death. According to Heidegger, anxiety is uniquely disclosive in that it reveals the insurmountable uncanniness of being-in-the-world. It teaches us that, like a square peg in a round hole, *Da-sein* ("being there") will never seamlessly fit into its world.[26] Put simply, our existential projecting exceeds any particular worldly project. Following Iain Thomson, William Blattner, and others, I argue that existential death, which Heidegger distinguishes from demise, is something we can live through. Moreover, I show how a genuine acknowledgement and living through of death requires *anticipatory resoluteness,* a sort of active passivity wherein we open ourselves to the impossibility of determining when *death*, as the collapse of our world of significance, will befall us.[27] Ultimately, I contend that Heidegger's early concept of resoluteness or *Ent-schlossenheit* (literally "un-closedness")

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[26] In "Misfitting," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson also uses this metaphor of a square peg in a round hole to describe her proposed critical concept of a "misfit." I will return to her discussion of this concept in section I of this chapter. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfitting," in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology,* ed. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 225-230.

[27] At the same time, however, I don't want to trivialize instances of biological death. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated so tragically, life is fragile, and none of us are impervious to destructive forces (e.g., infectious diseases, environmental disasters, atomic bombs, etc.). Moreover, it is important to recognize that socially disadvantaged groups, communities, and countries were hit hardest by the pandemic. So, while I think that biological death and its prevention is something that we should take seriously, for my intents and purposes, I will focus on Heidegger's notion of existential death, which, for him, is synonymous with *world collapse*, that is, a collapse of one's world of significance. As I attempt to show in the following pages, Heidegger's account of world collapse prefigures, but also significantly differs from, the renewed conception of vulnerability I develop in Chapters 3 and 4.

and his later concept of *Gelassenheit* ("releasement" and "openness to the mystery")

prefigure a reframing of vulnerability as an ambiguous openness to unexpected change and

transformation.

In the fundamental mood of anxiety, Dasein encounters "the 'nothing' of the possible

impossibility of its existence."[28] This discloses our primordial nullity, which is tied to our

finitude and hence is an integral part of us. Yet, Heidegger does not view nullity or the

"nothing" as something wholly negative. Instead, as he argues in "What Is Metaphysics?",

the revelation of the nothing is generative; indeed, it is the very source of selfhood and

freedom. Nonetheless, Heidegger's account of the nothing is somewhat abstract, and even

vague, at this earlier point in his thinking. In the final section of this chapter, I examine a

crucial development in later Heidegger's conception of the nothing—which he rearticulates

as "Being as such"—and our relationship to it: his notion of *Gelassenheit.* I suggest,

moreover, that although his account of *Gelassenheit* entails an open, receptive, and *non-

domineering* comportment toward that which is "other" (i.e., that which we cannot fully

grasp), it takes for granted the profound significance of embodied, human others. In other

words, our fundamental exposure to being affected by others, and vice versa, is not

something Heidegger explores at length.

1.1 Heidegger on the Indeterminate Nature of Existence

In Division One, Chapter Six of *Being and Time,* Heidegger sets himself the task of

explicitly grasping Dasein, as being-in-the-world, in the totality of its structural whole. Up

until now, he has given only a preliminary sketch of the Being of Dasein. More specifically,

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[28] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 310.

he has focused on Dasein's "average everydayness," which he characterizes as "inauthentic" and "fallen."[29] He begins Chapter Six by clarifying that Dasein's Being, or what ontologically supports the structural whole of Dasein and world, becomes accessible to us through a "primordially unitary phenomenon."[30] The phenomenon he soon arrives at is *care* (*Sorge*). Indeed, the Being of Dasein *is* care; unlike a rock, a table, or an insect, Dasein is an entity whose own Being is an issue for it. Although care is a crucial concept for Heidegger and much more could be said about it, I want to turn our attention to his discussion of anxiety in the sixth and final chapter of Division One.

What is the relationship between anxiety and care? Heidegger states, "As one of Dasein's possibilities of Being, anxiety—together with Dasein itself as disclosed in it— provides the phenomenal basis for explicitly grasping Dasein's primordial totality of Being."[31] Hence, while care is the Being of Dasein, the experience of anxiety is what first allows us to recognize this. But before we launch into a full-fledged discussion of anxiety, let us briefly explore the significance of moods for Heidegger.

In Section One, Chapter Five of *Being and Time,* Heidegger introduces mood by first making the distinction between *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*. In his words, "What we indicate *ontologically* by the term *Befindlichkeit* is *ontically* the most familiar and everyday sort of thing; our mood, our Being-attuned [*Stimmung*]."[32] Here, he clarifies that there are two different ways of analyzing the same phenomenon. *Ontically*, this phenomenon is the familiar, day-to-day experience of being in a mood; *ontologically*, it is *Befindlichkeit.* Although there is no satisfying English counterpart to the German expression *Befindlichkeit*

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[29] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 181.
[30] Heidegger, 181-182.
[31] Heidegger 182.
[32] Heidegger, 134.

(i.e., one that captures all of its connotations), translations include "affectedness," "attunement, and "disposedness." The literal translation "how do you find yourself?" is also helpful because it highlights Dasein's *thrownness,* or the fact we always already find ourselves embedded in a concrete, factical world with which we are fascinated. As I will discuss further along, Dasein is, initially and for the most part, not aware of its thrownness and hence evades or turns away from it. Heidegger tells us that attunement is an *existentiale*, that is, one of the fundamental structures of Dasein's existence.[33] He then shifts to a discussion of moods for the remainder of the section (§ 29). As Wayne Martin puts it in "Semantics of 'Dasein' and Modality of *Being and Time,*" Heidegger sets out "to establish *it* [the phenomenon that attunement and mood refer to] through phenomenological description."[34] This reflects Heidegger's method, throughout the book, of beginning his structural analyses of Dasein with familiar, everyday experience.

According to Heidegger, mood is the most "primordially disclosive kind of being for Dasein."[35] In other words, it is through a mood that I first find myself in a world. Mood, for Heidegger, is also the most basic and important—yet often overlooked—kind of intelligence. He emphasizes that a mood should not be thought of as an inner mental state over against an external world. Indeed, mood both *precedes* and *exceeds* cognition and volition.[36] Hence, it is the precondition for thought itself. In "Why Moods Mater," Matthew Ratcliffe states, "To find oneself in a world is not, first and foremost, to occupy the perspective of an impartial

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[33] Heidegger, 335. He argues that there are four basic existentials or structures of existence: *Befindlichkeit* ("attunement" or "mood"), *Verstehen* ("understanding"), *Verfallensein* (fallenness), and *Rede* ("discourse").

[34] Wayne Martin, "Semantics of 'Dasein' and Modality of *Being and Time,*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time,* ed. Mark A. Wrathall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121.

[35] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 136.

[36] Martin, "Semantics of 'Dasein' and Modality of *Being and Time,*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time,* 136.

spectator, neutrally gazing upon things from a particular spacetime location."[37] Instead, finding oneself in a world is "a matter of being practically immersed in it."[38] This highlights Heidegger's claim that we are never *not* in a mood. Indeed, even the "purest theory" is in a mood (i.e., a 'detached' or 'objective' one).[39] Hence, we can only master a mood by using another mood against it. This suggests that mood involves a kind of active passivity; although we are responsible to some extent for mastering or regulating our moods, we can never entirely rid ourselves of them. Not all moods, however, are equally disclosive. For example, Heidegger states that the everyday, public mood is one of evasion or "falling," which involves turning away from, rather than confronting, our fundamental "uncanniness" or "not-being-at-home" in the world (*Unheimlichkeit*). In what follows, I will discuss his key distinction between fear and anxiety, which will help illustrate how some moods disclose being-in-the-world more than others.

1.2 Uncanniness, Fear, Anxiety, and Death

In § 40, Heidegger introduces anxiety (*Angst*) as a "distinctive attunement" in which Dasein gets "brought before itself through its own being."[40] He opposes this to the everyday mood of "falling," which involves an inauthentic "*fleeing* of Dasein in the face of itself."[41] As should soon become clear, this phenomenon of falling is closely associated with fear. Moreover, Heidegger's use of kinetic language (e.g., "falling and "fleeing") evokes his distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence. Although this distinction

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[37] Matthew Ratcliffe, "Why Moods Matter" in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time,* 158.
[38] Ratcliffe, "Why Moods Matter," 158.
[39] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 138.
[40] Heidegger, 184.
[41] Heidegger, 184.

might appear to be moralizing, Heidegger repeatedly insists that this isn't the case.[42] In short, facing anxiety discloses existential death or world collapse, which radically individualizes Dasein by revealing its "solus ipse" or *self alone* (that is, the ontological core of the self that consists of sheer existing).[43] The insight we gain from this self-encounter is what enables us to revive ourselves and reconnect to the practical world we formerly took for granted. As Thomson notes, such "periodic experiences of death and rebirth to the publicly intelligible world" is what Heidegger means by *authenticity*.[44] Conversely, *inauthenticity* amounts to Dasein losing itself in the publicness (or public interpretation) of the anonymous, conformist "they." Indeed, the "they" has a tranquilizing effect on Dasein by disburdening of its "answerability," or from having to face its ownmost potentiality-for-Being.[45] We should keep in mind, however, that the "self" or "individual," for Heidegger, is not an isolated subject over against a world of objects; in fact, he is vehemently opposed to Descartes' version of solipsism. Let us pause here and briefly explore how Heidegger's emphasis on Dasein's uncanniness resonates with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's critical concept of "misfitting." After that, we will turn to Heidegger's account of anxiety vs. fear in *Being and Time.*

In "Misfitting," critical disability studies scholar Garland-Thomson proposes the term *misfit* as a keyword that aims to "defamiliarize and to reframe dominant understandings of disability."[46] For her, the word can have both negative and positive connotations. She begins by distinguishing between fit and misfit; while the former refers to an encounter between two

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[42] Heidegger, 167. At the end of §34, he states, "it may not be superfluous to remark that our own Interpretation is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein, and from the aspirations of a 'philosophy of culture.'" However, it is important to note that Heidegger scholars disagree as to whether Heidegger's account of authenticity and inauthenticity is in fact normative.

[43] Heidegger, 188.

[44] Iain Thomson, "Death," in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 217.

[45] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 127.

[46] Garland-Thomson, "Misfitting," 225.

things in which they come together harmoniously, the latter describes "an incongruent relationship between two things: a square peg in a round hole."[47] This description of a misfit calls to mind at least two important points. First, notice how Garland-Thomson uses the word "relationship" to characterize a misfit. She argues that the problem with a misfit is not located in either of the two things, but rather in their juxtaposition, or in the cumbersome attempt to fit them together. For instance, the problem of a misfit between a wheelchair user and a flight of stairs inheres not in the wheelchair user or in the stairs, but rather in their disjunctive relationship.[48] As Garland-Thomson notes, the concept is especially useful because it "definitively lodges injustice and discrimination in the materiality of the world more than in social attitudes or representational practices, even while it recognizes their mutually constituting entanglements."[49] In other words, misfitting is primarily a material issue, but it also involves some discursive elements. Indeed, the marginalization or exclusion of those who don't "fit in" usually has harmful material consequences. To be sure, Heidegger does not explicitly consider the ethical implications of being excluded from the public sphere. Nonetheless, his undermining of subject/object dualism and corresponding claim that we are always already immersed in a world of practical involvement (except in death), implies a relational understanding of selfhood. Hence, for both Heidegger and Garland-Thomson, the individual cannot be understood apart from, or prior to, its being-in-the-world.[50]

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[47] Garland-Thomson, 225.

[48] This claim is structurally similar to the social model of disability's argument that the locus of a disability is not in the individual, but rather in the relationship between the individual, the environment, and a particular goal. This argument is further addressed in Chapter 4.

[49] Garland-Thomson, 225-26.

[50] Although Garland-Thomson does not use the term "being-in-the-world," I take her claim that bodies are always "situated in and dependent on upon environments" (Garland-Thomson, 229) to be roughly equivalent to this Heideggerian term.

As for the second point, recall that "square peg in a round hole" is a term we used to describe Dasein's fundamental uncanniness or not-being-at-home-in-the-world (*Unheimlichkeit*). Combining Garland-Thomson's critical concept of misfit and Heidegger's notion of uncanniness, we might say that all of us are misfits, that is, none of us fit seamlessly into the world. In fact, Garland-Thomson states that "Although misfit is associated with disability and arises from disability theory, its critical application extends beyond disability as a cultural category and social identity toward a universalizing of misfitting as a contingent and fundamental fact of human embodiment."[51] If we consider this claim in light of Heidegger's notion of the "they" and its tendency to flatten out differences, then we can see how misfitting can be something positive. If "fitting in" means giving up everything that is unique about me, then is it really worth it?[52] Garland-Thomson also argues that there is a flux intrinsic to the fitting relation, which suggests that any of us could go from fitting (or at least believing we fit) to misfitting within a matter of moments. Furthermore, she states that "Vulnerability is a way to describe the potential for misfitting to which all human beings are subject."[53] In other words, both vulnerability and the potential for misfitting point to our inevitable permeability or openness to the world. As such, vulnerability or misfitting is not a static property of individuals but rather a relational, fluid process. Next, let us examine Heidegger's key distinction between fear and anxiety.

How, exactly, is anxiety a distinctive attunement in which Dasein "gets brought before itself through its own being?" Put differently, what makes anxiety a uniquely

[51] Garland-Thomson, 229.
[52] Sometimes, however, the pain of not fitting in is so great that many of us are willing to change almost anything about ourselves in order to stop feeling so isolated and alone. Indeed, we are social creatures, and the suffering associated with extreme isolation (e.g., solitary confinement) is, in many cases, a social and political problem.
[53] Garland-Thomson, 229.

disclosive mood? Heidegger reminds us that the aim of Chapter 6 is to explicitly grasp Dasein in the totality of its structural whole. Anxiety, unlike other moods or attunements, allows us to do just this. Initially and for the most part, Dasein is absorbed in the publicness of the "they" (*das Man*), which involves an inauthentic "fleeing of Dasein in the face of itself."[54] In other words, the everyday mood is one of an evasive turning away from one's ownmost being. If we are to grasp the totality of Dasein, however, Dasein must be brought before itself. Thus, we need a phenomenal account of how this shift or transformation from fleeing to facing takes place. Heidegger acknowledges that Dasein's "authentic potentiality-for-Being-its-Self" cannot be grasped through turning away, but he argues that only because Dasein has ontologically been brought face-to-face with itself can it flee from itself.[55] In other words, since *facing* is more primordial than *fleeing*, the latter presupposes the former. Still, turning-away is disclosive in that "makes it phenomenally possible for us to grasp existential-ontologically that in the face of which Dasein flees, and to grasp it as such."[56] Put simply, Dasein's tendency to flee in the face of itself, rather than being irrelevant, helps us grasp the totality of Dasein. Here, Heidegger's distinction between anxiety and fear is particularly helpful because it illustrates how two phenomenally distinct, but related, moods are connected on a deeper level. How does Heidegger characterize these moods?

Fear makes its appearance in Division One, Chapter Five of *Being and Time.* Heidegger begins by noting that fear is always fear of something threatening *within* the world. In other words, fear is a determinate mode of attunement. When I am afraid, I'm

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[54] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 184.

[55] Heidegger, 184. As Heidegger puts it, "Only to the extent that Dasein has been brought before itself in an ontologically essential manner through whatever disclosedness belongs to it, can it flee in the face of that in the face of which it flees."

[56] Heidegger, 185.

afraid of a definite thing or entity from a definite region. Let's say a river of lava is headed straight toward my house. Right now, it's 500 yards away, and it may very well engulf my house in flames. But there's also a chance that it will abruptly stop, and all will be spared. There's no way I can be certain of the outcome. To illustrate this chance aspect of fear, Heidegger distinguishes between "detrimental" and "threatening"; as the detrimental thing (e.g., the lava) draws close, it becomes threatening. In his words, "it can reach us, and yet it may not. As it draws close, this 'it can, and yet in the end it may not' becomes aggravated."[57] Hence, even though fear is directed towards something definite, it still involves a degree of uncertainty. Although I can pinpoint the source of my fear, I cannot determine if and when this fearful thing will reach me. As will soon become clear, this element of uncertainty is something that fear and anxiety share in common. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Heidegger considers fear to be an inauthentic mood. In other words, when Dasein is afraid, it does not confront itself through its own being. As Heidegger puts it, "Fear is anxiety, fallen into the 'world', inauthentic, and, as such, hidden from itself."[58] To make sense of this claim, we need to take a closer look at what he means by "anxiety."

According to Heidegger, anxiety is a distinctive mood. In anxiety, unlike in the majority of moods, Dasein gets "brought before itself [i.e., brought into death] through its own being."[59] Put differently, anxiety brings Dasein face-to-face with its fundamental uncanniness, and thereby enables it to *grasp itself as a whole*. This is because, in death, Dasein's existence is finite, or at an end, and does not stretch out into a world that would hide

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[57] Heidegger, 140-41.
[58] Heidegger, 189.
[59] Heidegger, 184. In his 1929-30 lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics,* Heidegger argues that boredom, much like anxiety, is a "fundamental attunement' in that it reveals being as a whole. Hence, both anxiety and boredom are distinctively well-suited for philosophizing. While much more could be said about boredom—indeed Heidegger dedicated approximately 100 pages discussing it in the above-mentioned lecture course—my focus in this chapter will be on anxiety.

us from ourselves. Heidegger states, "That in the face of which one has anxiety [das Wovor der Angst] is Being-in-the world as such."[60] What does this mean, and how does it differ from that in the face of which one has fear? As we can recall, fear is always fear of something *within* the world, something definite. Heidegger claims, in stark contrast to this, that what anxiety is anxious about is "completely indefinite."[61] When I am anxious, my anxiety is not directed towards a particular thing or entity within the world. I can't point to something concrete and say, 'This, here, is the source of my anxiety.' Instead, what I'm anxious about is my very existence, that is, my being-in-the-world as such.[62] In fact, not only is what threatens me completely indefinite but also entities within-the-world become irrelevant. My familiar, everyday world collapses into itself and assumes the character of "completely lacking significance."[63] It is important to note, however, that when the world collapses, it does not disappear. Heidegger claims that, in anxiety, what threatens is *nowhere* and is *nothing* ready-to-hand. Yet, this does not put the existence of the world into doubt. In Heidegger's words, "The utter insignificance which makes itself known in the 'nothing and "nowhere', does not signify that the world is absent, but tells us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this *insignificance* of what is within-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself."[64] What, then,

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[60] Heidegger, 186.

[61] Heidegger 186.

[62] Heidegger says that anxiety is not only anxiety *in the face of* something but also anxiety *about* something. I take this to be roughly equivalent to the difference between the thing or entity doing the *affecting* and the thing being *affected*. In fear, these two will necessarily be different. To extrapolate from my earlier lava example, that *in the face of which* I'm afraid is the river of lava, while that *about which* I'm afraid is my house (which is arguably an extension of me). In anxiety, however, Heidegger makes no such distinction. As Heidegger puts it, "That about which anxiety is anxious reveals itself as that *in the face of which* it is anxious—namely, Being-in-the-world. The selfsameness of that in the face of which and that about which one has anxiety, extends even to anxiousness [Sichängsten] itself." Heidegger, 188.

[63] Heidegger, 186.

[64] Heidegger, 187. Heidegger's claim that "entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves" suggests that, in anxiety, entities can't tell me who to be or how to act (note how this contrasts with the "they," which provides me with a ready-made template for who to be, how to act, what to say, etc.).

does Heidegger mean by "insignificance"? Here, his discussion of tool breakdown in Part One, Chapter Three is especially helpful.

Heidegger argues that equipment always comes in a holistic network of use, that is, it "hangs together." This means that equipment, for the most part, is not something we are cognitively or thematically aware of; in fact, when we start to think about whether we're using a tool well, this tends to hamper our performance. Heidegger calls this practical relation to equipment, which is devoid of thematic awareness, *ready-to-hand.* On the contrary, he refers to our cognitive or thematic awareness of such equipment as *present-at-hand.* Consider the following example: I'm driving down the road, humming a happy tune and relishing the gentle breeze on my face. Suddenly, my car breaks down, and I'm stranded on the side of the road. My relation to the car has shifted from one of practical, inconspicuous involvement to one of a cognitive or thematic awareness of it, as well as the road, other cars, and my current location. My nexus of involvement has (at least temporarily) broken down, that is, it no longer hangs together. Something similar, but much more extreme, occurs in anxiety. Heidegger states, "Here the totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance."[65] In anxiety, the entire world, along with all the practical and theoretical involvements linked to the ready-to-hand and present-at-hand, loses significance for me. Again, this does not mean that the world has disappeared, but rather that it remains as something from which I feel entirely disconnected.

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[65] Heidegger 186.

In her book *Heidegger on Being Uncanny,* Katherine Withy rightly compares the loss of significance associated with anxiety to the phenomenon of "derealization." As Withy notes, the DSM-5 describes derealization as "characterized by a feeling of unreality or detachment from, or unfamiliarity with, the world, be it individuals, inanimate objects, or all surroundings...The individual may feel as if he or she were in a fog, dream, or bubble, or as if there were a veil or a glass wall between the individual and the world around."[66] Put simply, this phenomenon involves intense *dissociation* or detachment from one's surroundings. Causes of derealization include trauma, severe stress, and the use of recreational drugs. Although the DSM-5 classifies "Depersonalization/Derealization" as a disorder, transitory or non-recurring experiences of derealization are quite common. As Withy specifies, some studies suggest that up to 70 percent of the population have "experienced transitory derealization at some point in their lives," frequently in frightening or stressful situations.[67]

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger repeatedly emphasizes that, in anxiety, the world "completely lacks significance" and that this experience "individualizes" Dasein.[68] Yet, two years later, in his 1929 Freiburg inaugural address *What Is Metaphysics?*, he uses the word "hover" to describe the experience of anxiety, which, in my view, more clearly illustrates its dissociative quality and its connection to derealization. Heidegger states, "We 'hover' in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging, because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. This implies that we ourselves—we humans who are in being—in the

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[66] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (DSM-5) (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 54.

[67] Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, 55.

[68] Heidegger's claim that anxiety "individualizes" Dasein contrasts sharply with Butler's and Gilson's relational view of the individual, which suggests that anxiety is always tied to our relations with others and the world.

midst of beings slip away from ourselves."[69] According to Heidegger, this experience of "hovering" or being "left hanging" is profoundly unsettling because it gives us nothing to hold onto. Like an astronaut cut loose in a zero-gravity spaceship, anxious Dasein has completely lost its grip on itself and the world.

Heidegger's above account of existential anxiety bears some striking resemblances to Corrine Lajoie's narrative of her lived experience of being diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and living with mental illness. In "Being at Home: A Feminist Phenomenology of Disorientation in Illness," she states, "In particularly difficult times, I feel as though every thread running between me and the world is loosened until I slip entirely between my own fingers."[70] Lajoie calls such experiences "disorientations" insofar as they severely disrupt our sense of belonging or feeling at home in the world. She argues, moreover, that although disorientations—which are not limited to BPD—usually "strike us as negative," the various ways in which we are challenged by them can play a meaningful role in our development and "prompt important changes in personal and relational practices."[71] Indeed, all of us will undergo these kinds of experiences at least once in our life, usually when we least expect it (e.g. losing a loved one, having our heart broken, or becoming disabled).[72] Furthermore, the sense of disruption that comes with such experiences can help

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[69] Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 101.

[70] Corrine Lajoie, "Being at Home: A Feminist Phenomenology of Disorientation in Illness," *Hypatia* 34, no. 3 (2019), 554.

[71] Lajoie, "Being at Home," 559.

[72] It is important to note that Heidegger argues, on the contrary, that not everyone dies. In other words, according to Heidegger, some people live their entire lives without ever experiencing existential death or world collapse. Nonetheless, I think Lajoie's suggestion that everyone (or at least almost everyone) will experience disorientations at some point in our lives can also be used to critically interrogate Heidegger's rather exclusionary, and potentially discriminatory, claim that not everyone dies.

us learn to live with our fundamental uncanniness or not-being-at-home-in-the-world.[73]

These related discussions of hovering, dissociation, and disorientation bring us back to the

crucial concept of this chapter: the *indeterminate*. Much remains to be said about this

concept, and its close connection to anxiety will soon become clear. (For now, it is sufficient

to note that both anxiety and indeterminateness involve a lack or absence of *security*.) First,

though, we need to examine what Heidegger means by "death." Indeed, a Heideggerian

account of anxiety that fails to discuss death is gravely inadequate.

Heidegger begins his discussion of death in Part Two, Chapter One by reaffirming his

commitment, which he made in Part One, to explicitly grasp Dasein in the totality of its

structural whole. He acknowledges, however, the seeming impossibility of Dasein ever

grasping itself as a whole: "As long as Dasein *is* an entity, it has never reached its

'wholeness.' But if it gains such 'wholeness', this gain becomes the utter loss of Being-in-

the-world. In such a case, it can never again be experienced *as an entity*."[74] Hence,

Heidegger admits that, in a purely *ontical* sense, Dasein can never experience itself as a

whole. Yet, as he will attempt to demonstrate in his analysis of death, Dasein can indeed

grasp itself *ontologically* as a whole. This will require an ontological analysis of 'end' and

'totality'; for if we want to grasp Dasein in its entirety, we need to understand where it begins

and where it ends. According to Heidegger, a certain "not-yet" (or end) belongs to Dasein as

long as it exists. Still, as he points out, this "not-yet" can be interpreted in more than one

way. Heidegger distinguishes between something still *outstanding* and something *impending*,

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[73] Still, it is crucial to recognize that many individuals, groups, and communities experience a harrowing, unacceptable, and largely preventable (environmentally produced) sense of uncanniness or not-being-at-home-in-the-world. For instance, the uncanniness experienced by an asylum seeker who is forced to flee her war-torn native country, only to be separated from her children and detained indefinitely in a "temporary" detention facility, is not something that anyone should have to "learn to live with."

[74] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 236.

and shows how they involve different senses of 'ending' and 'totality.'[75] Let's assume I have yet to pay off a significant portion of my college loan. As long as I owe money, there's still outstanding debt on that loan. The loan thus lacks a totality or togetherness. But when (at last!) I have paid the full amount, the previously outstanding sum of money is "all together," and the debt gets liquidated.[76] Heidegger stresses that the "not-yet" that we associate with what is still outstanding (e.g., the "not-yet-paid-off") is *not* the kind of "not-yet" that belongs to Dasein. How does the latter differ from the former?

Heidegger uses the word "impending" to characterize the "not-yet" that belongs to Dasein. He states, "The end is impending [steht...bevor] for Dasein. Death is not something not yet-present-at-hand, nor is it that which is ultimately still outstanding but which has been reduced to a minimum. *Death is something that stands before us—something impending.*"[77] Unlike a cocoon that is "not-yet" a butterfly (an entity that is not-yet-present-at-hand) or a debt that is "not-yet" paid off (something still outstanding), death is impending or imminent. Yet, there are other things that can impend for Dasein; for instance, an event such as a tornado, lava flow, or coming-of-age ceremony may be impending. Heidegger clarifies that impending death does *not* have this sort of Being.[78] This is where the connection between death and anxiety becomes apparent. Recall Heidegger's distinction, in Chapter Six, between fear and anxiety. Fear is always fear of a *definite* thing or event in the world. Anxiety, on the contrary, is *indefinite;* in anxiety, Dasein is anxious of being-in-the-world as such. Death thus

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[75] Heidegger, 250.

[76] Heidegger, 242.

[77] Heidegger, 250.

[78] Heidegger, 250. Heidegger also distinguishes between death and demise and clarifies the sense in which each impends. As Thomson puts it, "By anxiety before death…it is once again crucial to recognize that Heidegger means anxiety about the core self revealed in the collapse of my world, not fear concerning my eventual demise." Thomson, "Death and Demise in Being and Time," 279. So, while *demise* is an impending (but indefinite) event, *death* is an impending (and immanent) possibility, that is, "it is possible at any moment," Heidegger, 258.

shares with anxiety a lack of definite object; both can be characterized by the term "free-floating." Neither allows for the sense of relief that comes with having pinpointed the source of our unease. Heidegger states:

> This ownmost possibility, however, non-relational and not to be outstripped, is not one which Dasein procures for itself subsequently and occasionally in the course of its Being. On the contrary, if Dasein exists, it has already been thrown into this possibility. Dasein does not, proximally and for the most part, have any explicit or even any theoretical knowledge of the fact that it has been delivered over to its death, and that death thus belongs to Being-in-the-world. Thrownness into death reveals itself to Dasein in a more primordial and impressive manner in that state-of-mind [attunement] which we have called "anxiety." Anxiety in the face of death is anxiety 'in the face of' that potentiality-for-Being, which is non-relational and not to be outstripped.[79]

A lot is going on in this quote. First, what does Heidegger mean by "thrownness into death"? As mentioned in our above discussion of mood, *thrownness* refers to the fact that we always already find ourselves enmeshed in a concrete, factical world with which we are fascinated. Insofar as Dasein exists, it has already been thrown into a world that is not of its choosing. For example, I don't get to choose my parents, my ethnicity, or my country of origin. Still, these factors necessarily shape my identity; insofar as I exist, I cannot simply extricate them from my life. Similarly, death (or the perpetual possibility of a collapse of my world of significance) is an ineliminable aspect of my thrownness or, in Heidegger's words, is "not to be outstripped." According to him, facing up to our death is more important than anything else we could accomplish in life. Yet, primarily and for the most part, Dasein flees from death by remaining absorbed in the "they" self. Anxiety, on the contrary, pulls Dasein away from the "they"-self and reveals to Dasein its thrownness into death. Moreover, anxiety comes out of 'nowhere' and can arise in the most innocuous of situations. But when this

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[79] Heidegger, 251.

happens, Dasein can finally face up to its anxiety, and so project into its impending death, and thereby grasp itself as a whole. Further along, I will examine Heidegger's claim in the above block quote that death is "non-relational" and "not to be outstripped."[80] For now, though, let us focus on the relationship between anxiety and death. What does it mean to have "anxiety in the face of death"? And what, exactly, does Heidegger mean by "death"?

As we can recall from our above discussion, Heidegger insists that death, as the "not-yet" that belongs to Dasein, is none of the following: (1) something not-yet-present-at-hand, (2) something still outstanding, or (3) an impending event. What, then, is death? To answer this question, we need to parse out three distinct but related terms that Heidegger addresses in his chapter on death: perishing, demising, and dying. He uses the term "perish" to designate the end of anything that lives, whether it be a fruit, vegetable, plant, or animal. Dasein, however, never simply perishes. As Iain Thomson puts it in "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*," "*Pears perish, but Daseins demise and die.*"[81] But what does Heidegger mean by "demise" and "die"? Further along, he states, "We designate this intermediary phenomenon as its [Dasein's] "*demise.*" Let the term "*dying*" stand for that *way of Being* in which Dasein is *towards* its death.[82] So, for Heidegger, *demising* refers to the ontical or physiological coming-to-an-end that we normally call "dying." *Dying*, on the contrary, stands for Dasein's *being-towards-death.*

Now, a skeptical reader might wonder why Heidegger would use the term "death" in such a counterintuitive sense; indeed, there is much debate among scholars as to what exactly

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[80] As will become clear in Chapters 2 and 3, Heidegger's claim that death is "non-relational" is fundamentally at odds with Butler's suggestion that death (and the loss, grief, mourning associated with it) is politically saturated through and through.

[81] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being in Time*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time*, 265.

[82] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 247.

Heidegger means by death. In this regard, there are two diametrically opposed camps of Heidegger scholars. The first camp—which includes, but is not limited to, Paul Edwards, Piotr Hoffman, and Stephen Mulhall—argues, as Thomson puts it, that "by 'death,' Heidegger must mean the same sort of things that we normally mean when we talk about 'death,' such as *demise* (Edwards), *decease* (Hoffman), or *mortality* (Mulhall)."[83] The second camp, which includes, among others, William Blattner, John Haugeland, and Carol White, argues that, for Heidegger, "death" means something like a "global collapse of significance" and has almost nothing to do with the customary sense of the word.[84] Thomson presents convincing evidence that "death," in Heidegger's sense of the term, is something we can live through. For instance, he cites the following quotes from *Being and Time:* (1) "Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is" and (2) "death is the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general."[85] Recall Heidegger's characterization of the ending or "not-yet" that belongs to Dasein as "*impending*" (rather than "not-yet-present-at-hand" or "still outstanding"). In addition to this, he emphasizes that Dasein "is already its not yet" and that the ending associated with death is not "Being-at-an-end [Zu-Ende-sein], but a *Being-towards-the-end* [*Sein zum End*e] of this entity."[86] In other words, death is an integral part of us as long as we are alive. It is thus a mistake to view it as a future event that we can simply ignore.

1.3 Anticipating Death

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[83] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time,*" 263.
[84] Thomson, 263.
[85] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 245, 262.
[86] Heidegger, 245.

For Heidegger, the *way* in which we comport ourselves toward our death is of utmost importance. Primarily and for the most part, we evade death by conforming to the public interpretations of the "they." We misconstrue death as a well-known event and adopt an "indifferent tranquility as to the 'fact' that one dies."[87] This attitude, which conceals the fact that death is indefinite (or possible at any moment), does not allow for anxiety in the face of death. Heidegger refers to this attitude as "inauthentic" being-towards-death. In contrast, "authentic" being-towards-death, that is, "anticipation" of death, involves recognizing and accepting that "*death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility—non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped.*"[88] In anticipation, death is no longer misconstrued as an event, but rather understood and cultivated *as a possibility*. But how does the crossover from *inauthentic* to *authentic* Being-towards-death take place? In other words, what is the catalyst for this transformation in understanding?

In §53, Heidegger states, "Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be 'actualized,' nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself *be.* It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing."[89] Here, Heidegger is describing what happens when Dasein's world of significance collapses. If I can endure my anxiety (rather than flee from it), this enables me to trace it all the way back to its source in my fundamental uncanniness.[90] This will allow me to experience existential death. As we discussed in our above analysis of anxiety, such a global world collapse involves a complete loss of significance. It is not that the world has

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[87] Heidegger, 254.

[88] Heidegger, 258-59. Further along, I will address these four crucial components of death in more detail.

[89] Heidegger, 262.

[90] He states, however, that "under the ascendancy of "falling and publicness, 'real' anxiety is rare." Heidegger, 190. This implies that existential death, too, is a rare experience. Nonetheless, I think we have reason to doubt Heidegger's claims about the exclusivity of death (see footnote 72).

disappeared but rather that it no longer holds *significance* for me. In other words, I feel

totally disconnected from it. Things that were once familiar now seem strange and obtrusive.

As Ratcliffe puts it, "What we previously took for granted becomes salient in its absence."[91]

Moreover, the looming feeling that comes with anxiety (due to a lack of object) is

inextricably connected to death as "possibility." Yet, death isn't just any kind of possibility;

instead, as Heidegger states, it is "possible at any moment" or, put differently, it is

"indefinite."[92] But he also says that death is "certain." Isn't the pairing of *possibility* and

certainty rather odd? Let's take another look at the following quote (cited in the previous

paragraph): "*Death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility—non-relational,

certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped.*"[93] Heidegger repeatedly cites these five

criteria as crucial to understanding death and demise. Yet, without further investigation, this

"full existential-ontological conception of death" remains rather abstract.[94] So, what, exactly,

does Heidegger mean when he says that death is (1) Dasein's ownmost possibility (2) non-

relational, (3) certain, (4), indefinite, and (5) not to be outstripped?

    First, Dasein's very Being-in-the-world is at issue in death. When my world of

significance collapses, it becomes completely irrelevant to me; what I formerly took for

granted now seems strange and obtrusive. To be sure, the world is still there, but I am

radically dissociated from it. I thereby experience myself as a project-less projecting that

survives, as Thomson puts it, "the collapse of any and all my particular projects."[95] In

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[91] Ratcliffe, "Why Moods Matter," 167. Ratcliffe also argues that the experience of severe depression is structurally similar to Heideggerian anxiety. More specifically, in both anxiety and depression, our usually "taken-for-granted sense of *belonging* to a world" (my emphasis, 172) is radically transformed or disrupted. Much like Lajoie, Ratcliffe thinks that this disruption of our sense of belonging serves to reveal our being-in-the-world.

[92] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 258.

[93] Heidegger, 258.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*," 277.

Heidegger's words, death is "the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself toward anything, of every way of existing."[96] Thus, death is not just any old possibility but rather the possibility of my *utter impotency*. Moreover, my very being is what is at issue in death; in particular, I discover that project-less projecting is the most basic or primordial aspect of myself.[97] This is what Heidegger means when he says that death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. Second, death is *non-relational* in the sense that, in death, I am cut off from all relations with others. This forces me to take over my ownmost Being instead of merely resorting to the superficial conventions of the "they."

Third and fourth, death is *certain* and, as such, *indefinite.* In anticipation, I am certain of death *as a possibility* that I embody and not as a future occurrence (and thus refrain from trying to actualize it).[98] Anticipation also enables me to make certain of my ownmost Being in its totality, that is, to experience myself as a project-less projecting that outlives any particular project. In fact, this experience serves as the very touchstone of certainty.[99] In anticipation, I open myself to the *indefiniteness* of death's certainty. As Heidegger puts it, "In anticipating [zum] the indefinite certainty of death, Dasein opens itself to a constant threat arising out of its own 'there.' In this very threat Being-towards-the-end must maintain itself."[100] Rather than fleeing from or tranquilizing the indefinite nature of death, as is the case in inauthentic Being-towards-death, I recognize that death is possible at any moment (i.e., that I could stop being the practical self I am), and yet I endure this constant threat to

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[96] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 262.
[97] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time,* 277.
[98] Heidegger distinguishes between expecting an event's actualization and anticipating something that is possible.
[99] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*," 277.
[100] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 265.

my Being. According to Heidegger, *anxiety* is the mood or attunement that is able to hold open this threat.[101]

Fifth, death is *not to be outstripped.* In anticipation, I free myself for accepting that death is unsurpassable. I recognize that my "uttermost possibility" lies in giving myself up, which shatters my "tenaciousness" or "clinging" to whatever existence I have reached.[102] In other words, the experience of death crushes my rigid adherence to the view that there's only *one* "correct" choice of life project. When I become free for my own death, I am liberated from my "lostness in those possibilities which may accidently thrust themselves upon one."[103] For the first time, I can "authentically understand and choose among the factical possibilities" that lie before unsurpassable death, rather than letting the "they" choose for me.[104] In other words, giving myself up, and hence becoming free for death, individualizes me and enables me to (authentically) choose in light of my finitude. Although anticipation liberates me from my lostness in the "they," this is not tantamount to severing social ties with others. Instead, it helps me better understand others and avoid conflating their possibilities with my own.[105]

1.4 The Call of Conscience, Being-guilty, and Resoluteness

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[101] Death or world collapse, as a possibility, is a constant threat to my being because world collapse cuts me off from the world and reveals that there is no one right answer on how to live my life. Any particular projects that I once found so important now become trivial to me. The world of practical involvement that I was formerly immersed in (and took for granted) now seems strange and obtrusive.

[102] Heidegger, 264. The Stambaugh translation uses the term "clinging."

[103] Heidegger, 264.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid. As Heidegger puts it, "As the non-relational possibility, death individualizes me—but only in such a manner that, as the possibility which is not to be outstripped, it makes Dasein, as Being-with, have some understanding of the potentiality-for-Being-of-Others." I take this to mean that death doesn't individualize Dasein in a solipsistic manner, such that the Being of others becomes irrelevant, even after I have reconnected to the world; instead, death allows me to better understand that although death is non-relational, it is an immanent possibility not just for me, but for other Daseins as well.

In our above discussion of the "full existential-ontological conception of death," we examined what it means to *anticipate* death as a possibility. This is the first structural moment in Heidegger's phenomenological account of authenticity. The second structural moment is what he calls "resoluteness."[106] But to bring *resoluteness* into focus, we first need to understand what Heidegger means by "guilt" and "conscience." At the end of his chapter on death, he addresses the question of whether there is any evidence that Dasein can, in fact, experience itself as a whole; for, in order to be able to confirm Heidegger's claims about authentic Being-towards death, Dasein would need to be able to *give testimony* "as to a possible authenticity of its existence."[107] Heidegger's solution to this problem involves a lengthy, and rather counterintuitive, discussion of guilt and conscience. This is the focus of Part Two, Chapter Two.

Primarily and for the most part, Dasein remains lost in the "they," which hides the way in which it has implicitly "relieved Dasein of the burden of explicitly choosing" among possibilities of Being.[108] How, then, is Dasein retrieved from its ensnarement in the "they"? According to Heidegger, this retrieval or reclamation is carried out neither by God nor some Other, but rather by Dasein *itself*. As he puts it, Dasein "brings itself back to itself."[109] This happens by means of what Heidegger refers to as the "call of conscience." He notes that calling is a mode of discourse, which "articulates intelligibility."[110] We need to be careful, however, not to jump to conclusions here. Although calling is a mode of discourse, strictly

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[106] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*," 272.
[107] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 267.
[108] Heidegger, 268.
[109] Heidegger, 286.
[110] Heidegger, 271.

speaking, the call of conscience says nothing. Put simply, it is silent. So, *who is called* by this call of conscience and *who does the calling*?

Heidegger states, "The call of conscience has the character of an *appeal* to Dasein by calling it to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self; and this is done by way of *summoning* it to its ownmost Being-guilty."[111] For Heidegger, the call of conscience is something like this: it comes from across a vast gap, and thus feels like an alien voice, but in reality comes from Dasein itself in its uncanniness. This is what Heidegger means when he says that the call "comes *from* me and yet from *beyond me and over me*."[112] Although it doesn't utter anything, it unwaveringly appeals to the Self of the they-self (even if Dasein misconstrues it or fails to hear it). By *passing over* the "they," the call pushes it into insignificance; simultaneously, the call summons the individual Dasein to its potentiality-for-Being-its-Self, and hence calls Dasein forth to its possibilities.[113] But if the call doesn't utter anything, then how exactly does it retrieve Dasein from its absorption in the "they"? Moreover, how do we make sense of Heidegger's claims that (1) Dasein is at the same time both the caller *and* the called and (2) the caller feels like an *alien* voice or, as Simon Critchley puts it, "there is no immediate identity between these two sides or faces of the call"?[114]

According to Heidegger, the call of conscience 'says' nothing that might be discussed and gives no information about 'worldly' events.[115] In other words, it says nothing concerning our practical or theoretical engagement with the world. Instead, it silently reveals

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[111] Heidegger, 269.
[112] Heidegger, 275.
[113] Heidegger, 274.
[114] Simon Critchley, "The null basis-being of a nullity, or between two nothings: Heidegger's uncanniness," in *Interpreting Heidegger: Critical Essays*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71.
[115] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 280.

to Dasein the uncanniness or contingency of its thrown Being. Not surprisingly, then, the

mood or attunement of the call is *anxiety.* Heidegger refers to the call's uncanny way of

keeping silent as "reticence" (I will discuss this term in greater detail below).[116] He also

emphasizes that the call of conscience manifests itself through care. Indeed, care is the

condition of possibility for conscience itself. In Heidegger's words, conscience "has its

ontological possibility in the fact that Dasein, in the very basis of its Being, is care."[117]

As discussed in the opening of this chapter, "*care*" *(Sorge)* has to do with the fact that

Dasein's own Being is an issue for it. Unlike inanimate objects, and even animals (according

to Heidegger's residually anthropocentric view), Dasein *cares* about, and wants to disclose,

the meaning of its Being. Yet, as Heidegger repeatedly emphasizes, Dasein proximally and

for the most part exists in an inauthentic mode, and hence fails to explicitly address the

question of Being. In his chapter on death, Heidegger explores the possibility of an authentic

Being-towards-death but questions whether this factically ever happens. The call of

conscience, which he dubs "Dasein's attestation of an authentic Being-towards-death," is his

solution to this problem.[118] It is worth noting that Dasein's status as both the *caller* and

called is analogous to the structure of Dasein as both *authentic* and *inauthentic*.[119] As

Heidegger puts it, "Dasein is already both in the truth and in untruth."[120] Thus, his claim that

the call of conscience comes from the "uncanniness of thrown individualization" is just

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[116] Heidegger, 277.

[117] Heidegger, 278.

[118] Heidegger, 267. At the end of Part Two, Chapter One of *Being and Time,* Heidegger states, "The question of Dasein's authentic Being-a-whole and of its existential constitution still hangs in mid-air. It can be put on a phenomenal basis which will stand the test only if it can cling to a possible authenticity of its Being which is *attested* [my emphasis] by Dasein itself." Although the call of conscience is Heidegger's proposed solution to this problem, the challenge is to figure out how we can say that this conscience is something real even though it isn't objectively present.

[119] Critchley, "The null basis-being of a nullity," 71.

[120] Heidegger, 222.

another way of saying that authentic Dasein pursues, and threatens the complacency of, inauthentic Dasein. What does this uncanny call give us to understand?

According to Heidegger, the call of conscience discloses Dasein as 'Guilty!' in the very ground of its Being (although we can certainly fail to hear or understand this). But before delving into a discussion of existential guilt, Heidegger addresses the ordinary conception of moral or legal guilt. "Being-guilty" in this moralistic sense of "having come to owe something to Others" means "Being-the-basis of," or reason for, a lack of something in the Dasein of that Other.[121] Suppose I borrowed $100 from my friend over a month ago, and I still haven't paid her back (even though I promised to pay her back within two weeks); for this reason, I feel guilty about my indebtedness to her. Heidegger doesn't outright reject this conception of guilt; in fact, he thinks that all ontological investigations "must start with what the everyday interpretation of Dasein 'says' about them."[122] Still, he wants to address a more primordial kind of guilt, which he argues is the pre-moral source of moral guilt. As discussed above, *care* is the Being of Dasein. In §58, Heidegger reiterates his claim from Part One that the care structure is comprised of: 1. facticity (thrownness), 2. existence (projection), and 3. Falling (inauthenticity).[123] This helps set the stage for the nuanced and rather difficult discussion of nullity that follows. First, though, we need to understand how care is related to guilt. To do this, it will be helpful to jump ahead in the text a little.

In Part Two, § 59 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger states, "The call has the kind of Being which belongs to care."[124] Put simply, the call of conscience is rooted in care. Recall

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[121] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 282. Although "having debts" represents a familiar or common-sense usage of the German 'Schuldigsin,' it clearly does not represent a common-sense usage of the English 'Being-guilty,' since the latter term comes from an entirely different stem.
[122] Heidegger, 281.
[123] Heidegger, 284.
[124] Heidegger, 291.

Heidegger's claim in Part One (which he reiterates here and elsewhere) that the being of

Dasein is care. In other words, care is key to grasping Dasein in the totality of its structural

whole; hence, we need to pay close attention to its structure. Elsewhere in the book,

Heidegger delineates the manifold structure of care in painstaking detail.[125] What I want to

emphasize here, however, is the vital relation between "thrown projection" (two components

of the three-dimensional care structure) and nullity.[126] As Heidegger stresses repeatedly

throughout *Being and Time*, Dasein is simultaneously *ontic* and *ontological;* like two sides of

a coin, neither aspect can be disregarded. This means, among other things, that Dasein's

freedom is not absolute but *finite*. In § 58, Heidegger states:

> In the structure of thrownness, as in that of projection, there lies essentially a nullity. This nullity is the basis for the possibility of *in*authentic Dasein in its falling; and as falling, every inauthentic Dasein factically is. *Care itself, in its very essence, is permeated with nullity through and through.* Thus "care"—Dasein's Being—means, as thrown projection, Being-the-basis of a nullity (and this Being-the-basis is itself null). This means that *Dasein as such is guilty,* if our formally existential definition of "guilt" as "Being-the-basis of a nullity" is indeed correct.[127]

To make sense of this quote, we first need to understand what Heidegger means by "nullity"

(Nichtigkeit). There is, however, some disagreement among Heidegger scholars as to the

nature and extent of this nullity. As we will see, this is grounded in a disagreement regarding

the appropriate translation of *Nichtigkeit*.

In "The Null Basis of Being a Nullity," Simon Critchley stresses the relation between

nullity and impotency. He interprets Heidegger's claim that there is a nullity situated in the

structures of both *thrownness* and *projection* to mean that Dasein is a double "zero" or

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[125] See Part One, § 41 and § 42.
[126] Heidegger, 196. In § 41, Heidegger states, "In defining 'care' as 'Being-ahead-of-oneself [projection]—in-Being-already-in [thrownness]…as Being-alongside [falling]…', we have made it plain that even this phenomenon is, in itself, structurally articulated" (parentheses added).
[127] Heidegger, 285.

"impotentialization."[128] He argues that since our impotentialization, which stems from an

"unmasterable thrownness," is our condition of possibility (and impossibility), we ought to

embrace it and "wear it as a badge of honor.[129] William Richardson, however, thinks that

Critchley's interpretation of Dasein's nullity makes "too much out of too little to make any

satisfying sense at all."[130] According to Richardson, this faulty reading of Heidegger is

rooted in Critchley's inadequately critical acceptance of the English translators' rendering of

the German word *nicht* ("not") and the German word *Nichtigkeit* as "null" and "nullity."

Richardson, on the contrary, translates *nicht* as "null" and *Nichtigkeit* as "not-ness" or "not" -

infectedness.[131]

 As Richardson reads it, "not" negates something positive, while "null" is an all-

encompassing negation.[132] Recall, from above, Heidegger's claim that there lies a "nullity" in

both our thrownness *and* our projection. In response to Critchley's insistence that this means

Dasein *is* a double "zero" or "impotency," Richardson states, "For my sense, this reduction to

impotence of what seems to be no more than a limit on the power of our potency goes too

far."[133] Regardless of whether one translates *nicht* as "null" or "not," I agree with

Richardson's critical reading of Critchley. The latter's claim that our impotency *defines us*

largely disregards Heidegger's more nuanced understanding of the "not." For example,

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[128] Critchley, "The null basis-being of a nullity," 77-78.
[129] Critchley, 75.
[130] William Richardson, "Heidegger and the Strangeness of Being" in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality,* ed. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 159.
[131] Richardson, "Heidegger and the Strangeness of Being," 158.
[132] Richardson, 158. To further clarify his understanding of the difference between "not and "null," Richardson states, "As I read it, 'not' denotes negation that limits something positive, 'null' a negation that is unqualifiedly total. Correspondingly, *Nichtigkeit* suggests the character of being affected by, and even deformed by, a limiting 'not'; nullity suggests unqualified, hence unlimited, negation of any positivity at all."
[133] Richardson 159.

Heidegger states, in the very section we have been discussing: "But is it so obvious that every 'not' signifies something negative in the sense of a lack?"[134] Here, Heidegger is clearly calling into question the narrow understanding of 'not' that limits its meaning to "lack." If we focus solely on Dasein's impotency, then we close ourselves off to the possibility of exploring the richer, not-wholly-negative meanings of *nicht* and *Nichtigkeit.* In what follows, I will finish clarifying the relationship between guilt and "nullity" or "not-ness" in *Being and Time*, and then shift to a discussion of later Heidegger's renewed understanding of the "not" and its relationship to anxiety and uncanniness.

In § 58, Heidegger states, "Thus 'Being-a-basis' means *never* to have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up. This 'not' belongs to the existential meaning of 'throwness.'"[135] Unlike Descartes' God, Dasein is not self-caused (*causa sui*); instead, Dasein is thrown into a world that is not of its own accord. For example, I don't get to select my parents, birthplace, or socioeconomic status in advance. I also don't get to select my ethnicity, whether I'm born with a disability, or what my pre-existing talents, cares and predilections are. This ineradicable contingency of self is what Heidegger is referring to when he says Dasein is a "thrown basis."[136] Although I am not the cause or basis of my own Being, I still have to take over—or take responsibility for—this Being-a-basis that I have been thrown into. Now, how does all of this relate to care (*Sorge*)?

As cited above, Heidegger states that "*Care itself, in its very essence, is permeated with nullity through and through.*"[137] We saw earlier that the care-structure is comprised of the following three elements: facticity (throwness), existence (projection), and falling

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[134] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 286.
[135] Heidegger, 284.
[136] Heidegger, 284.
[137] Heidegger, 285.

both its potency and impotency (or, put differently, how Dasein is both active and passive). But before we get ahead of ourselves, we need to understand what Heidegger means by "resoluteness."

Heidegger begins §60 by reiterating his earlier claim that the call of conscience gives us to understand, or summons us to, our "Being-guilty."[143] He characterizes the authentic understanding of the call as "wanting to have a conscience," which amounts to a "readiness for anxiety" and owning the choice of who we are.[144] In understanding the call, Dasein is forced to confront its basic uncanniness; and as we discussed earlier, anxiety is the mood or attunement that belongs to uncanniness. Just as the call is silent (i.e., it utters nothing), so too the mode of discourse that accompanies wanting to have a conscience is *reticence*, a way of articulating the world in which, by "keeping silent," I deprive conventional language of its power to make sense of the particular situation in which I find myself.[145] In this way, I open myself to my ownmost Being-guilty. But why does the call keep silent? According to Heidegger, it comes from "the soundlessness of uncanniness" and calls Dasein back into "the stillness of itself" (or *solus ipse*).[146] Not surprisingly, the "they" is suspicious of such silent discourse and thus fails to hear the call. Upon giving this preparatory analysis, Heidegger defines *resoluteness* as "This distinctive and authentic disclosedness [or 'un-closedness'], which is attested in Dasein itself by its conscience—*this reticent self-projection upon one's ownmost Being-guilty, in which one is ready for anxiety*'"[147] In other words, in resoluteness,

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[143] Heidegger, 295.

[144] Heidegger, 296.

[145] Mark Wrathall and Max Murphy, "An Overview of *Being and Time*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time,* 30.

[146] Wrathall and Murphy, "An Overview of *Being and Time*," 30. In the silence of death, the worldless self, or *solus ipse*, reminds me that there is no *one* right answer on how to live life (this can be read as a profoundly anti-fundamentalist, anti-authoritarian claim).

[147] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 296-297. My emphasis. Heidegger stresses that disclosedness of Dasein in readiness for anxiety is composed of the following three existential structures: (1) anxiety as

Dasein does not flee from anxiety but rather embraces it, which shatters the rigidity and

obstinacy of the "they," and frees particular Dasein for determining what is factically

possible for it at the time.

    We should now be somewhat familiar with the terms "reticence," "projection," and

"readiness for anxiety." Still, we need to take a closer look at what Heidegger means by

disclosedness ("*Ent-schlossenheit*"), which, as Thomson points out, Heidegger sometimes

hyphenates. According to Thomson, he does this in order to highlight that:

> …the existential "resoluteness" whereby Dasein freely chooses the existential
> commitments that define it does not entail deciding on a particular course of action
> ahead of time and obstinately sticking to one's guns come what may, but, rather,
> requires an 'openness' whereby one continues to be responsive to the emerging
> solicitations of, and unpredictable elements in, the particular existential 'situation,'
> the full reality of which only the actual decision itself discloses. In resolve's
> decisive "moment of insight," Dasein is (like a gestalt switch) set free rather than
> paralyzed by the contingency and indeterminacy of its choice of projects, and so can
> project itself into its chosen project in a way that expresses its sense that, although
> this project is appropriated from a storehouse of publicly intelligible roles inherited
> from the tradition, it nevertheless matters that this particular role has been chosen by
> this particular Dasein and updated, *via* a "reciprocative rejoinder" (386), so as,
> ideally, to develop its particular ontic and factical aptitudes as these intersect with
> the pressing needs of its time and generation.[148]

In other words, resoluteness is by no means a stubborn, inflexible sense of resolve; instead, it

involves a recognition that there is no single correct answer about what to do or who to be.

Resolute Dasein, unlike irresolute Dasein, recognizes and accepts that things often don't go

as planned (and that this isn't necessarily a "bad" or "negative" thing). Indeed, the only way

to determine how the future will pan out is to project ourselves into given possibilities.

Although these possibilities are rooted in a particular tradition, and so are not entirely novel,

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    attunement, (2) understanding as a self-projection upon one's ownmost Being-guilty, and (3) discourse
    as reticence.
[148] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*," 273-274.

we can nevertheless make them our own by updating them, *via* a "reciprocative rejoinder," in a way that complements our unique capacities and acknowledges the crucial needs of our time and generation. Thus, by "reciprocative rejoinder," Heidegger means a creative repetition or reworking of something in the past. As he puts it, "Repetition does not abandon itself to that which is past, nor does it aim at progress. In the *moment of vision* authentic existence is indifferent to both these alternatives."[149] In other words, such a rejoinder does not seek to escape into the past, nor is it fixated on progress. Rather, in the "moment of vision"—which has its origin in the Greek word "*kairos*" (the "right" or "opportune moment")—we freely choose to project ourselves into our chosen projects, which hinges on accepting that they are contingent and indeterminate.

How does all of this relate to my earlier claim that Heidegger's discussion of resoluteness helps clarify how Dasein is defined by both its *potency* and *impotency* (or activity and passivity)? Recall that there are two structural moments in Heidegger's phenomenological account of authenticity: "anticipation" and "resoluteness." Although Heidegger fleshes them out independently, he eventually claims that they are internally connected.[150] As he puts it, "Thus only *as anticipating* does resoluteness become a primordial Being towards Dasein's ownmost potentiality-for-Being [or ability to-be]. Only when it 'qualifies' itself as Being-towards-death does resoluteness understand the 'can' of its potentiality-for-Being-Guilty."[151] In other words, resoluteness proceeds, or comes after, anticipation of death. In anticipation, I trace my anxiety all the way back to its source in my

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[149] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 386. My emphasis.
[150] Heidegger, 305. He states, "Resoluteness does not just 'have' a connection with anticipation, as with something other than itself. *It harbors in itself authentic Being-towards-death* [i.e., anticipation]*, as the possible existentiell modality of its own authentic*ity."
[151] Heidegger, 306.

fundamental uncanniness, or existential homelessness that results from the fact that there is

no life project I can ever be finally at home in, because there is "nothing about the

ontological structure of the self" that could tell me what specifically I should do with my

life.[152] As a result, my world of significance collapses. In resoluteness, I (having survived

death) reconnect to the world. Thus, *authenticity* names a dual movement in which, as

Thomson puts it, "the world lost in anticipating or running out into death is regained in

resolve."[153] In Being-towards-death or anticipation, I encounter my primordial nullity as

myself; simultaneously, my ineliminable Being-guilty is made manifest. In resoluteness, I

open myself to this Being-guilty and accept that my freedom is finite, which enables me to

reconnect to the world. As Heidegger states, "Resolution does not withdraw itself from

'actuality,' but *discovers first what is factically possible*; and it does so by seizing upon it in

whatever way is possible for it as its ownmost potentiality-for-Being in the 'they.'"[154] But in

order to discover what is factically possible, I must be open to identifying my limitations.

Hence, I am neither totally potent nor totally impotent, but *somewhere in between*.[155]

1.5 "What Is Metaphysics?", Anxiety, and the "Nothing"

In 1929, two years after *Being and Time* was published, Heidegger expands upon his

discussion of anxiety, uncanniness, and death in his lecture course "What Is Metaphysics?"

As can be recalled from our above discussion of anxiety, he uses the word "hover"

(*schweben*) in this text to describe the experience of world collapse, which he didn't use in

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[152] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time,*" 270.
[153] Thomson, 274.
[154] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 299. My emphasis.
[155] This overcoming of the potent/impotent, active/passive binary makes room for *ambiguity*, which is the primary focus of Chapter 2. As we will see, acknowledging the ambiguity of our *openness*—which is closely connected to Heidegger's concepts of resoluteness (literally "un-closedness") and *Gelassenheit* ("openness to the mystery")—is crucial if we want to adopt non-reductive conception of vulnerability.

Being and Time. Let us review what he says about this word. In anxiety, one feels "ill at ease" (*es ist einem unheimlich*) but cannot pinpoint or determine what causes this feeling. Put simply, anxiety has no object.[156] Moreover, "All things and we ourselves sink into indifference," that is, we experience a global collapse of our worldly projects.[157] This does not mean, however, that the world disappears; instead, it recedes from us while simultaneously turning toward us, which has an oppressive effect. More specifically, we are completely swept up or inundated by the fact that we can get "no hold on things." What was initially so familiar and easy to cognitively grasp is now strange and obtrusive. Heidegger states:

> Anxiety reveals the nothing. We "hover" in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. This implies that we ourselves—we humans who are in being—in the midst of beings slip away from ourselves. At bottom therefore it is not as though "you" or "I" feel ill at ease; rather, it is this way for some "one." In the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold onto, pure Da-sein is all that is still there.[158]

Here, Heidegger equates "hovering" (*schweben*) with being "left hanging."[159] What does it mean to be left hanging? In the fundamental mood of anxiety, intelligibility as such hangs into the nothing; this being "left hanging," gives us the haunting sense that this might not be the only way to *be* (i.e., that we could be better or live in a better world). Yet, primarily and the most part, we tranquilize this haunting experience by staying busy and falling prey to the "they." Heidegger associates anxiety with a twofold "slipping away" (*entgleiten*). In anxiety, (1) beings as a whole slip away from us and (2) we slip away from ourselves. Prior to the

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[156] Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" 101.
[157] Heidegger, 101.
[158] Heidegger, 101.
[159] Other synonyms for *schweben* include "float," "suspend," and "linger."

occurrence of anxiety, we felt like we had a solid grip on the world and ourselves but now, in their "slipping away," these things are wholly incomprehensible; not only is the world strange to us, but we are strange to ourselves. The personality traits, activities, and commitments that we used to think defined us peel away so that "pure Da-sein" (or being-here) is all that remains.[160] When this happens, "the nothing" is revealed. Let's take a closer look at the way in which the nothing becomes manifest.

Heidegger clarifies that in the occurrence of anxiety, the nothing does not become manifest "apart from" beings as a whole; instead, it is encountered "at one with" beings as a whole.[161] More specifically, it reveals itself amidst beings explicitly as a slipping away or retreating of the whole. In this slipping away, Dasein finds itself in "utter impotence" with respect to beings as a whole.[162] As stated above, beings are not destroyed but rather escape our cognitive grasp, and hence are disclosed in their "full but heretofore concealed strangeness."[163] Indeed, Heidegger is careful to distinguish between "the nothing" and the logical "negation" of beings as a whole. Such negation can be produced at will, which implies that it is predictable; the nothing, however, catches us off guard; it cannot be measured or calculated. According to Heidegger, the nothing precedes and gives rise to negation, not vice versa.[164] Moreover, the nothing is "essentially repelling" toward the "retreating whole of beings," which is what reveals beings in their previously concealed strangeness; this repelling gesture of the nothing, which "oppresses" or "crowds round" Dasein in anxiety, is its essence: nihilation.[165]

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[160] Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" 101.
[161] Heidegger, 102.
[162] Heidegger, 102.
[163] Heidegger, 103.
[164] Since logical negation is predictable, it can be viewed as a tamed, toned-down derivative of the nothing.
[165] Heidegger, 101, 103. The "nothing" that Heidegger refers to in this 1929 lecture (i.e., "What Is Metaphysics?") is *Being as such* in its difference from the *Being of entities*, that is, ontological difference.

When the nihilation of the nothing occurs, via the fundamental mood of anxiety, what we initially took for granted becomes conspicuous in its absence. Recall from our discussion of *Being and Time* that the experience of death or world collapse allows us to explicitly grasp ourselves as a whole. In anticipation or running out into death, we trace our anxiety back to its source in our basic uncanniness or existential homelessness that results from the fact that there is no life project we can ultimately be at home in, since there is nothing about the ontological structure of the self that could tell us what exactly we should do with our lives.[166] Consequently, we experience a global collapse of our worldly projects, which reveals our primordial nullity and being-guilty. In resoluteness, we open ourselves to being-guilty and accept that our freedom is *finite*, which allows us to reconnect to the world. Hence, anticipatory resoluteness is grounded in both our *potency* and *impotency*. Indeed, it is only by surrendering myself to the nothing that I can take charge of my existence. As Heidegger states in "What Is Metaphysics?", "If in the ground of its essence Dasein were not transcending [beings as a whole], which now means, if it were not in advance holding itself out into the nothing, then it could never be related to beings nor even to itself. Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom."[167] In other words, to be Dasein means to be held out into the nothing (i.e., the not-yet of futurity). Moreover, the nothing precedes—and gives rise to—selfhood and freedom, that is, it belongs to our essential unfolding rather than being a counterpart of it. Hence, the nothing is not negative in the sense of a lack or privation but rather teeming with possibilities.

Admittedly, Heidegger's account of the nothing is quite abstract, and even vague, at this point in his philosophical thinking. For example, what exactly does he mean when he

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[166] Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time,*" 270.
[167] Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" 103.

speaks of the "nihilation of the nothing"? We know that the nihilation of the nothing simultaneously repels beings as a whole and "oppresses" us, and that this constitutes its essence, but we don't know much else. In the following section, I will examine a key development in later Heidegger's work that provides further insight into the nothing and our relationship to it, that is, his conception of *Gelassenheit* ("releasement" and "openness to the mystery").

1.6 *GELASSENHEIT*

In the first essay of *Country Path Conversations*—which consists of a triadic conversation between a guide, scholar, and scientist—Heidegger criticizes the modern, scientific characterization of *thinking* as "willful representation" (*Vorstellen*) and instead proposes that the essence of thinking is "non-willing" (*Nicht-Wollen*).[168] More precisely, thinking is "*releasement* to the open-region." Recall from above that, for Heidegger, "releasement" is synonymous with *Gelassenheit*; hence, the "non-willing" thinking he calls for is inextricably linked to *Gelassenheit.* Still, we need to examine what Heidegger means by "open-region." Perhaps it will be helpful to begin by saying what it is *not*.

For Heidegger, the "open-region" or "abiding expanse" is not interchangeable with "world."[169] A brief glance at his earlier work will help us see why. After Heidegger's pursual of a "fundamental ontology"—which he characterizes in *Being and Time* as an understanding of "the meaning of being in general"—proved to be futile*,* he eventually abandons this

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[168] Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations,* translated Bret W. Davis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 33, 38.

[169] Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations,* 97. In 1959, Heidegger published a revised excerpt from this text. As translator Bret Davis notes in footnote 57, "Among the changes is the substitution of 'open-region' (*Gegnet*) for 'world' (*Welt*)."

effort.[170] In particular, he realizes that the notion of a "fundamental ontology" is incompatible with his radical "historicization of being" into a series of what Thomson calls "ontological epochs or "historical constellations of intelligibility."[171] In Heidegger's middle period, during what is often called "the turn," he begins to distinguish between the "Being of entities" and "Being as such." While the former refers to the "Being" that belongs to Dasein in *Being and Time,* the latter refers to "the Nothing," "the earth," or inexhaustible being. Since the "Being of entities" is limited to Dasein, it can rightly be called anthropocentric (according to Heidegger, Dasein excludes non-human animals). "Being as such," on the contrary, does not depend on Dasein but rather precedes and exceeds us. This distinction is important because it implies that truth does not depend on humans. What I take Heidegger to be saying in *Country Path Conversations* is that the "open-region" is equivalent to Being as such, that is, the inexhaustible source of historical intelligibility.[172] Although his understanding of our relationship to the "open-region" can be linked to his notion of the fundamental strife between earth and world in "The Origin of the Work of Art," his characterization of our relationship to Being as such in *Country Path Conversations* takes on a less conflictual tone. This is because he puts a much stronger emphasis on *Gelassenheit* or "releasement" in this latter text.

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[170] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 227.

[171] Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 116.

[172] For instance, Heidegger's claim that the essence of thinking is "releasement to the open-region," (*Country Path Conversations*, 80) parallels his definition, in "Memorial Address," of *Gelassenheit* as "releasement toward things" and "openness to the *mystery*, (i.e., openness to "that which shows itself and the same time withdraws"), the latter of which is just another name for Being as such or the nothing. Similarly, Bret Davis suggests in his review of Richard Capobianco's *Engaging Heidegger* that "Perhaps *die Gegnet* [the "open-region"], as this abyssally open and thus self-concealing and impenetrable 'forest [surrounding the clearing],' is what Heidegger means by "the region to which the clearing, in turn, belongs." Davis, "Review: *Engaging Heidegger*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, September 10, 2010, https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/engaging-heidegger/. I take these claims as evidence that the open-region is what Heidegger formerly referred to as the "nothing" ("What Is Metaphysics?"), and then the "essentially self-secluding earth" ("The Origin of the Work of Art").

During his conversation with the Scientist and Scholar, the Guide equates

"releasement" with "waiting" and "restrained enduring."[173] This is connected to Heidegger's

broader claim that releasement itself comes not from the human but from the open-region,

which helps explain his assertion that the essence of thinking is *non-willing*. Although the

transition from willing to non-willing requires a paradoxical "willing of non-willing,"

thinking itself is something that comes from outside us and washes over us. On the contrary,

thinking in the sense of *willful representation* always looks outward into the horizon.

Heidegger calls such modern, scientific thinking "transcendental-horizontal representation,"

which he refers to elsewhere as "enframing," that is, treating everything as a mere resource to

be optimized and recycled. According to Heidegger, the transcendental horizon is only "the

side turned toward us" of the surrounding open-region.[174] In other words, the human

perspective is merely one facet of a much broader circle-of-vision, which does not receive its

openness from our gazing at it. Yet, it would be presumptuous to assume that releasement to

the open region is utterly passive. Instead, as Heidegger puts it, releasement lies "outside the

distinction between passivity and activity."[175]

Recall our discussion of "anticipatory resoluteness" in section four of this chapter. In

short, I stated that Dasein is neither totally potent nor totally impotent, but somewhere in

between. In *Country Path Conversations,* Heidegger is acutely aware of the possibility that

his notion of releasement will be misconstrued as mere powerlessness and even a "denial of

the will to live."[176] To counter this risk, he connects releasement with his *Being and Time*

discussion of "resoluteness" or "un-closedness" (*Ent-schlossenheit*), the latter of which he

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[173] Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, 78, 94.
[174] Heidegger, 72.
[175] Heidegger, 70.
[176] Heidegger, 93.

defines as "the *specifically* [eigens] undertaken self-opening of Dasein *for* the open."[177] Thus, both resoluteness and releasement require us to *freely* choose to undertake our existence—finitude and all—which means that neither resoluteness nor releasement implies utter impotency. Indeed, choosing to let go of what is beyond our control tends to yield a better outcome in the grand scheme of things. For example, if I'm baking a cake and I keep succumbing to my urge to check on it every ten minutes, then the cake will probably flop. Conversely, if I remain patient and refrain from constantly checking on it, then my cake will almost certainly turn out light and fluffy. Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* is quite similar to the Daoist concept of *wuwei,* that is, "effortless action" or "non-action." Learning to align ourselves with the Way is like refraining from the temptation to swim upstream when we know the river is too powerful to oppose.[178] Similarly, one who releases herself to the open-region lets go of her illusory sense of sovereignty (at least temporarily) and accepts that there will always be aspects of reality that are beyond our control.[179]

Heidegger's notion of Being as inexhaustible reinforces the idea that we are neither utterly potent nor utterly impotent. For him, Being both *informs* and *exceeds* our grasp, which means that some, but not all, of its aspects will inevitably escape us. One way in which Heidegger conceptualizes this is in terms of difference (or otherness) included within the

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[177] Heidegger, 93. This is Heidegger's updated version (included in his 1959 excerpt and mentioned by translator Bret Davis in footnote 53) of his initial claim in *Country Path Conversations* that "resoluteness" means "the self-opening for the open."

[178] In his 1954 essay "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger addresses the reduction of the Rhine River, during the age of modernity, to a meaningless resource to be optimized (that is, a "water-power supplier"), which he contrasts with "the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years." He describes this modern way of viewing the river as "monstrous" and juxtaposes it with Hölderlin's hymn "The Rhine." Heidegger has hope that this current age of modernity will be surpassed by a post-modern age in which we learn to view things as more than just empty resources to be optimized. If we combine his critique of empty optimization with the Taoist emphasis on letting-be and respect for our environment, then we arguably arrive at an enhanced critique of modernity. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, 321.

[179] As will become clear in the next chapter, Butler gives a more thoroughgoing critique of the potentially fatal fantasy of sovereignty in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War.*

same. In *Identity and Difference*, he argues, following Parmenides, that thinking and being are the *same* but not *identical.* By making this subtle distinction, Heidegger allows for difference within sameness. Now, one might object that Heidegger's conception of Being is inherently violent and totalizing in that it reduces the Other to the Same and thereby precludes difference. Indeed, both Levinas and Irigarary make this criticism. Yet, if, following Heidegger, we distinguish between the "same" and "identical," then sameness *does* allow for difference. This key distinction challenges us to think sameness and difference simultaneously, which requires us to overcome dualistic thinking and instead embrace the polysemic, dynamic nature of existence. For later Heidegger, the common "ground" we share with all entities is Being as such, that is, the inexhaustible source of historical intelligibility that always partially, but never fully, escapes our grasp. This means that Being is not static but rather a dynamic interplay between presencing and absencing, revealing and concealing.

Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* encourages us to release ourselves to the "open-region" or "inexhaustible being," which necessarily involves a degree of otherness. Moreover, in *Contributions to Philosophy,* he gives an account of the genesis of intelligibility that allows for an encounter with the unfamiliar, which reinforces the idea of otherness. In particular, he articulates the happening of truth as "enowning" (*Ereignis*) or "the event of appropriation," that is, an opening of a groundless ground that inaugurates unconcealment.[180] In "Meaning, Excess, and Event," Richard Polt expresses approval of Heidegger's acknowledgement of "the excess of my own being, of nature, of beings as a whole, and of the *inceptive event* [or event of meaningfulness that can only be understood by informing the life

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[180] Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. P. Emad and K. Maly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

that unfolds it, as in love].”[181] Polt argues, however, that "the excess of the other individual who faces me, and the event of the encounter with that other, do not get adequately articulated in his thought."[182] Put simply, Polt agrees with Levinas' claim that Heidegger fails to do justice to the face of the other. In a similar vein, I think that Heidegger's concepts of resoluteness and *Gelassenheit* are too impersonal. Although they involve an openness to being affected by that which is "other"—and even make room for a renewed conception of vulnerability as not necessarily negative—they take for granted the profound ways in which we are shaped by our face-to-face encounters with human others. As Judith Butler states in *Precarious Life*, "I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must. Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something."[183]

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[181] Richard Polt, "Meaning, Excess, and Event," *Gatherings* I (2011), x45.
[182] Polt, "Meaning, Excess, and Event," x45.
[183] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

Chapter Two: Beauvoir and Butler on Ambiguity and Vulnerability

In this chapter, I track the movement in existential phenomenology from ontology to ethics, particularly with reference to Simone de Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity. Although she doesn't give a straightforward definition of this term, she suggests that it is an integral part of the human condition, such that we both transcend our natural condition and remain riveted to it, are both a unique subject and an object for others, and are both an autonomous individual and part of a greater social collective. Beauvoir's work on ambiguity fills a gap left by other existential thinkers, including Heidegger and Sartre.[184] In *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*, Ann Murphy suggests that the hesitation evinced by recent feminist philosophers regarding the leap from "ontological claims of dispossession and precariousness to the terrain of normative ethics is not so much a liability as a contemporary manifestation of what it means to 'assume ambiguity,' as Simone de Beauvoir would have suggested."[185] In other words, we find provocation for responsibility in this hesitation or moral uncertainty rather than in its elimination.[186] Taking this suggestion as my point of departure, I examine

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[184] As I suggested in chapter one, early Heidegger is more concerned with ontology than with ethics. Indeed, he clarifies repeatedly in *Being and Time* that his distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence is not moralizing. In his words, "it may not be superfluous to remark that our own Interpretation is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein" (167). To be sure, Heidegger *does* make ethical claims about our relationship to technology in his later work; yet, he does not explicitly devote his time to formulating an ethics. The same can be said of Sartre, whose magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, is largely a response to *Being and Time* and hence is concerned primarily with ontology. In the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre announces his intentions to devote his next book to ethics, but he never actually brings this project to fruition. Indeed, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir defends Sartre against those who claim his existentialist ontology condemns humans without recourse but admits that he "opens up the perspective for an ethics" only in the final pages of *Being and Nothingness.* (11). Hence, Beauvoir's aim in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is to pick up where Sartre left off by establishing an existentialist ethics.

[185] Ann Murphy. *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary.* State University of New York Press (2012), 83.

[186] Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*, 83.

Beauvoir's notion of the fundamental ambiguity of human existence, while paying close attention to both her ontological and ethical claims.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir argues that although existence is necessarily a lack of being, we can't help but want to fill this lack; put differently, there will always be an unsettling distance between us and the world.[187] Yet, we can choose to joyfully—albeit sometimes painfully—accept this ineliminable distance that is necessary for disclosing being. Moreover, this does not mean that we will no longer desire to remove this distance. Instead, we will experience a perpetual tug-of-war between accepting it and trying to eliminate it. To assume our fundamental ambiguity, we must embrace, rather than deny, this tension. In Beauvoir's words, "Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity."[188] According to her, this ambiguity extends beyond the realm of an existentialist ontology and into the realm of ethics.

Beauvoir argues that, insofar as we are humans, we depend on each other for our survival. Moreover, she recognizes that the idea of such an inter-dependence is frightening; for the fact that we humans are simultaneously separate and bound to each other makes conflict inevitable.[189] Since failure is an integral part of the human condition, people will always make mistakes, and the negative consequences of those mistakes will harm others.

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[187] Later in this chapter, I will explore Beauvoir's most detailed example of what this "unsettling distance" might look like. For now, I think it is sufficient to say that such an unsettling distance can be conceived in terms of ourselves and various aspects of the environment (e.g., between the mountain and me). As we saw in Chapter 1, Heidegger calls this unsettling distance "uncanniness" or "not-being-at-home-in-the-world" (*Unheimlichkeit*). Like a square peg in a round hole, Dasein will never seamlessly fit into its world. Beauvoir's claim that "existence is a lack of being" also recalls our discussion of Dasein's nullity. In suggesting that we can learn to live with the ineliminable distance between ourselves and the world, and even find joy in it, Beauvoir makes a move that is structurally similar to Heidegger's claim that nullity is not simply a lack. As he puts it, "But is it so obvious that every 'not' signifies something negative in the sense of a lack?" Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 286.

[188] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 9.

[189] Murphy, 67.

Nonetheless, Beauvoir doesn't think that violence is inherently bad; in some cases, when an individual or group of individuals is being oppressed, the only way to end such oppression is to slay the tyrant. Put simply, "no action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against men."[190] She calls these paradoxes that inevitably arise in human interaction "the antinomies of action."

As I argue in this chapter, our dependence on others is ambiguous because our bodily vulnerability opens us equally to what Adriana Cavarero refers to as "the two poles of the essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability: wounding and caring."[191] Much like Heidegger's notion of anxiety in the face of death, the indeterminacy that results from ambiguity is profoundly unsettling and motivates various attempts to escape it. And yet, as I argue, such indeterminacy or uncertainty need not be a source of despair; instead, we can choose to affirm it and even find joy in it.[192] Still, Beauvoir stresses that failure is a necessary aspect of human existence and that "without failure, no ethics."[193]According to her, we all feel anguish in the face of our freedom and try to escape this anguish, *via* bad faith, in a multitude of ways. This can be understood as an expression of the mechanism of disavowal, which, as I suggested in the Introduction, is a common thread in the work of Heidegger, Beauvoir, Butler, and Gilson. One mode of bad faith involves setting up absolute or universal values, whose source we then attribute to God or "impersonal universal man."[194] For

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[190] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 99.

[191] Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence,* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2007), 20.

[192] Like Heidegger, Beauvoir argues that humans lack a fixed essence, which implies that existence is *indeterminate*—a disconcerting thought for many. Nevertheless, this indeterminacy is not wholly negative because it is the source of freedom. It is important to keep in mind, however, that bodily vulnerability is differently manifested across the globe and that the harrowing (and largely preventable) sense of uncertainty or indeterminacy experienced by many oppressed individuals must not be affirmed but rejected. I address this differential manifestation of vulnerability in chapters three and four.

[193] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 10.

[194] Beauvoir, 17.

Beauvoir, however, such approaches to ethics are disingenuous because they gravely oversimply the complexity of human existence. According to her, our freedom is only intelligible when it is applied to concrete, particular situations.

Beauvoir's notion of our fundamental ambiguity and the moral uncertainty it implies is, in many ways, a precursor to recent feminist accounts of vulnerability. Although the body is centrally addressed in the *Second Sex*, her primary focus in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is on the relationship between one's own projects and those of others—that is, on the collision of interest, desire, and will. Consequently, her ethics of ambiguity lacks an account of the body. At the end of this chapter, I argue that Butler's recent work on precariousness, which stresses that one's survival is socially bound up with the survival of others, both emphasizes the importance of ambiguity (drawing on Beauvoir) and goes a step further than Beauvoir by developing an embodied account of vulnerability. Like Beauvoir, Butler suggests that our constitutive interdependency and exposure to others is ambiguous in that it constitutes both a promise and a threat. However, Butler's emphasis on the corporeal nature of vulnerability allows for a richer understanding of the relationship between ambiguity and vulnerability than is found in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.[195] According to her, acknowledging that we are vulnerable creatures does not, in itself, guarantee ethical action. Still, she suggests that our shared vulnerability can motivate, and even serve as a basis for, ethical action.

2.1 The Fundamental Ambiguity of Human Existence

In the opening pages of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues that humans *live* and *think* a tragic ambiguity that plants and animals merely undergo. Hence a "new paradox"

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[195] Butler, *Frames of War*, 61.

is introduced into our destiny: a person simultaneously transcends her natural condition and remains riveted to it, is an acting subject and an object acted upon, is an individual and a member of a collective, to name a few.[196] According to Beauvoir, we have all felt this tragic ambiguity of our condition at some point or other; yet most philosophers attempt to mask or eliminate it. Their efforts, however, are in vain. The "reasonable metaphysics" and "consoling ethics" with which they seek to entice us only highlight this fundamental ambiguity of human existence.[197] Thus, since we can't eliminate it, we might as well learn to assume or embrace it.

For Beauvoir, our ambiguity springs from the fact that our existence is necessarily marked by failure. We try to make ourselves God or to eliminate the distance between ourselves and the world, but this is an impossible goal.[198] Instead, we make ourselves exist as humans. As Beauvoir puts it, "His [man's] being is lack of being, but this lack has a way of being which is precisely existence."[199] Nevertheless, she stresses that we can deny this initial lack as lack, and instead affirm it as a positive existence. A major implication of such an attitude is the rejection of any transcendental or absolute authority. This means that we humans, who will never perfectly coincide with ourselves, are the sole creators of values. For Beauvoir, this is where ethics begins. The existential decision is full of anguish because it requires that one "incur the risk, in each case, of inventing an original solution."[200] In other words, there is no guarantee that my solution is the best solution, or even a tenable one. After

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[196] Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity,* 1.
[197] Beauvoir, 8.
[198] Beauvoir, 10. As she notes, "Sartre declares, in effect, that man is a "'useless passion,' that he tries in vain to realize the synthesis of the for-oneself [or to remove contingency from his being], to make himself God." In other words, no matter how hard we try to overcome the contingency of being (or, as Beauvoir puts it, to remove the ineliminable distance between ourselves and the world), our efforts will ultimately prove futile. Beauvoir, 10.
[199] Beauvoir, 13.
[200] Beauvoir, 142.

all, ethics is irrelevant to those inhabiting the sphere of the divinity. As Murphy states in *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*, "[e]thics is an issue for us precisely to the degree that we are capable of failure."[201] Hence, if we are committed to assuming our fundamental ambiguity, we must refrain from seeking comfort in absolute standards.

Early in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir clarifies that she is an atheist existentialist. While Dostoevsky famously proclaims that, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted," Beauvoir argues that the opposite is the case, that is, "If God does not exist, men's faults are inexpiable."[202] In other words, if God does not exist, our level of responsibility increases exponentially; for if we acknowledge that the world is not created by an alien power but by humans, we realize that our actions, including our successes and failures, necessarily shape this world. And without God to forgive us for our "sins," our faults are inexcusable. What is more, responsibility cannot be viewed in an atomistic sense; for the consequences of my actions affect not only me, but those around me as well. What does it look like for someone to fail to recognize this?

Beauvoir refers to people who view freedom and responsibility in an individualistic sense as "adventurers." She argues that the attitude of the adventurer is "very close to a genuinely moral attitude"; for the adventurer, rather than trying to *be* being, makes himself a lack of being.[203] If existentialism were solipsistic, then it would have to view the adventurer as its ideal hero. Although the adventurer thinks he can "assert his own existence without taking into account that of others," he is being disingenuous because the reality is, "every undertaking unfolds in a human world" and affects others.[204] According to Beauvoir,

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[201] Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*, 104.
[202] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 15-16.
[203] Beauvoir, 59.
[204] Beauvoir, 60-61.

freedom privileges situations that allow it to realize itself as indefinite movement. Since my freedom depends on that of others, I must respect their freedom and, whenever possible, help them free themselves. In other words, freedom cannot will itself without aiming at an open future, the latter of which requires the freedom of others. While such a law imposes limits upon my action, it also gives my action content and keeps me from "hardening in the absurdity of facticity."[205] The adventurer, however, remains indifferent to the content of his freedom; he enjoys action for its own sake and is attached to his exploration or conquest but detached from the end at which he aims. Once he has succeeded in conquering a person, place, or thing, he quickly loses interest in it.

For Beauvoir, there is more to life than jumping from one solo adventure to the next. Hence, as stated above, she argues that we ought to raise the original spontaneity of freedom, which is contentless, to the height of moral freedom, which acknowledges the concrete, particular "situation"—one that inevitably includes others. We need to remember, however, that Beauvoir views failure as integral to the human condition, so the transformation of our original spontaneity into moral freedom is by no means a once-and-for-all occurrence. Instead, one who undergoes an "existentialist conversion," that is, assumes her fundamental ambiguity, will always feel somewhat torn between her own freedom and that of others. Beauvoir criticizes Kant for defining man as "pure positivity" and thereby recognizing "no other possibility in him than coincidence with himself"; the problem with this approach is that it makes it extremely difficult to "account for an evil will."[206] Beauvoir, unlike Kant, does not see the human as being an essentially positive will. For her, it is possible to choose the unethical and still be perfectly rational. For Kant, on the contrary, the good will is good

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[205] Beauvoir, 60.
[206] Beauvoir, 33.

without qualification inasmuch as it acts in accordance with reason. Although he admits that it is possible to violate the categorical imperative, he argues that one who does so is acting neither freely nor rationally.[207] Beauvoir is also critical of the Stoic understanding of freedom. In particular, she argues that "existentialist conversion" must be sharply contrasted with the "Stoic conversion," the latter of which opposes to the sensible or material universe a formal freedom that is without content.[208] Instead, existentialist conversion should be compared to Husserl's phenomenological reduction, which requires us to put the will to be in parentheses (*epoché* or "bracketing"). As Beauvoir sees it, bracketing the will to be involves preventing any possibility of failure by "refusing to set up as absolutes the ends toward which my transcendence thrusts itself, and by considering them in their connection with the freedom which projects them."[209] In other words, according to Beauvoir, bracketing entails recognizing that my projects are contingent rather than absolute. But is her interpretation of the phenomenological reduction accurate?

In *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir,* Debra Bergoffen lends support to Beauvoir's overall argument regarding our fundamental ambiguity but suggests that Beauvoir misses the point of the phenomenological reduction. According to Bergoffen, bracketing the will to be is "more than a matter of refusing to set up my ends as absolute. It is a matter of seeing what happens when the will to be, understood as the will of the project (the will of establishing ends whether as absolute or contingent), is put out of play."[210] In other words, bracketing the will to be does not amount to making a pre-experiential commitment to refuse

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[207] Gail Linsenbard, "Sartre's Criticism of Kant's Moral Philosophy," *Sartre Studies International* 13, No. 2 (2007): 67-68.

[208] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 13.

[209] Beauvoir, 13.

[210] Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 92.

to set up my ends as absolute; instead, it involves observing what happens when the will to be, which Bergoffen understands as the will of the project, is "put out of play" or suspended. But to make more sense of Bergoffen's critique, we need to know why she identifies the *will to be* with the *project*.

Recall, from the introduction of this chapter, Beauvoir's distinction between (1) "wanting to disclose being" and (2) "wanting to be the being originally disclosed."[211] Bergoffen devotes a significant part of *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir* to making sense of, as well as expanding upon, this crucial distinction that lies at the heart of our fundamental ambiguity. In what follows, I will explore Bergoffen's formulation of this distinction. I will then show how she relates this distinction to the project and to ethics. This, in turn, will help us make sense of her claim that Beauvoir misses the point of the phenomenological reduction.

2.2 Bergoffen on Beauvoir's Two Moods/Moments of Intentionality

In *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir,* Bergoffen addresses Beauvoir's interpretation of Sartre's description of man as a "useless passion." At the beginning of *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir recalls this description in order to defend Sartre against those who claim he condemns man "without recourse."[212] As she sees it, she is simply clarifying Sartre's claim that man is "a being who *makes himself* a lack of being *in order that there might be being*," which, as she interprets it, means that "passion is not inflicted upon him from without."[213] According to Bergoffen, however, Beauvoir actually sees things a bit

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[211] This distinction can also be articulated as follows: (1) the desire to maintain the ineliminable distance between myself and the world versus (2) the desire to eliminate this distance.

[212] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 11.

[213] Beauvoir, 11.

differently than Sartre. While Sartre assigns merely one desire to consciousness (i.e., the desire to be) and describes man as a useless passion in order to ensnare consciousness in the bad faith desire to be God, Beauvoir assigns two contesting desires to consciousness: "the desire to disclose being and the desire to be."[214] This move is important because it fissures the relationship between consciousness and Being, making room for the desire for disclosure, which Beauvoir associates with joy. Her sustained emphasis on disclosure thus places her closer to Heidegger than Sartre (at least in this context). Bergoffen cites a passage from Part One of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that beautifully illustrates this notion of conflicting desires:

> It is not in vain that man nullifies being. Thanks to him being is disclosed and he desires this disclosure. There is an original type of attachment to being which is not the relationship "wanting to be" but rather the relationship "wanting to disclose being."…I should like to be this landscape which I am contemplating, I should like this sky, this quiet water to think themselves within me, that it might be I whom they express in flesh and bone, and I remain at a distance. But it is also by this distance that the sky and the water exist before me. My contemplation is an excruciation only because it is also a joy. I cannot appropriate the snow field where I slide. It remains foreign, forbidden, but I take delight in this very effort toward an impossible possession... This means that man, in his vain attempt to be God, makes himself exist as man…It is not granted him to exist without tending toward this being which he will never be. But it is possible for him to *want* this tension even with the failure which it involves.[215]

Beauvoir's emphasis on the close connection between intentionality and desire reflects Sartre's claim that "man is a useless passion." Like Sartre, she thinks it's impossible to fully extinguish the desire to *be*, that is, the desire to eliminate the distance between oneself and the landscape, sky, snow, water, etc. However, she goes a step further than Sartre by suggesting it's possible to experience joy in "this very effort toward an impossible

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[214] Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir,* 78.
[215] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 12-13. My emphasis.

possession."[216] Thus, her account of consciousness, far from condemning humans, allows for

a joyful, yet non-domineering, attitude toward others and the world. Instead of plucking the

lone rose for myself, I joyfully choose to leave it in the public garden for others to gaze upon

and smell. Rather than micromanaging my child's future, I take delight in learning about her

unique desires, talents, and goals, even if they're not what I originally had in mind. In short,

Bergoffen's formulation of the two contesting desires of consciousness—that is, *the desire to*

disclose being and *the desire to be the being originally disclosed* (i.e., the will to be)—which

comprise two moods/moments of intentionality, is key to understanding her critique of

Beauvoir's account of the ethical project.[217] So, how does the project relate to this important

juxtaposition of desires?

      As Bergoffen understands it, Beauvoir equates the will to be (the second moment of

intentionality) with "the will of the project," which Bergoffen defines as "the will of

establishing ends whether as absolute or contingent."[218] In other words, when I commit

myself to bringing about some end, I can either recognize that I set up this end and hence that

it's contingent, or I can attribute this project to some foreign absolute like God, Truth, or

Justice. While the former approach does not fall into bad faith, the latter approach does. This

is because bad faith leads me to forget that I am the author of my own projects and that

foreign absolutes are mere figments of my imagination. According to Bergoffen, however,

both forms of the project are at odds with the first moment/mood of intentionality—that is,

the desire to disclose being—and thus are susceptible to the bad faith desire of *the will to be*

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[216] For example, the sense of non-mastery associated with falling in love requires recognizing that the other will always at least partially escape our grasp. Indeed, "falling" for someone involves acknowledging (whether implicitly or explicitly) that even though this person brings us incredible joy, their feelings for us could always change. In other words, the emotional vulnerability associated with falling in love involves both joy and fear, that is, both positive and negative emotions.

[217] Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir,* 79.

[218] Bergoffen, 92.

(the second mood/moment of intentionality). Moreover, she argues that Beauvoir eludes this bad faith tendency of the project when she describes "the will of the ethical project as joyfully determining itself as a law which recognizes the other's freedom."[219] To be sure, Beauvoir is not being evasive or over-simplifying the nature of the project when she claims that fighting for the liberation of some necessarily compromises the freedom of others, and that such an antinomy of action cannot be resolved. In fact, she argues that in situations of oppression, it is sometimes necessary to kill the oppressor in order to free the oppressed. The point Bergoffen wants to make, however, is that the project *per se* is intrinsically connected to the second moment of intentionality, that is, the will to be. In other words, it is impossible to establish a project without, to an extent, wanting to be the being originally disclosed. Another way of viewing this second moment of intentionality is in terms of the desire for mastery, which, as I will show in Chapters 3 and 4, is closely related to the ideal of invulnerability. Bergoffen claims that in order to set up a project, whether it involves absolute or contingent ends, we need to have the desire for some sort of control. As she puts it:

> However we may wish to construe the difference between mastery and the project, it is difficult to think of a project which does not share with mastery the desire for some sort of control. The very idea of a project is the idea of directing reality toward certain specified ends. However contingent these ends may be, as ends they are at odds with witnessing the emergence of meaning."[220]

Bergoffen is well aware that Beauvoir criticizes the desire for mastery; nevertheless, she argues that Beauvoir overlooks how this desire raises problems for the ethical project. Since the project inevitably shares with mastery the desire for control, it is antithetical to the desire

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[219] Bergoffen, 90.
[220] Bergoffen, 94-95.

to disclose (or witness the unfolding of) Being. Put differently, Bergoffen accuses Beauvoir

of simultaneously criticizing the desire for mastery *and* highlighting the importance of the

project, while subtly suggesting—but failing to explicitly acknowledge—that they are

internally connected. Bergoffen associates the desire to disclose being with an attitude of

"letting be," which closely resembles Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit.* According to her,

presenting oneself as master does more than Beauvoir concedes, for it not only perverts the

will of the project but also "infects the desires of revelation" and "threatens the attitude of

letting be."[221] For Bergoffen, a vital aspect of the delight of discovery is the experience of

witnessing, but not being in control of, the unfolding of being. Not surprisingly, then, the

desire for control undercuts this delight. But how does this help us makes sense of

Bergoffen's claim that Beauvoir misses the point of the phenomenological reduction?

As stated earlier, Bergoffen argues that (1) bracketing the will to be involves more

than just refusing to set up my ends as absolute and (2) it involves seeing what happens when

the will to be, understood as the will of the project, is put entirely out of play.[222] In other

words, the phenomenological reduction entails not just a mitigation but a total suspension of

the will to be. This means that it is grounded in the first mood/moment of intentionality, that

is, the desire to disclose being. Bergoffen equates the will to be with the will of the project,

which means she thinks both are at odds with the phenomenological reduction. Beauvoir, on

the contrary, does not view the phenomenological reduction as opposed to the project *per se*

but rather as opposed to the project that involves setting up my ends as *absolute*. Paying

close attention to Beauvoir's criticisms of the desire for mastery throughout *The Ethics of*

Ambiguity, Bergoffen carefully brings to the surface this underlying tension between the

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[221] Bergoffen, 95.
[222] Bergoffen, 92.

desire for *disclosure* and the desire to *be* the being originally disclosed, that is, the desire for mastery. Since Beauvoir's notion of the ethical project is key to her existentialist ethics, Bergoffen's provocative claim that "it is difficult to think of a project which does not share with mastery the desire for some sort of control" calls the desire of the project into question.[223]

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Bergoffen's goal is merely to criticize Beauvoir. Indeed, Bergoffen notes that given Beauvoir's attention to ambiguities, and given her description of intentionality/consciousness, she would almost certainly reject the radical notion that "however careful we are in delineating it, we cannot absolve the project of its participation in the will to be."[224] In other words, Beauvoir does not think that all ethical projects, especially those that seek to end oppression, imply the bad faith desire for mastery. Yet, as Bergoffen points out, there are certainly cases in which the desire to make the other more like oneself, which is grounded in a fear of the other coupled with the desire to master the unknown, is disguised as a desire to liberate the other. Take, for example, the Christian missionary who seeks to "civilize" African souls, or the educator who attempts to "save" Native Americans from their "primitive" ideas. Thus, although Bergoffen argues that there is a fundamental tension between the desire for disclosure and the desire of the project (the latter of which implies the desire for some sort of control), she does not think that all projects should be rejected nor that this tension can ever be resolved. Instead, following Beauvoir, she urges us to be sensitive to social contexts and to always remember that our freedom is situated. In what follows, I will examine Beauvoir's notion of situated freedom and show how it gives rise to what she calls the "antinomies of action."

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[223] Bergoffen, 94.
[224] Bergoffen, 93.

2.3 Situated Freedom

As suggested in the introduction of this chapter, Beauvoir's conception of freedom is highly complex. In Section One of *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* she distinguishes between the "original spontaneity of freedom" (ontological) and "moral freedom" (normative), urging us to raise the former to the height of the latter. Rather than recklessly exercising my personal freedom, I ought to consider the broader ethical implications of my actions. This requires me to refrain from viewing freedom in a merely abstract sense and instead pay close attention to the concrete, particular situation in which I find myself.

Part of what makes Beauvoir's understanding of freedom so rich is her emphasis on what she calls the "situation." To be sure, she is not the first existentialist to use this term. Heidegger engages in a brief but crucial discussion of the situation in *Being and Time,* and Sartre discusses the term extensively in *Being and Nothingness.* Still, Beauvoir's account of the situation is unique in that it focuses on the freedom and well-being of others to a much greater extent than Heidegger's and Sartre's accounts. For Beauvoir, an adequate conception of freedom cannot be limited to the individual; indeed, I can only be free if others are free, which means that a self-centered conception of freedom will, in the long run, alienate me from others. As she puts it, "Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening into the absurdity of facticity."[225] According to Beauvoir, we not only *need* the freedom of others but also, in a sense, always want it, a point she tries to get across in her earlier book *Pyrrhus and Cineas.* Yet, her interpersonal conception of freedom is by no means utopic. Since human existence is fundamentally ambiguous—which means, among other things, that

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[225] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 71.

I am both a sovereign, unique subject *and* an object for others—freedom for some

necessarily means unfreedom for others.

In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir states, "The place that each one occupies is always a

foreign place. The bread that one eats is always the bread of another."[226] In other words, the

place I currently call home is likely a strange, unknown place for someone across the globe;

and since hunger is a very real global problem, the food that sustains me is simultaneously

not sustaining others. Derrida makes a similar point in *The Gift of Death,* when he states,

"How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that

you feed at home every day for years, whereas other cats die at every instant?"[227] For

Beauvoir, it is impossible to serve *all* people (or, as Derrida might say, *all* animals). In

serving some, I am inevitably remaining indifferent to, or even harming, others. Yet,

Beauvoir does not think it is possible to resolve this *antinomy of action*; attempting to do so

would be futile, since we are humans, not gods. Put differently, all humans are finite;

simultaneously, however, we are defined by our ability to transcend that which is given. As

she puts it, "He [man] will *take* a place [on earth] by throwing himself into the world, by

making himself exist among other men through his own project."[228]

Although Beauvoir states above that man "*throws himself*" into the world (rather than

"*is thrown* into" the world), this does not mean she thinks we always get to choose the

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[226] Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 107. She makes a similar point in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* when she states, "As we have also seen, the situation of the world is so complex that one cannot fight everywhere at the same time and for everyone," Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 98.

[227] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 2nd ed., trans. David Wills, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 71.

[228] Beauvoir, 107. In *Being and Time,* Heidegger referred to this twofold nature of humans as "thrown projection." Of course, the elephant in the room is Beauvoir's use of the masculine pronouns he/him/his. As I will discuss in chapters 3 and 4, the use of these pronouns goes hand in hand with the myths of sovereignty and invulnerability, which both Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) and later feminist philosophers extensively address.

situation in which we find ourselves.[229] In Part Two of *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* she argues

that the child's situation is "characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he

has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him

as an absolute to which he can only submit."[230] In other words, the child finds herself in a

given situation that, in her eyes, is inalterable and hence cannot be surpassed or transcended.

Beauvoir calls this world in which the child finds herself the "serious world," since it goes

hand-in-hand with the "spirit of serious" or the habit of considering values as ready-made

things.[231] She clarifies, however, that, in most cases, the child herself is not serious. Indeed,

childhood is something we all go through, and we do not become fully aware of our freedom

until we are adults. Yet, adopting the spirit of seriousness as an adult (or failing to ever let go

of the serious world) is a form of bad faith. If I am given the opportunity to realize my

freedom as an indefinite movement but fail to take this opportunity, then I am, to an extent,

denying my freedom.

Beauvoir recognizes, however, that there are situations in which the attitude of

seriousness does not amount to bad faith. As she puts it, "There are beings whose life slips by

in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they

have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads."[232] For example, a

woman who has been denied freedom all her life and led to think that her oppressive situation

is "natural" cannot be blamed for adopting an attitude of seriousness, since it is impossible to

revolt against nature. Yet, if a possibility of liberation appears and she fails to act on it, such

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[229] Perhaps this use of "throws himself" instead of "is thrown" is a matter of translation, since reflexive verbs in French are often ambiguous in the sense that it's unclear whether the subject is *acting* or being *acted upon*.
[230] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 35.
[231] Beauvoir, 35.
[232] Beauvoir, 37.

a resignation of freedom "implies dishonesty," which is a "positive fault."[233] Put simply, such

a person is acting in bad faith.

For Beauvoir, exercising our freedom involves setting up projects. Like Heidegger

and Sartre, she argues that we lack a fixed essence and that this lack has a manner of being

that is precisely existence.[234] Since there's no predetermined plan or blueprint for our lives,

the burden is on us to define our existence. Rather than seeking comfort in ready-made

values, it is our responsibility to create our own, however unsettling this may be. Hence,

freedom and responsibility are like two sides of the same coin. To be sure, our original

spontaneity is oblivious to responsibility, but it is important to remember that Beauvoir wants

us to raise this primal freedom to the height of moral freedom. So, with freedom comes

restraint. Beauvoir is highly critical of projects that are based on a narrow, individualistic

conception of freedom. But recall, from above, Bergoffen's criticism of the project *as such.*

According to her, the project necessarily shares with mastery the desire for some sort of

control, which conflicts with the desire for disclosure. Yet, as Bergoffen recognizes,

Beauvoir's goal is not to resolve this conflict between fundamentally opposed desires;

instead, the latter views it as a manifestation of the tragic ambiguity of human existence.

Nevertheless, Beauvoir *does* consider one crucial alternative to the individual project: the

shared project or, in Bergoffen's words, the "we-project."[235] What is the we-project, and how

does it relate to Beauvoir's notion of situated freedom?

As we discussed earlier, Bergoffen argues that Beauvoir outlines an ethic of the

project that evades "the anxieties that fuel the bad faith of the second intentional moment" by

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[233] Beauvoir, 38.
[234] Beauvoir, 13.
[235] Bergoffen. *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 97.

maintaining that the will of the ethical project joyfully determines itself as a law that recognizes the freedom of the other.[236] According to Bergoffen, this approach is problematic because it fails to get at the heart of the issue: the project *as such*, whether it involves setting up ends as absolute or contingent, is at odds with the attitude of *letting be* that is necessary for disclosure. Although Beauvoir does not explicitly challenge the ethic of the project, Bergoffen argues that the former's description of generosity is incompatible with the ethic of the project. In Part Two of *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir describes what she calls the "generous passions," which she distinguishes from the "maniacal passions": "It is only as something strange, forbidden, as something free that the other is revealed as an other. And to love him genuinely is to love him in his otherness and in that freedom by which he escapes. Love is then the renunciation of all possession."[237] Here, Beauvoir is suggesting that, for the other to truly be revealed *as* an other, I must abandon all attempts to grasp her in her entirety; instead, I must embrace the fact that, ultimately, she escapes my grasp and is forbidden to me. Only by taking such a generous or non-masterful approach can I genuinely love the other.

As we noted in our discussion of the two conflicting moods/moments of intentionality*,* Beauvoir describes the perpetual tension between (1) the agonizing yet futile desire to *be* the sky, landscape, or snowfield and (2) the delight experienced in "this very effort toward an impossible possession."[238] Here, it becomes clear that for an object to be disclosed, there must remain a distance between myself and that object. At this point, we are only dealing with inanimate objects. Later on, however, Beauvoir reveals that this *distance*

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[236] Bergoffen, 90.
[237] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 67
[238] Beauvoir, 12.

requirement for disclosure also holds true for people: in order for an other to be revealed as an other, she must appear as strange, forbidden, and free. As I understand it, the generous passions are exercised when a person affirms and rejoices in the ineliminable gap between herself and the particular thing or person being disclosed. Yet, Beauvoir stresses that one cannot love a "pure thing in its independence and separation," that is, one cannot love a thing (or person) apart from the meaning one attaches to it.[239] Moreover, such meaning appeals to the existence of others, which implies a frightening dependency on them. In Beauvoir's words, "Thus, we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others. The idea of such a dependence is frightening, and the separation and multiplicity of existants raises highly disturbing problems."[240]

Let's say I'm all alone at the beach, and I see a beautiful sunset. Although I appreciate its beauty, I wish I had someone to share it with. I feel lonely and a little bit empty. Or perhaps my friend tragically dies during childbirth. Although I can certainly make other friends, no one could ever serve as a perfect substitute for her. Indeed, for Beauvoir, the uniqueness or singularity of each individual is irreducible. Moreover, if one proposes that sacrificing a few individuals is insignificant in light of—and necessary for—the greater good, he or she is woefully neglecting the importance of human singularity. I think this is what Beauvoir is getting at when she suggests that our simultaneous *singularity* and *mutual dependency* (i.e., I am not identical to you, but I am dependent on you and vice versa) is "frightening" and "raises highly disturbing problems." As I proposed earlier, our dependence on others is ambiguous because it opens us equally to both wounding and caring. Yet, instead of seeking to *overcome* dependency in order to attain self-sufficiency—which is an

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[239] Beauvoir, 67.
[240] Beauvoir, 67.

impossible goal—we ought to endure the perpetual tug-of-war between the individual and the collective. Whether we like it or not, there's always going to be a degree of tension between self and other, or between what Beauvoir calls the "original spontaneity of freedom" and the "height of moral freedom." And since we can never fully escape the truth, we might as well face up to it. By exploring Beauvoir's notion of the "we-project," we can observe how some of this self-other tension—which is closely linked to the two moods or moments of intentionality—can be minimized. A good place to start is by asking: Why, according to Beauvoir, is simply *letting the other be* not always appropriate? As we'll soon see, the answer lies in the grim but undeniable truth that oppression exists in the world.

Beauvoir is well-aware of the widespread nature of oppression; but far from turning a blind eye to human suffering, she considers it our obligation as humans to work against situations that dehumanize others. Referring to Beauvoir's recognition of the limits of the generous passions, Bergoffen states:

> If Beauvoir did not recognize the real power of the situation—if she refused to see the ways in which situations negate the possibilities of freedom, she might have resolved the tensions between the desires of intentionality in favor of the generosity that lets the other be. This generosity, however, requires that both I and the other experience our revelatory powers. When the situation bars the other from this experience, the generosity that lets the other be is empty. Here the situation demands the other form of generosity—the generosity of the we-project. I am, in these circumstances, obligated to work against situations that dehumanize others— to work for liberation.[241]

Here, Bergoffen highlights Beauvoir's commitment to the notion of "situated freedom" and then relates this to situations that "negate the possibilities of freedom" or, put differently, situations that oppress the other by reducing her to brute facticity. According to Bergoffen,

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[241] Bergoffen. *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir,* 97.

Beauvoir might have resolved the tension between the two moments or moods of intentionality in favor of the generous passion that lets the other be if there didn't exist oppressive situations that bar the other from experiencing her "revelatory powers," that is, her capacity to disclose being. Yet, the undeniable reality is that oppression is widespread in this world, and it would be unrealistic to expect it to suddenly disappear. For generosity to not be empty—for it to affirm what Beauvoir calls "the concrete and particular thickness of this world"—the other must experience her revelatory powers, which means that genuine, non-empty generosity sometimes demands involvement or intervention in the other's situation.[242] In particular, generosity sometimes obliges us to work against situations that oppress or dehumanize others. One mode of disavowal that gets in the way of generosity is what Beauvoir's calls the "attitude of seriousness."

As Beauvoir argues, the serious man refuses to recognize that disclosing being is an ongoing process, and thereby deprives himself of the creative process that involves inventing novel solutions to unique moral problems.[243] To be sure, Beauvoir's emphasis on creativity and invention may seem daunting, especially since I must refrain from seeking comfort in ready-made values such as Good and Evil. When I am part of a "we project," however, I am not choosing and acting alone but in conjunction with others who share the same goal (e.g., ending colonial oppression in Algeria).[244] What distinguishes a *we-project* from a *me-project* is that the former is explicitly concerned with the future of multiple individuals, while the

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[242] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 106.

[243] The classic "Ax Murderer" objection to Kant's claim that lying is always morally wrong is a prime example of the problematic nature of the belief that values are ready-made things.

[244] This is not the same as merely sitting back and letting others do the work for me; indeed, there's no escaping the anxiety of choice.

latter is not. Still, we must ask: how can a desired end be brought about without regarding human life as secondary to this end?

In Part II of *Ethics,* Beauvoir addresses the potentially tyrannical nature of the serious man:

> But the serious man puts nothing into question. For the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution—army, highway, revolution, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself. Therefore, the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant. Dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice, he pretends that the unconditioned value of the object is being asserted through him; and by the same token he also ignores the subjectivity and freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the thing, he persuades himself that what he sacrifices is nothing.[245]

This passage is key to understanding Beauvoir's claim that values are not foreign absolutes and her corresponding criticism of the serious man's failure to recognize this. When a serious man raises an object to the stature of an idol that must be preserved at all costs, then human life becomes secondary to this Thing. Here, Beauvoir's criticism of the Algerian War comes into play. During this time, General de Gaulle and other leaders of the French army had idolized France and the Army to such an extent that they were willing to resort to barbarism in order to sustain colonialism in Algeria. As Beauvoir puts it in her "Preface to *Djamila Boupacha*," "The army…wants to maintain in servitude a people who are entirely resolved to die rather than to renounce their independence. Against this collective and indomitable will, the army considers itself obliged to defy every law, written and unwritten; indeed, their problem allows for only one solution: extermination."[246] This is why Beauvoir says the

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[245] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 49.

[246] Beauvoir, "Preface to *Djamila Boupacha*," in *Beauvoir: Political Writings,* ed. Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmermann (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 280.

attitude of seriousness leads to fanaticism. When an individual obstinately engulfs her freedom in a Cause or Thing that she takes to have absolute value, nothing pales in comparison to this object. In the case of French colonialism in Algeria, the army developed a political fanaticism that stripped politics of human content and imposed the State "not *for* individuals, but *against* them."[247]

One of the dangers of the spirit of seriousness is that it involves a simultaneous detachment from the world and dependence on the idolized object. As we discussed earlier, Beauvoir argues in *Ethics* that our dependence on others is frightening; for her, it's understandable that people who are aware of the risks and the inevitable element of failure involved in worldly engagements attempt, in various ways, to fulfill themselves outside of the world.[248] Yet, adopting a detached attitude toward others is simply one way of attempting to surmount the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition, which is insurmountable. According to Beauvoir, the genuine person embraces this ambiguity and refuses to recognize any foreign absolutes. On the contrary, the serious person engulfs her transcendence in some external idol, which is in relationship with everything in the whole universe and subsequently threatened by the whole universe.[249] If the only thing that matters is some external Cause or Thing, then anyone who gets in the way of it is merely an obstacle. Now, how does all of this relate to our discussion of generosity, oppression, and the we-project?

Beauvoir is not a relativist. Although she argues that human existence is fundamentally ambiguous, this does not imply that, morally speaking, anything goes. As she states in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "A freedom cannot will itself without willing itself as an

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[247] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 50.
[248] Beauvoir, 68.
[249] Beauvoir, 51.

indefinite movement. It must absolutely reject the constraints which arrest its drive toward itself."[250] In other words, freedom needs an open, contingent future toward which it can project itself. When a situation negates the possibilities of freedom, it must be rejected. This connects to Bergoffen's claim in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir* that we have an obligation to work against situations that dehumanize others. In many cases, the generosity that lets the other be (associated with the first intentional moment) is appropriate.[251] For example, it makes no sense to try to force someone to love me. In situations of oppression, however, Beauvoir argues that the failure to act amounts to complicity. As she argues in "Preface to *Djamila Boupacha*," one can either side with the torturers of Algerians or against them; there is no third alternative.[252] This brings us back to our discussion of the we-project.

Beauvoir makes clear in her writing that she considers conflict an ineliminable part of human life. Indeed, the conflict between the desire to disclose being and the desire for mastery can never be fully resolved, which results in various forms of internal strife as well as strife between self and other. Yet, the we-project allows us to at least temporarily put aside our differences and work toward a shared goal. This explains Beauvoir's work with French-Tunisian lawyer Gisèle Halimi that was intended as a collaborative participation in the larger project of the Algerian revolution and its resistance to the barbaric excesses of the French colonial occupation.[253] Similar we-projects have recently come to the fore due to the George Floyd uprising, which sparked worldwide public outrage over police violence toward black

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[250] Beauvoir, 31.

[251] As I mentioned above, this attitude is closely connected to Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit,* which involves a disclosing, non-imposing comportment toward the world.

[252] Beauvoir, "Preface to Djamila Boupacha," 281.

[253] In his introduction to Beauvoir's "Preface to *Djamila Boupacha,*" Julien S. Murphy notes that "The preface to Djamila Boupacha represents the culmination of Beauvoir's commitment to Algerian independence. This is the only book Beauvoir lent her name to as a coauthor" and "On the day after the book was published, Beauvoir received a death threat." Murphy, "Preface to *Djamila Boupacha*," *Beauvoir: Political Writings*, 262.

people in the US. The series of protests that followed from this atrocious murder induced a profound shift in the US social imaginary, such that tolerance for police violence dramatically decreased. Many have compared Floyd's death to the brutal killing of Eric Garner by police in 2014.[254] Yet, there is a crucial difference between the two: Garner's murderers were acquitted, while Derek Chauvin and his accomplices were not. In other words, these recent convictions—including those of Ahmaud Arbery's killers—send a powerful message to both police officers and white supremacist vigilantes: you are *not* above the law, and you *will* be held accountable for your racist violence.[255]

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir claims that, when it comes to oppression, "abstention is complicity."[256] But this wasn't always her view. In her autobiography *Prime of Life*, she admits that, prior to WWII and the Nazi occupation of France, her views amounted to "quasi-solipsism and illusory autonomy."[257] During the Nazi occupation, however, she became painfully aware that her life, like any life, was "part of world, a community of individuals, and a flow of activity which is not entirely in one's control."[258] In other words, she became aware of the frightening extent to which we depend on others. Hence, freedom, for her, could no longer be viewed as a wholly individual matter; instead, it involved a complex, and often problematic, web of human relations. This is not to say that the individual is insignificant compared to the whole; indeed, Beauvoir is highly critical of Hegel's claim that individual differences will ultimately be reconciled in Absolute knowledge. As Fredrika

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[254] "A timeline of the George Floyd and anti-police brutality protests," *Al Jazeera*, June 11, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/11/a-timeline-of-the-george-floyd-and-anti-police-brutality-protests.

[255] The men who killed unarmed Ahmaud Arbery while he was jogging in their neighborhood were not police officers but rather *white supremacist vigilantes.*

[256] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 86.

[257] Beauvoir, *Prime of Life,* 369.

[258] Beauvoir, 369.

Scarth notes in *The Other Within,* "For Beauvoir, individual pain and suffering must remain individual, intense, and to some degree incommunicable."[259] I think this is what Beauvoir is getting at when she says in Part One of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that each of us has the incomparable taste in our mouth of our own life.[260] Those who argue that individual sacrifice is redeemed by collective historical "progress" are reducing the individual to the absurdity of facticity, that is, detaching her from her transcendence. When individuals are viewed solely in terms of their utility, they become mere objects to be controlled and manipulated. To challenge this mode of thinking, Beauvoir asks, in so many words: What does it mean for something to be useful?

Beauvoir points out that, contrary to what utilitarian ethics argues, "the terms 'useful to Man' and 'useful to man' do not overlap."[261] This is because there is no such thing as universal, absolute Man or Humanity. According to her, it is true that "each is bound to all" but simultaneously each of us is "a separate existence" engaged in our own projects.[262] For her, this is precisely the ambiguity of the human condition: I am both an individual and a member of a collective, and the tension between these two aspects of existence can never be fully resolved. When we relate this to the problem of utility, we encounter the following antinomy: "the only justification of sacrifice is its utility; but usefulness is what serves Man. Thus, in order to serve some men we must do disservice to others."[263] Indeed, it is impossible to please everyone. For example, in the struggle against oppression, the tyrant or slaveowner

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[259] Fredrika Scarth, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 62.
[260] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 9.
[261] Beauvoir, 112.
[262] Beauvoir, 112.
[263] Beauvoir, 112-113.

will almost certainly experience a degree of unhappiness. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that Beauvoir is not a relativist.

Although Beauvoir stresses the antinomic nature of action, she nevertheless gives us a principle for choosing whom to serve: one must strive, above all, to safeguard the indefinite movement of freedom. And, as we have seen, she argues that one cannot be free unless others are free. Hence, I can ask, before making a decision, whether or not I'm acting in a way that seeks to uphold the other's freedom. Here, an attitude of generosity, in which I affirm the ineliminable distance between myself and the other, is key. Or, to put this in Heideggerian terms, I ought to adopt a comportment of *Gelassenheit,* or openness to the mystery of that which shows itself and at the same time withdraws. Thus, epistemic humility is key to an ethics of ambiguity. When I claim to have absolute knowledge, I risk falling prey to an attitude of seriousness, in which I flee from the complexities of freedom. As Simon Critchley states in his article "The Dangers of Certainty: A Lesson from Auschwitz," "We always have to acknowledge that we might be mistaken. When we forget that, then we forget ourselves and the worst can happen."[264] Indeed, Beauvoir's ethics never allows us to have the peace of mind that we are fighting the good fight; instead, we have to live with the unease of never being entirely certain that we made the right ethical decision. Nonetheless, this shouldn't dissuade us from striving to safeguard the indefinite movement of freedom.

As mentioned above, Beauvoir rejects the utilitarian approach to ethics that strives to give the word *useful* a "universal and absolute meaning."[265] Instead, she urges us to always ask: "useful to *whom*?" Since there is no such thing as universal and absolute Man or

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[264] Simon Critchley, "The Dangers of Certainty: A Lesson from Auschwitz," *New York Times*, February 2, 2014.
[265] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 112.

Humanity, it would be foolish to claim that I am acting on behalf of the entire human race.

One problem Beauvoir has with utilitarianism is that, when combined with the spirit of

seriousness, it tends to subordinate the individual to some absolute or unconditioned end. She

also points out that what sets war and politics apart from all other techniques is that "the

material employed is human material."[266] And, as she argues, "human efforts and lives can

no more be treated as blind instruments than human work can be treated as simple

merchandise; at the same time as he is a means for attaining an end, man is himself an

end."[267] Hence, when it comes to ethical considerations, it is not utility, happiness, or

comfort—but rather *freedom*—that has the final say. What might it look like to disregard this

principle?

In *On Liberty,* John Stuart Mill argues that despotism is an appropriate form of

government for "barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified

by actually affecting that end."[268] Here, Mill is rejecting the subjective freedom of

indigenous populations in favor of a paternalistic colonialism, which he unquestioningly

assumes will "improve" them (i.e., maximize their happiness and well-being). This attitude

bears similarities to bioethicist Dan Brock's claim that, as Ron Amundson puts it, "abnormal

people who report a high quality of life are simply mistaken about the quality of their own

lives."[269] To assume that one knows what's best for another, while wholly disregarding her

first-person perspective, is the height of arrogance. Or, put differently, it is a rejection of the

generosity that lets the other be, without which love is impossible. Yet, as mentioned earlier,

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[266] Beauvoir, 112.
[267] Beauvoir, 112.
[268] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty,* ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 10.
[269] Ron Amundson, "Against Normal Function," *Studies in the History of Biology and Biomedical Sciences* 31, no. 1 (2000): 33-53.

generosity doesn't entail standing idly by while others are oppressed; instead, it is our obligation to participate in the struggle against oppression and simultaneously refrain from assuming a paternalistic attitude. For example, one might simply ask the other, "How best can I help you?"

According to Beauvoir, "the supreme end at which man must aim is his freedom, which alone is capable of establishing the value of every end."[270] This implies that one must decisively reject the constraints that attempt to reduce one to pure facticity. As she succinctly puts it, "A freedom which is interested in denying freedom must be denied."[271] For Algerians, this meant revolting against French colonialism. And as Beauvoir notes in "Preface *to Djamila Boupacha,*" most Algerians were resolved to die rather than renounce their freedom. Beauvoir is quick to address the oppressor's objection to those rebelling that he in turn is being oppressed and deprived of *his* freedom. This, she suggests, is the argument that the Southern slaveholders leveled against the abolitionists; and it worked, at least initially: the Yankees were so infused with the "principles of an abstract democracy" that they did not concede that they had the right to deny Southern planters the "freedom to their own slaves."[272] According to Beauvoir, this view dishonestly conceals a contradiction: it involves a simultaneous withdrawal of a freedom into itself *and* denial of the fact that it is only through the freedom of others that a freedom can will itself as an indefinite movement. As Beauvoir puts it, "the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom."[273] This brings us back to her claim that we are dependent

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[270] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 113.
[271] Beauvoir, 91.
[272] Beauvoir, 90.
[273] Beauvoir, 91.

on others to a frightening extent. What are the ethical implications of this claim? Here,

Butler's recent work on precariousness is especially insightful.

2.4 Butler on Precariousness, Dependency, and Violence

In chapter two of *Precarious Life*, Butler addresses the relationship between corporeal

vulnerability and politics. More specifically, she examines a dimension of political life that

"has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to

loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these

conditions."[274] Butler wrote this book just three years after 9/11, and one of her primary

concerns in writing it was to critique the way in which the United States responded to this

tragedy. Almost immediately after 9/11, the Bush administration declared that it was waging

a "war on terrorism." According to Butler, this was a direct manifestation of the US' refusal

to stay with the overwhelming sense of vulnerability and loss it felt at that time. Upon being

reminded of its primary vulnerability, the US was quick to deny it through a fantasy of

mastery. As Butler notes, "President Bush announced on September 21 that we have finished

grieving and that *now* it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief."[275] He thus

sought to banish grief and replace it with the desire for revenge.

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that our corporeal vulnerability is

fundamentally ambiguous. As Butler, Cavarero, and Murphy argue, there is nothing about a

recognition of vulnerability in and of itself that guarantees ethical action. While such a

recognition can certainly provoke ethical responses, the opposite is also true: often, as

demonstrated by the US, a revelation of one's vulnerability instead provokes a desire for

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[274] Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 19.
[275] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 29.

revenge. Cavarero concisely illustrates this point when she states in *Horrorism,* "In the ambivalence of the mask, what is revealed is the two poles of the essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability: wounding and caring. Inasmuch as vulnerable, exposed to the other, the singular body is irremediably open to both responses."[276] Here, Cavarero defines embodied vulnerability as a kind of exposure or openness to the other. This notion of exposure is key to Butler's emphasis, especially in her later work, on mutual dependency. So, what does she say about dependency and how does it relate to vulnerability?

In *Precarious Life*, Butler argues that we are given over to others from the start and that, in the primary helplessness of infancy, this couldn't be more apparent. The infant cannot feed or care for herself and is utterly defenseless in the face of danger. Whether she lives or dies is not up to her; instead, it is contingent on the response of her mother or primary caretaker. As we grow older, however, the illusion of sovereignty or impermeability can more easily take hold. The CEO of a large corporation or leader of a country might deem himself a self-made, self-sufficient man (the word "man" is not accidental here), but this ignores the numerous individuals who enabled his success in the first place. Indeed, to deny our dependence on others is to fail to acknowledge the very conditions of our existence. As Butler puts it, "At the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported toward a 'you'; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally."[277]

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[276] Cavarero, *Horrorism,* 20. Here, Cavarero is referring to a photograph that was taken on the day of the bombings that struck London on July 7, 2005. In the photograph, a woman's face is covered by a medicated gauze mask, which was applied by first aid workers to sooth and protect her facial burns. Yet, the woman is not alone. A young man—her rescuer—gently embraces her. In Cavarero's words, "Vulnerable himself, the young man responds to the *vulnus* that has struck the other with his care. Care, medication, the soothing of the wound: the gauze mask is all of these things too" (20).

[277] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 45.

Butler is highly critical of models of agency that are based on notions of sovereign power; yet this is not the same as arguing that we are totally helpless. Indeed, she acknowledges that it is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own* and that we are "entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies."[278] She also argues that claims to bodily integrity and self-determination are crucial for many political movements. This includes lesbian and gay rights claims to sexual freedom, transsexual and transgender claims to self-determination, feminists' claim to reproductive freedom, and claims to be free from racist attacks, to name a few. Still, Butler insists that there is a sense in which the body that we guard as our own can never be only that.[279]

According to Butler, the body has an inevitably public dimension, since it is given over to the world of others from the start, prior to individuation. Hence, political struggles in the name of bodily integrity and self-determination must contend with the fact that, as embodied beings, we are necessarily *dispossessed*, that is, disposed toward and available to others.[280] She thus asks, "Is there a way that we might struggle for autonomy in many spheres, yet also consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another?"[281] I think this is precisely what Beauvoir is getting at when she states in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that an existence which is limited to itself cannot be validly fulfilled, that it appeals to the existence of others, and that this idea of mutual dependence is frightening. In the *Second Sex*, the body is a central concern for Beauvoir; in *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* however, she focuses primarily on the tension between self and other (or the original

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[278] Butler, 25.
[279] Butler 26. Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*, 69.
[280] Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary*, 71.
[281] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 27.

spontaneity of freedom and the height of moral freedom), while failing to explicitly address the body. Hence, Butler's more embodied account of the ambiguous nature of vulnerability bears similarities to Beauvoir's account of our fundamental ambiguity but allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the relationship between ambiguity, vulnerability, and mutual dependency than found in *The Ethics of Ambiguity.*

Let us return to the above critique of sovereignty. Neither Beauvoir nor Butler is arguing that autonomy is a myth that must be abandoned. Nonetheless, they insist, as Murphy succinctly puts it, that claims to autonomy and integrity must be concurrent with the acknowledgement that we are "radically dependent on others for the formation and persistence of our social selves."[282] Unfortunately, such an acknowledgement doesn't always take place. Sometimes a glimpse of our vulnerability and dependency instead provokes denial, along with a desire for revenge. As Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, this was the case with the Bush administration's response to the September 11 attacks on the United States.

In the opening pages of *Precarious Life,* Butler is careful to acknowledge that 9/11 was an "unexpected and fully terrible experience of violence."[283] Put simply, it is not her intention to downplay the severity of this tragic event. Nevertheless, she thinks that the way in which the United States responded to its boundaries being breached and to the simultaneous exposure of its "unbearable vulnerability" was a huge ethical mistake.[284] What is her reasoning behind this? Recall her claim that, as embodied beings, we are necessarily disposed to others. Still, she suggests that grief is unique in that contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am.[285] In moments of

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[282] Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary,* 69.
[283] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 5
[284] Butler, xi.
[285] Butler, 28.

grief, I am beside myself, not at one with myself, undergoing something that is outside of my control. On such occasions, it is sometimes impossible to comprehend the feeling that washes over me or to know what it is *in* another person that I have lost. Butler suggests that perhaps this sphere of dispossession is "precisely the one that exposes my unknowingness, the unconscious imprint of my primary sociality."[286] She then asks whether this situation of mourning can furnish a perspective by which we can begin to apprehend the contemporary global situation.

Let us think back to Cavarero's claim that insofar as the singular body is exposed to the other, it is open to two responses: wounding and caring. Like Beauvoir's notion of the fundamental ambiguity of human existence, this essentially ambivalent alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability is *insurmountable.* But, as Butler and Murphy argue, part of what makes our primary human vulnerability so provocative is its ambivalent nature. Although it would be less complicated to say that caring, as opposed to wounding, is more fundamental to being human (or vice versa), this would solve the problem of the ethical encounter too easily. The reality is, both wounding and caring (and even indifference) remain possible responses to the recognition of another's bodily vulnerability. Nevertheless, Butler argues that "Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war."[287] By using the word "can" instead of "will," Butler demonstrates her hesitation to make a sudden leap from a descriptive ontology to a normative ethics. And as Murphy argues, this hesitation is not so much a liability as it is a contemporary manifestation of what Beauvoir calls "assuming

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[286] Butler, 28.
[287] Butler, 29.

ambiguity."[288] As discussed above, assuming ambiguity is what a genuine person—someone who is willing to look truth in the face—will do. So, while hesitation might seem like a flaw to someone who thinks morality is black and white, Beauvoir would argue the opposite, namely, that hesitating when it comes to making ethical decisions is a good thing. According to Beauvoir, an existentialist ethics must respond to the demands of concrete circumstance, which entails relinquishing the consolations of abstraction and bad faith.[289] Instead, one must "incur the risk, in each case, of inventing an original solution."[290] This means, among other things, that one can never be entirely certain of making the "right" choice. But how does all of this relate Butler's above claim that mindfulness of our primary human vulnerability can serve as the basis of claims for non-military political solutions?

According to Butler, being mindful of our vulnerability entails "staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability."[291] One way in which we can do this is by "tarrying with grief," that is, remaining open to its unbearability rather than striving to seek a solution to grief through violence.[292] As noted above, Bush did just the opposite of this; a mere ten days after 9/11, he declared that it was time for "resolute action" to take the place of grief. And, as we now know, this "resolute action" amounted to a bloody, indefinite "war on terrorism" that involved widespread xenophobia toward Muslims, the systematic use of torture in illegal detainment camps, and the killing of thousands of civilians. Just as General de Gaulle was willing to protect the sovereignty of France at all costs—even if it meant exterminating the

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[288] Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary,* 83.
[289] Murphy*,* 113.
[290] Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 142.
[291] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 29.
[292] Butler, 30.

Algerian people—so too the Bush administration was willing to do anything it took to secure the United States' fantasy of mastery.

Butler asks whether dislocations of First World safety could instead motivate the insight into the radically inequitable ways that bodily vulnerability is distributed globally. Although this wasn't the case with 9/11, she imagines a future in which we learn to let go of institutionalized fantasies of mastery by staying with the thought of vulnerability. To fail to do this is to annihilate a critical resource for politics. As she puts it, "To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way."[293] On the contrary, if we can learn to stay with grief—which must be distinguished from a narcissistic withdrawal into melancholia—we can develop a "point of identification with suffering itself" and use this as a resource for politics.[294] Such an approach requires us to ask the following critical question: why is it that we mourn for some lives but respond with apathy to the loss of others? In other words, what is responsible for the differential allocation of grief?

For Butler, grief is not merely a private matter. To truly understand grief, we need to think about how it is publicly manifested. By highlighting the omissive quality of military obituaries and arguing that omission effects violence, Butler draws attention to the differential distribution of public grieving and shows that it is an immensely significant political issue. For example, she points out that "there are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a

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[293] Butler, 30.
[294] Butler, 30.

life that qualifies for recognition."[295] Here, Butler suggests that by refusing to publish

obituaries for civilians, the United States conveys the message that such lives are not

grievable. What is more, this exclusionary norm forms and frames our interpretation of these

deaths. If I never learn the name, see the face, or hear the story of an anonymous civilian who

is killed in war, it is all too easy to shrug off their death as just another war casualty. Butler

also cites a case in which the *San Francisco Chronicle* rejected the obituaries submitted by a

Palestinian American for two Palestinian families killed by Israeli troops, with the

explanation that the newspaper "did not wish to offend anyone."[296] She argues that we have

to scrutinize the conditions under which public grieving amounts to an "offense" against the

public itself.[297] So, what are these conditions? Here, Butler's continuation of her discussion

of precariousness in *Frames of War* is particularly helpful.

In *Frames of War*, Butler articulates the US military's prohibition on public grieving

in terms of a regulation of affects. Anchoring her discussion in the postulation of a

"generalized condition of precariousness," she argues that the "obtrusive alterity" against

which the body finds itself "can be, and often is, what animates responsiveness to that

world."[298] This responsiveness can include a wide range of affects, such as pleasure, rage,

suffering, grief, and hope. In other words, as Butler argued in *Precarious Life*, our corporeal

vulnerability is fundamentally ambiguous because it can provoke an array of responses, with

the opposite extremes being wounding and caring. Still, her discussion of responsiveness in

Frames of War is unique in that it emphasizes the *regulation of affect* within the context of

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[295] Butler, 34.

[296] Butler, 35. In stark contrast to these examples, if a US soldier or journalist is killed in war, an obituary will more than likely be published in their honor and their death will be broadcasted on various news media outlets; consequently, their death will feel much more real.

[297] Butler, 35.

[298] Butler, *Frames of War*, 33-34. Butler's claim here is clearly influenced by Levinas' writing on the ethical encounter with the other.

war. She argues, moreover, that the "frames" through which we apprehend, or fail to apprehend, the lives of others as lost or injured are "politically saturated" operations of power.[299] Indeed, for a particular life to be apprehend as lost or injured, it must first be apprehended as living. If, however, such an apprehension never takes place, then this life is never lived nor lost in the full sense.[300] But what exactly does Butler mean by "apprehension"?

Butler distinguishes between "apprehending" and "recognizing" a life, arguing that the latter is the stronger term, one that has its origin in Hegelian texts and has undergone various forms of revision and critique over the years. "Apprehension," on the other hand, is less precise, insofar as it can imply "marking, registering, acknowledging without cognition."[301] If it is a form of knowing, it is intertwined with *sensing* and *perceiving* (both are associated with affect), but in ways that amount to preconceptual forms of knowledge. As I understand it, apprehension is less constricted by representational thinking than recognition is. For example, Butler argues that one can apprehend that something is not recognized by recognition.[302] So, while recognition and apprehension are both forms of knowing, the latter can detect things that escape the former. By making this subtle distinction, Butler is able to focus on a mode of addressing the other that exceeds representation, that is, *affective responsiveness.*

Butler acknowledges that affective responses may appear to be primary, to require no explanation, and to precede the work of understanding and interpretation. Yet, she argues that this couldn't be further from the truth. As she puts it, "Our affect is never merely our own:

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[299] Butler, 1.
[300] Butler, 2.
[301] Butler, 5.
[302] Butler, 49.

affect is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere. It disposes us to perceive the world in a certain way, to let certain dimensions of the world in and to resist others."[303] Hence, we have to critically examine the interpretative frames through which we respond to certain forms of violence with horror and other forms of violence with indifference. Butler is not arguing that our affective and moral responsiveness is wholly determined by the interpretive frameworks through which we perceive reality, but rather that these frameworks regulate such responsiveness to a much greater extent than we tend to think. Indeed, the first step in resisting or defying regulatory power is to recognize it for what it is. For example, Butler states, in response to anthropologist Talal Asad's question of why we feel horror and moral repulsion in the face of suicide bombing when we don't always feel the same way in the face of state-sponsored violence, such as drone strikes:

> If just or justified violence is enacted by states, and if unjustifiable violence is enacted by non-state actors or actors opposed to existing states, then we have a way of explaining why we react to certain forms of violence with horror and to other forms with a sense of acceptance, possibly even with righteousness and triumphalism.[304]

By showing how our affective responses are partly conditioned by interpretive frameworks that exceed our understanding, Butler sheds light on the real-world consequences of the differential distribution of affect. More specifically, she illustrates how the post-9/11 framework of war, which relies on a heightened sense of nationalism, works by "tacitly differentiating" between "those populations on whom my life and existence depend, and those populations who represent a direct threat to my life and existence."[305] Put simply, such

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[303] Butler, 50.
[304] Butler, 50.
[305] Butler, 42.

a framework propagates a lethal "Us vs. Them" mentality. Hence, populations who appear as a direct threat to our life are viewed as not quite human, which means that we won't feel the same horror and outrage over the loss of their lives as we will over the loss of those lives that display "national or religious similarity to our own."[306] Nevertheless, Butler thinks that it is possible to resist or reject this differential distribution of our affective responses. How might we go about doing this?

According to Butler, the postulation of a generalized precariousness or common bodily vulnerability "calls into question the ontology of individualism" and "implies, although [it] does not directly entail, certain normative consequences."[307] She thereby hesitates, as discussed earlier, to make the leap from a descriptive ontology to a normative ethics, a hesitation that can be viewed as a contemporary manifestation of Beauvoir's notion of "assuming ambiguity." Indeed, Butler acknowledges that our common bodily vulnerability is fundamentally ambiguous in that it can provoke either wounding or caring. How, then, might we keep this in mind as we examine the normative consequences that this vulnerability gestures towards (but does not guarantee)? Recall Beauvoir's claim in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that the extent of our dependence on others is frightening. Beauvoir, much like Butler, challenges the ontology of individualism by arguing that we cannot truly be free unless others are free. Still, this doesn't prevent someone, such as De Gaulle or Bush, from denying this by adhering to the fiction of sovereignty. One of the strengths of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is that it demonstrates various ways in which we disavow, or fail to assume, our fundamental ambiguity. This, in turn, reinforces Beauvoir's claim that insofar as we are human, we are necessarily finite and thus will inevitably make mistakes.

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[306] Butler, 42.
[307] Butler, 33.

In this chapter, I examined Beauvoir's notion of the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition and explored what implications this has for freedom, responsibility, action, and mutual dependence. Next, I supplemented this ontology and ethics of ambiguity with a discussion of Butler's notions of precariousness (or bodily vulnerability) and mutual dependence. In the following chapter, I more closely examine Butler's distinction between vulnerability, *precariousness,* and *precarity* and show what political consequences issue from this. I then transition to a discussion of Erinn Gilson's *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* showing how her work builds on that of Butler.

Chapter Three: Vulnerability, Invulnerability, and Disavowal

In *Frames of War*, Butler argues that if we are going to actively resist the differential allocation of our affective responses, then we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that "implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging."[308] What might this new bodily ontology look like? First off, Butler clarifies that when she refers to "ontology," she is not laying claim to a description of basic structures of being that are entirely separate from social and political organization. Instead, an ontology of the body is necessarily a social ontology, since the body is always already exposed to social and political forces. Moreover, how does our earlier discussion of vulnerability figure into this new bodily ontology? Towards the end of the previous chapter, we explored Butler's notion of a primary human vulnerability (as addressed in *Precarious Life*) and examined the way in which it was denied through an institutionalized fantasy of mastery. One question that we ought to ask before moving forward is: do "vulnerability" and "precariousness" refer to the same thing? Following Gilson, I will argue that they do not.

In *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* Gilson states, "Even though Butler does not distinguish the two terms, such a distinction is a logical implication of her understanding of precariousness."[309] While precariousness refers to a shared tenuousness of existence—to the fact that our lives can be eradicated at will or by accident—vulnerability has a broader meaning. By making this distinction, Gilson is able to avoid what she calls a "reductively

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[308] Butler, *Frames of War,* 2.
[309] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 47.

negative" understanding of vulnerability, one that limits its connotation to loss and injury.[310]

As she makes clear in her writings, it is not her intention to dismiss or ignore the association

of vulnerability with injury and loss. Like Butler, she thinks that an apprehension of a

common human vulnerability does not guarantee an ethical response and can, on the

contrary, solicit violence and aggression instead. She notes, however, that although Butler

acknowledges the variability of the meaning of vulnerability and how it is experienced, the

latter's account of vulnerability focuses almost solely on its connection to violence. She

states:

> Although there is truth to this connection—insofar as there is violence, there is
> vulnerability—it is a one-sided truth. Linking vulnerability with violence
> encourages understanding vulnerability dualistically, as a property that can only be
> had by one party to an interaction, and leads us to a fragmented conception of our
> social world: there are vulnerable 'sufferers' and invulnerable 'darers,' there are the
> weak who need defending and the strong who are capable of either defending or
> perpetrating harm.[311]

In other words, by framing vulnerability in dualistic terms, we miss the opportunity to view it

in a more nuanced manner. Furthermore, if vulnerability is understood merely as

susceptibility to harm, then it becomes something negative, something to be avoided.

Invulnerability, its perceived opposite, is viewed as the ideal to which we should aspire.

After all, who wants to be weak? Who wants to be the doormat that everyone tramples on?

Another problem with viewing vulnerability merely as susceptibility to injury is that

it tends to foster an "Us vs. Them" mentality. On the one hand, there's *us*—the normal, able-

bodied, autonomous individuals; and then, other the other hand, there's *them,* the abnormal,

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[310] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 59.
[311] Gilson, 66-67.

weak, dependent individuals. In other words, viewing vulnerability as a wholly negative, undesirable quality transforms it into a stigma. Vulnerability is seen as a source of shame, something that should be concealed or avoided. Just as we flee from anxiety in the face of death (Heidegger), or attempt to mask the fundamental ambiguity of human existence (Beauvoir), so too we try, in various ways, to disavow our primary human vulnerability. Gilson argues that if we want to break with this negative framing of vulnerability, then "we must envision other occasions for experiencing and thinking vulnerability."[312] Still, she finds Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity useful because it reinforces the idea that vulnerability is both a universal condition and a politically mediated condition of those in specific circumstances.

The threefold task of this chapter is to situate Gilson's thought in relation to Butler's, to examine our societal disavowal of vulnerability, and to shed light on how this disavowal is manifested in our everyday lives. The breakdown of each section is as follows: In Section I, I explore Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity, and then connect this Gilson's twofold conception of vulnerability. In Section II, I briefly address Western society's pervasive disavowal of vulnerability and show how this gives rise to the myths of sovereignty and invulnerability. Finally, in Section III, I argue that the stigma associated with disability serves as an especially illuminative example of disavowing vulnerability.

3.1 Precariousness, Precarity, and Vulnerability

In *Frames of War,* Butler continues her discussion of precariousness from *Precarious Life,* but her terminology shifts and becomes more precise.[313] She now overtly distinguishes

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[312] Gilson, 67.
[313] Gilson, 43.

between "precariousness" and "precarity," a distinction that was only implicit in *Precarious Life.* According to Butler, they are distinct but intersecting concepts. On the one hand, precariousness designates a generalized condition: "To live is always to live a life that is at risk from the outset and can be put at risk or expunged quite suddenly from the outside and for reasons that are not always under one's control."[314] In other words, precariousness is a condition shared by all; there is no escaping it. Whether we like it or not, our lives are, by definition, fragile and insecure. Gilson notes that although precariousness is similar to existential finitude, it serves a different purpose.[315] Finitude, especially in a Heideggerian sense, refers to the tenuousness of our individual existence—to our own mortality, our unique limitations, and our susceptibility to a global collapse of significance. Precariousness, on the contrary, refers to the manner in which this tenuousness is shared, or to what Butler calls our "radical substitutability," that is, the way any of us could be substituted for another and so are interchangeable with regard to the precariousness of life.[316] Yet, the precariousness of life is not always perceived, apprehended, or recognized; instead, whether we perceive precariousness, or fail to perceive it, is regulated by conditions of intelligibility, which Butler calls "frames."

Precarity, on the other hand, refers to a politically induced condition in which "certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death."[317] Hence, precarity, unlike precariousness, is *not* a condition shared by all; instead, it is created, maintained, and exacerbated by humans. Butler's notion of precariousness accords with Heidegger's and

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[314] Butler, *Frames of War,* 30.
[315] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 45.
[316] Butler, *Frames of War,* 14; Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 45.
[317] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

Beauvoir's accounts of existential finitude. Indeed, both precariousness and finitude highlight the fundamental fragility or instability of human existence. However, Butler politicizes this discussion—via her concept of precarity—in a way that cannot be said for either Heidegger or Beauvoir. In other words, Butler's claim that precarity is politically induced shifts our focus to both the unequal distribution of power and the suffering to which it gives rise.

Recall our discussion, in chapter two, of the differential allocation of grief (and affect in general). As Butler argues, we need to critically examine the interpretive frames through we apprehend, or fail to apprehend, lives as grievable. According to her, these frames are politically saturated through and through. In *Frames of War,* she is especially concerned with the way in which such frames are produced by the nation-state in the context of war. While it might be tempting to think that our affects precede the work of understanding and interpretation, it would be naïve to assume this. Instead, our affective responses are "highly regulated by regimes of power and sometimes subject to explicit censorship."[318] Examining the relationship between affective responsiveness and precarity is crucial because it allows us to better understand how and why precarity is differentially distributed.

Butler insists that our affective and moral responsiveness is always already shaped by norms of recognition, or conditions of intelligibility, that dictate who does and doesn't count as human. At the end of Chapter 2, we briefly considered this in terms of Asad's question of why we feel horror and repulsion in the face of suicide bombing when we don't always feel the same way in the face of state-sponsored violence (e.g., drone strikes). As we saw, the post-9/11 frames of war in the US relied on a heightened sense of nationalism by implicitly differentiating between (1) those populations on whom our existence depends, and (2) those

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[318] Butler, 39.

populations who represent a direct threat to our existence. Another, more recent example is the Trump's administration's anti-immigrant rhetoric, which portrayed Mexican immigrants as "drug dealers, criminals, and rapists."[319] Butler argues that such frames of war, which can involve both foreign and domestic affairs, propagate a differential allocation of precarity premised on the assumption that some lives are threatening to human life as we know it and are thereby "destructible" and "ungrievable."[320] This implies that framing is simultaneously a perceptual and a material issue: whether we regard—or fail to regard—particular lives as grievable produces material reality, and vice versa. As Gilson puts it, "Framing, thus, is not just a matter of how people are regarded or overlooked, but of the practices that coincide with, support, and perpetuate that way of regarding them, linking material conditions to the differential ways of regarding lives."[321] Hence, our affective responsiveness (or lack of it) induces precarity in certain populations, who thereby become differentially exposed to violence, injury, and death. How, then, might we go about resisting the dominant frames that propagate this harmful "Us vs. Them" mentality?

Recall Butler's distinction between *recognizing* and *apprehending*. Although both are modes of perception, the latter is less precise (since it can involve marking, registering, and acknowledging without full cognition) and is not wholly limited by existing norms of recognition.[322] If apprehension is a mode of knowing, it is entwined with sensing and perceiving. Butler argues that insofar as we are able to apprehend things that exceed or escape recognition, apprehension can "become the basis for a critique of norms of

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[319] 'Drug dealers, criminals, rapists': What Trump thinks of Mexicans. BBC News, August 31, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-37230916.
[320] Butler, *Frames of War,* 31.
[321] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 45.
[322] Butler, *Frames of War,* 5.

recognition."[323] For example, apprehending that a disabled person is not being recognized by existing norms of recognition enables us to critique these norms and perhaps even help improve the material reality of that person, that is, decrease her precarity. This means that although our affective and moral responsiveness is necessarily shaped by prevailing norms, it is not utterly limited by them. As Eric Baudner argues, apprehension, unlike recognition, does not involve "full-fledged cognitive understanding," and this allows for a mode of *being affected* that recognition generally precludes.[324] For example, the initial video of George Floyd's death, which shows officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck for nearly nine minutes, while Floyd repeatedly cries "I can't breathe!" and calls out for his deceased mother before finally dying, invokes an affective response in the viewer that escapes *recognition*. In other words, the sense of anger, grief, and shock that this video induced in so many viewers involved *being affected by* this act of violence in a way that an act of recognition could not account for. As will become clear later in this chapter and in the following chapter, the notion of *affect* plays a central role in reconceptualizing vulnerability in terms of ambiguity, openness, and becoming. Next, let us examine Gilson's provocative claim—addressed briefly at the opening of this chapter—that precariousness and vulnerability are not the same.

Gilson argues that vulnerability is a more general notion than precariousness in at least three ways. First, it involves a broader sense of uncertainty and instability; it is not openness to losses in particular but to "destabilizing alterations" as a whole.[325] Second, although precariousness and vulnerability both pertain to life, the former is limited to life (and its possible loss), while the latter is not. Instead, vulnerability involves ways of being

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[323] Butler, 5.

[324] Baudner, Eric. 2021. *Reassembling Pain, Reassembling the Reading of Fiction: An Inquiry into the Ontology of Drama.* Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 35.

[325] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 46.

affected, that is, *affectivity*. Examples of this include ecosystems, which are vulnerable to change, to "shifts in the conditions and relations" that compose it and "the sensitivity of emotional vulnerability," which might be comprehended as "a greater attunement, an openness to feeling."[326] Third, the result of increased vulnerability is not necessarily loss, although it may be in some cases. While increased precariousness results in increased exposure to violence, injury, and death, the outcomes of increased vulnerability are indeterminate.[327] By distinguishing between precariousness and vulnerability, Gilson is able to conceptualize vulnerability as more than just susceptibility to harm.

Butler argues that the purpose of positive social obligations is to minimize precariousness and its inequitable distribution.[328] Yet, Gilson insists that this does not hold true for vulnerability because its relationship to responsibility is more complicated. She contends, moreover, that the imperative to reduce vulnerability is "part of the source of ethical problems."[329] In other words, *invulnerability*, viewed as an ideal to which we should aspire, is ethically suspect. Let us turn, then, to society's pervasive disavowal of vulnerability and examine how it relates to the myths of mastery and invulnerability.

3.2 Disavowing Vulnerability

As stated above, the view that *vulnerability* is tantamount to "susceptibility to harm" is pervasive. Take, for example, the following passage from Christoph Hein's *The Distant Lover.* At one point in the novel, Claudia, a young doctor, states, "I'm prepared for everything, I'm armed against everything, nothing will hurt me anymore. I've become

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[326] Gilson, 46.
[327] Gilson, 47.
[328] Butler, *Frames of War,* 22.
[329] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 47.

invulnerable. Like Siegfried, I have bathed in dragon's blood, and no linden leaf has left a

single spot of me unprotected. I'm inside this skin for the duration. I will die inside my

invulnerable shell…"[330] Although this example partially conveys what it means to be

vulnerable, by way of its opposite—invulnerability—it does not capture its full meaning.

Indeed, falling in love would be impossible if it weren't for vulnerability's ambivalent

potentiality. When we fall in love, there's always the possibility that we will get hurt; at the

same time, however, joy and awe are equally possible outcomes. Hence, drawing on Butler,

Gilson, and Cavarero, I define vulnerability as an ambivalent openness to unexpected change

and transformation that is shared by all but differently manifested and experienced. Still, in

our day and age, vulnerability is primarily understood in a reductively negative way. What is

more, this reductively negative understanding of vulnerability has concrete ethical

implications and, more specifically, gives rise to the potentially harmful ideal of

invulnerability. Thus, both Butler and Gilson argue that it is crucial to consider the

relationship between vulnerability and ethics. Gilson, however, goes a step further than

Butler by examining the concrete social conditions that both enable and preclude ethical

response. At the opening of Chapter 3 of *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, she states:

> An ethics of vulnerability is an immanent ethics, one that cannot bind
> transcendentally and necessarily, but rather compels only from within our own
> experience and grounded on a specific set of recognitions: that we all share in a
> common vulnerability; that particular forms of vulnerability, or precariousness, are
> often differentially distributed; that we possess a capacity for aggression that can
> lead us to abuse others in their vulnerability and the expression of which we must
> mitigate in order to conduct ourselves ethically; and that the vulnerability that we
> share binds us to one another in a way that we cannot undo or ignore. In seeking to
> enact an ethics of vulnerability, we must begin to understand where we go awry
> with respect to these recognitions.[331]

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[330] Christoph Hein, *The Distant Lover* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 177. Appears as an epigraph in Simone
   Drichel, "Reframing Vulnerability: 'so obviously the problem…?'" *SubStance* 42, no. 3 (2013): 3-27.
[331] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 73.

Here, Gilson lists four recognitions that are crucial for an immanent and experience-driven

ethics of vulnerability. In this chapter and the next, I will more fully discuss these key

recognitions. For now, though, I want to focus on Gilson's claim that in order to enact an

ethics of vulnerability, we must begin to comprehend where we go wrong with regard to

these recognitions. In other words, ethical action entails an understanding of our ethical

failures; for if we cannot acknowledge our mistakes, then we cannot even begin to change

our behavior. As Beauvoir succinctly puts it, "Without failure, no ethics."[332]

Gilson argues that our failure to engage our and others' vulnerability ethically stems

from two culturally dominant reactions to experiences of vulnerability: avoidance and

disavowal.[333] Hence, her primary aim in Chapter 3 of *The Ethics of Vulnerability* is to help us

understand why these negative reactions, rather than avowal and attentive response, are so

prevalent in our day and age. Drawing on recent work in the epistemology of ignorance, she

contends that ignorance of vulnerability is a case of *willful ignorance*, which develops from a

thoughtless adherence to a reductively negative conception of vulnerability, according to

which it is tantamount to susceptibility to injury. But what, exactly, is willful ignorance and

what is its relationship to avoidance and disavowal? Gilson's understanding of this term

comes from her reading of Nancy Tuana's taxonomy of ignorance, which outlines four

modes of ignorance: "(1) knowing that we do not know yet not caring to know, (2) not even

knowing that we do not know, (3) not knowing because (privileged) others do not want us to

know, and (4) willful ignorance."[334] Gilson acknowledges that ignorance of vulnerability

might seem to be an instance of not knowing in the second way, which might be overcome

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[332] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 10.
[333] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 73.
[334] Gilson, 76. See Nancy Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement and
Epistemologies of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3(2006): 1-19.

through an awareness of our ignorance and a desire to conceive of ourselves as vulnerable to the core. She argues, however, that ignorance of vulnerability is an instance of not knowing in the fourth way. What is her reasoning behind this?

Like Butler, Gilson argues that ignorance of vulnerability works primarily at the level of self-formation and self-understanding.[335] It is not that one first avows and comprehends vulnerability, and then deliberately disavows it. Instead, such a disavowal is unconscious, self-deceiving, and deeply embedded in our everyday habits and practices—to such an extent that an inability to apprehend or perceive vulnerability often becomes the foundation of the development of one's sense of self.[336] According to Gilson, willful ignorance is actively cultivated and perpetually maintained because "it appears to be in one's interest to remain ignorant"; yet, much like the existentialist notion of bad faith, "it is not a matter of a conscious act of volition."[337] In other words, willful ignorance simultaneously requires ongoing effort *and* is largely unconscious (or at least subconscious). Just as a habit becomes second nature only after it is repeated regularly over time, willful ignorance of vulnerability is the outcome of a gradual, lifelong process of disavowal.

In her essay "Managing Ignorance," Elizabeth Spelman cites a passage from James Baldwin's letter "My Dungeon Shook" to help illustrate the nature of willful ignorance: "This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying

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[335] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 77.

[336] Gilson, 74, 77. Kelly Oliver makes a similar point when she states, "The literature and myths of Western culture are full of images of males giving birth to themselves through an attempt to control that which cannot be controlled, the creation of life." Kelly Oliver, *Family Values: Subjects between Nature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 128.

[337] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 77.

hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it."[338] Baldwin

wrote this letter to his nephew on the hundredth anniversary of the emancipation of slaves in

America. In it, he accuses white people of fleeing from the brute reality of systematic racism

and the ongoing oppression of blacks. He refers to the former as both "the authors of

devastation" and "the innocents," since most white people deny their complicity in such harm

because thinking about it makes them uncomfortable or disrupts their sense of self (e.g., as a

"good person"). Baldwin argues, however, that "it is the innocence which constitutes the

crime."[339] In other words, it is not enough to simply have good intentions; more importantly,

one must confront the history and ongoing reality of systematic racism in the US. How does

this connect to our broader discussion of willful ignorance?

Drawing on the work of Spelman, Tuana contends that willful ignorance allows

White Americans to altogether avoid the issue of whether Black American's grievances are

real. Rather than considering whether these grievances are true or not, one simply ignores

them. As Tuana puts it, "willful ignorance is a systematic process of self-deception, a willful

embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring

of the oppression of others and one's role in that exploitation."[340] One example of willful

ignorance worth considering is our rampant consumerism in the US coupled with a failure to

acknowledge or further investigate the exploitative working conditions of those who make

the products we consume. Indeed, if I am unaware of the suffering that went into

manufacturing my iPhone, then I can more easily enjoy it in an "innocent," guilt-free

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[338] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Michael Joseph, 1963), 17; quoted in Elizabeth Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 119.
[339] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 17.
[340] Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance," 11.

manner. Next, let us examine how this relates to Gilson's claim that in order to engage our and others' vulnerability ethically, we must begin to understand where we go wrong with respect to recognizing it. More specifically, why is society's attitude toward vulnerability primarily one of avoidance and disavowal? Here, a discussion of the similarities between willful ignorance and the existentialist notion of bad faith should be illuminative.

Gilson states, "Willful ignorance is perpetuated by the pain, discomfort, or disturbance that are attendant upon bringing it to light. Existential accounts of bad faith, which are conceived as forms of ignorance, also develop this sense of willful ignorance."[341] In other words, both willful ignorance and bad faith are deep-seated modes of disavowal that are sustained by the pain or unease that would accompany their disclosure. Yet, just as Beauvoir argues that our bad-faith attempts to conceal our fundamental ambiguity are in vain, so too Gilson avers that willful ignorance of our primary vulnerability will ultimately prove futile.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Beauvoir highlights the pervasive sense of unease incited by our fundamental ambiguity, and the subsequent attempts of philosophers to conceal this ambiguity: "As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it."[342] Yet, Beauvoir insists that such attempts— whether they involve reducing mind to matter (or vice versa), merging mind and matter into a single substance, or establishing a hierarchy between body and soul—are bound to fail, since it is impossible to flee from our fundamental ambiguity. Indeed, one of the strengths of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is that it illustrates various ways in which we can fail to assume this

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[341] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 77-78.
[342] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* 7.

ambiguity. By familiarizing ourselves with such modes of human failure, we can better equip ourselves for future ethical action. This is not to say that it is possible, or even desirable, to wholly eliminate failure; as Beauvoir notes, it is a necessary part of human existence and is the condition of ethics. Still, it is helpful to recognize that both willful ignorance and bad faith often perpetuate harm toward self and others. Whether such harm amounts to racism, sexism, ableism, or xenophobia, it is grounded in not wanting to think about the implications of a disturbing or unsettling truth. Nonetheless, confronting such a truth is easier said than done. If Butler and Gilson are right that ignorance of vulnerability operates mainly at the level of self-formation and self-understanding, then acknowledging or confronting our primary vulnerability may very well precipitate a profound destabilization of our sense of self. This does not mean, however, that confronting vulnerability is always a matter of choice.

In *Embodying the Monster*, Margrit Shildrick draws on Lacan's notion of *corps morcelé* ("fragmented body") in order to explain the sense of shock that is often felt by an able-bodied individual who unexpectedly encounters a disabled individual: "In the encounter with the disabled or damaged body, the shock is not that of the unknown or unfamiliar, but rather of the psychic evocation of a primal lack of unity as the condition of all."[343] This idea of an originary lack of unity that is temporarily repressed by the young child during the mirror stage can be compared to Beauvoir's claim that although existence is a lack of Being, we cannot help but want to fill this lack. Although there are a number of crucial differences between Lacan's and Beauvoir's accounts of the subject, both thinkers suggest that complete self-mastery or autonomy is unattainable. Moreover, both acknowledge that the desire for

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[343] Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 80.

mastery is not something that we can simply will away; even if I make a sustained effort to recognize my originary dis-integration or lack of unity, the desire for mastery will nonetheless haunt me from time to time. With this in mind, let us return to Shildrick's above quote. Her point can be summarized as follows: although it may appear that the able-bodied individual is shocked by the disabled or damaged body's "absolute difference," what actually shocks the former is being reminded of her own "primal lack of unity," or, put differently, her primary vulnerability.[344] Indeed, Shildrick herself stresses the relationship between vulnerability and our unattainable desire for self-mastery. As she puts it, "What is at stake is the impossible desire for transcendence, and the denial of the impure and uncontrollable materiality in which all of us find our existence, and that renders the subject always already vulnerable."[345] In the next section of this chapter, I will further explore the relationship between vulnerability, disability, and disavowal. For now, though, I want to shift our attention to Gilson's claim that thinking and acting in a reductionistic manner is "part and parcel of pursuing invulnerability."[346] First off, how does Gilson define *reductionism*?

Following Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's account of reductionism in *Ecofeminism,* Gilson characterizes reductionism as "a framework for both knowing and valuing that reduces what is known to its isolatable and manipulable parts, and what is valuable to its economic value."[347] Gilson also describes the reductionistic perspective as mechanistic because it "lends itself to considering all systems—natural and social—as comprised of the same uniform constituent parts."[348] Yet, the presumption of uniformity, which permits

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[344] Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster,* 80.
[345] Shildrick, 80-81.
[346] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 85.
[347] Gilson 81.
[348] Gilson, 81.

knowledge of parts of a system to represent knowledge of the whole system, leads us to view things—nature, people, etc.—as nothing but manipulable resources, since we are able to break them down into exploitable, manageable parts. Furthermore, as Gilson notes, Shiva thinks that the prevalence of reductionism in our society is not an accident but rather a response to the demands of a specific form of economic and political organization. As Shiva puts it, "The reductionistic world-view, the industrial revolution and the capitalist economy are the philosophical, technological and economic components of the same process."[349] In other words, reductionism is not merely a pervasive way of thinking, but also a dominant mode of acting that accompanies capitalism and the technological practices that have propelled it.

Since reductionism permits the fragmentation and alienation of parts of a system, it makes it easy for individual corporations (and other sectors of the capitalist economy) to focus solely on their own profits and efficiency. The problem with this is that other crucial considerations—such as the health and well-being of humans and ecosystems—get neglected by default. Moreover, commercial capitalism is centered on specialized commodity production and thus calls for uniformity in production and the mono-functional use of natural resources.[350] Yet, as suggested above, the presumption of uniformity leads us to view things as manipulable and exploitable resources, and thereby fans the flame of the unattainable desire for mastery. In Shiva's words, "Reductionism thus reduces complex ecosystems to a single component, and a single component to a single function. Further, it allows for the manipulation of the ecosystem in a way that maximizes the single-function, single-

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[349] Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993, 2014), 24.
[350] Mies and Shiva, *Ecofeminism,* 24.

component exploitation."[351] For instance, most of us depend heavily on the global practice of monoculture, which focuses on maximizing the yield of a single crop in a given area. Yet, research has shown that monoculture—including its use of (1) genetically modified seeds purchased by corporations like Monsanto and (2) toxic chemical fertilizers and pesticides—harms people and the farm ecosystems we depend on.[352] As Gilson argues, reductionism is a dominant worldview that "functions to narrow one's perspective," blocking from view many significant features of the world; it is a thought pattern based on *closure*.[353] In other words, reductionism works like tunnel vision to limit one's experience of the world to what bolsters one's attempt to be a masterful subject. Not surprisingly, then, reductionism and invulnerability are like two peas in a pod.

To fortify her claim that thinking and acting in a reductionistic manner is an integral part of pursuing invulnerability, Gilson discusses reductionism in the context of our experience of, and attitude toward, embodiment. She states, "it is through our bodies that we are most obviously affected and, specifically, wounded…As such, these tendencies of the body can be experienced as a source of fear, and the body becomes a prime object for our attempts to avoid and disavow vulnerability."[354] There is clearly nothing wrong with taking precautions to avoid bodily injury or pain (e.g., wearing a seat belt, looking both ways before we cross the street, or getting a COVID vaccine). Yet, our attempts to make our bodies invulnerable are as pervasive as they are futile. Although most of us know that we are mortal, it is an uncomfortable truth that we would rather not think about; hence, the myth that the

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[351] Mies and Shiva, 24.

[352] Kumi Naidoo, "The food systems we choose affect biodiversity: do we want monocultures?" *The Guardian*, May 22, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/food-system-monocultures-gm-un-diversity-day.

[353] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 81.

[354] Gilson 83.

body can be controlled becomes all the more enticing. Gilson characterizes the bodily pursuit of invulnerability as "managing the body so as to present and experience it as strong, controlled, fit, trim and taut, and youthful."[355] Contemporary examples of such bodily management include restrictive dieting, over-exercising, cosmetic surgery, age-management techniques, and performance-enhancing drugs.

Gilson also notes that the pursuit of vulnerability presumes a mind/body dualism wherein the active mind exerts control over the passive body. One major problem with this is that it leads to a narrow or reductionistic conception of what the body can do. Citing John Russon, she states, "Rather than understanding the body as an opening to what is outside it and as something with 'its own immanent sensitivity, its own perspective, and initiative, its own desires, the body becomes another object to be manipulated.'"[356] In other words, by viewing the body as a passive substance, we miss out on its unique capacities that would allow for a richer, more meaningful life. As Beauvoir might suggest, our attempts to master and control our bodies with our minds are bound to fail because we are humans, not gods. The desire for control is gripping and, to an extent, inevitable; simultaneously, however, it is an ongoing source of frustration. Although there is nothing wrong with wanting stability or security per se (which often occurs alongside the feeling that one has lost, or is losing, control), the problem is that such a desire can incite us to do things that harm both ourselves and others. For example, our cultural obsession with thinness, which is a manifestation of the desire for control, is responsible for various forms of bodily hatred, eating disorders, and hospitalizations. In what follows, I will discuss the avoidance and disavowal of vulnerability in the context of disability. More specifically, I will argue that the stigma associated with

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[355] Gilson, 83.
[356] Ibid. John Russon, *Human Experience* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 25.

disability serves as a highly illuminative example of disavowing vulnerability. In doing so, I will explore some crucial similarities between Garland-Thomson's notion of the "normate" and Gilson's concept of the "entrepreneurial subject."

3.3 Stigma, Disability, and Vulnerability

In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identit*y (1963), Erving Goffman defines the term *stigma* as a mark or attribute that is socially discrediting insofar as it is inconsistent with our stereotype (or preconceived notion) of "what a given type of individual should be."[357] Put differently, it is not the attribute itself that constitutes the stigma but rather the *relationship* between the attribute and the stereotype. Goffman further characterizes a stigma as "constituting a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity."[358] When we meet a new person, we generally anticipate that they fall into one of a number of social categories. In such situations, evidence can arise that this person possesses an attribute that makes them different from others in the social category we assume they are in, and different in an undesirable way; consequently, this person is diminished in our minds from a whole, normal person, to a sullied, discredited one. Here, it is helpful to recall Butler's claim in *Frames of War* that our affects are never merely our own but rather are regulated from the start by exclusionary social norms that suggest that some lives are grievable, while others are disposable or not-quite-human.

If we apply Butler's insight about the regulation of affect to Goffman's account of stigma, then we can see that our tendency to stigmatize those who don't fit neatly into a

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[357] Erving Goffman, "Selections from *Stigma*," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th edition, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2017), 134

[358] Goffman, "Selections from *Stigma*," 134.

particular social category is more than just a personal choice; instead, this tendency is part and parcel of a much broader social context. Therefore, if we want to understand how the stigma process works, then we need to do more than just analyze individual habits and proclivities. For example, what are the social and political conditions of stigma, and why do we more commonly reject rather than accept people who depart unexpectedly from our expectations of how they should be? As I'll attempt to show, these questions can be partially answered by returning to a theme that was discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3, that is, anxiety in the face of uncertainty and the accompanying desire for security. For now, though, I want to turn to Goffman's notion of "mixed contacts," that is, direct physical encounters between "normal" individuals and "stigmatized" individuals.

Regarding "mixed contacts," Goffman states, "When normals and stigmatized do in fact enter one another's immediate presence…there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted on both sides."[359] Put simply, the direct encounter between the "normal" and "stigmatized" individual is a prime manifestation of the causes and effects of stigmatizing those who do not fit a particular society's standards of normality. Goffman notes that the stigmatized individual may find that he feels uncertain as to how "*we normals* will identify and receive him" and that, as a result, may feel that he has to be "self-conscious and calculating" about the impression he is making to an extent and in social settings that he assumes others are not.[360] In more general terms, the passage suggests that stigma is not something fixed and essential but rather dynamic and socially constructed, which is consistent with Butler's claim that our affects are regulated by exclusionary social

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[359] Goffman, "Selections from *Stigma*," 139.
[360] Goffman, 139-140. My emphasis.

norms. Although Goffman's work on stigma has played—and continues to play—a key role in the development of the interdisciplinary field of disability studies, there are a few criticisms I want to address.

First off, when Goffman says "we normals," he insinuates that his audience consists solely of non-stigmatized individuals. In other words, as Jeffrey Brune puts it, he approaches the topic solely from the perspective of normality, positioning himself and his readers as "we normals" and disabled people as "others."[361] By making this distinction, Goffman conveys (whether intentionally or unintentionally) an "Us vs. Them" mentality that further marginalizes already-marginalized individuals. A closely related criticism is that he fails to question *normalcy* and instead takes the notion of the "normal human being" largely for granted. Yet, as Brune and Garland-Thomson argue, these related shortcomings in Goffman's work are ones that disability scholars have fruitfully addressed in their responses to, and adaptations of, his work. In Brune's words, "One of the most unifying goals of disability studies is to privilege a disabled perspective and it has not been hard to examine stigma from this vantage point. The examples are too numerous to mention."[362] Put differently, Goffman's one-sided approach to the topic of stigma has propelled numerous disability scholars to examine stigma from the perspective of disabled people, which has ultimately led to a fuller, less biased, and more nuanced understanding of stigma. Moreover, as Garland-Thomson's critical concept of the "normate" demonstrates, Goffman's failure to *question normalcy* has spurred disability scholars to pursue this very endeavor.

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[361] Jeffrey Brune, "In Defense of Stigma or at Least Its Adaptations." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34. No. 1 (2014), https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4014/3539.
[362] Brune, "In Defense of Stigma or at Least Its Adaptations."

Second, Goffman's tone towards the stigmatized people he addresses is particularly hostile and, at times, he even seems to mock his subjects. For instance, to illustrate what he calls "tortured performance," he gives the example of a wheelchair user who "manages to take to the dance floor with a girl in some kind of mimicry of dancing."[363] However, as the competitive sport of wheelchair dancing demonstrates, there are many who would strongly disagree with Goffman's sentiment. At another point in the book, he lists "Mennonites, Gypsies, shameless scoundrels, and very Orthodox Jews" as examples of bearers of stigma who are unaffected by the way normals treat them.[364] Perhaps some of Goffman's language usage can be explained by the fact that he published this book in 1963, but even back then, I think his grouping together of such individuals would have worried many of his readers. Yet, although Goffman's shortcomings should be noted, this does not necessarily mean that we ought to discount his work altogether. As Garland-Thomson argues in *Extraordinary Bodies*, Goffman's stigma theory provides a helpful vocabulary for situating disability in social contexts: "Whereas terms such as 'otherness' or 'alterity' dominate literary criticism, both are limited for explaining marginalized identities because they are nouns. In contrast, the term 'stigma'…can take many grammatical forms to match the component strands of a complex social process."[365] Put simply, the term "stigma" is better suited than other, less semantically flexible words for explaining the marginalization of various social identities such as disability, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.

The third and final criticism I want to address is that Goffman focuses exclusively on encounters between "normal" and "stigmatized" individuals, while failing to acknowledge

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[363] Goffman, "Selections from *Stigma*," 138.
[364] Goffman, 136.
[365] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 30.

that stigma is simultaneously a structural issue. For example, Brune notes that the Marxist geographer Brendan Gleeson harshly criticizes Goffman for "ignoring structural forces that shape notions of disability" and clarifies that, according to Gleeson, "personal encounters are merely the outcome of larger, economic, and political forces."[366] To be sure, Goffman's failure to address the significance of larger structural forces when it comes to understanding stigma is a serious shortcoming of his work. Yet, as Burne again asserts, this is an accurate critique but not a compelling reason to abandon Goffman's work altogether. By adapting Goffman's work and examining stigma as the outcome of *structural forces*—such as industrialization and social Darwinism—instead of merely the outcome of *interpersonal encounters*, disability scholars have been able to synthesize a "macro structuralist" understanding of stigma with a "micro personal" one.[367] Such a synthesis of approaches recalls Beauvoir's claim in the *Ethics of Ambiguity* that, to begin to understand what it means to be human, we need to simultaneously consider both the individual and the social context in which she is embedded.

In addressing the above three criticisms of Goffman's work, I briefly mentioned the accusation that he fails to question normalcy. This accusation, especially as it is put forth by Garland-Thomson, is particularly relevant to our above discussion of disavowing vulnerability. If, as Gilson argues, vulnerability is generally associated with weakness, powerless, and passivity—and thereby viewed as an undesirable quality that ought to be disavowed—then those who are perceived by "we normals" as vulnerable can be said to possess a stigma or an undesired differentness. Garland-Thomson contends that stigma is a response to the "dilemma of difference" and suggests that the former is best understood as a

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[366] Brune, "In Defense of Stigma or at Least Its Adaptations."
[367] Brune.

superiority/inferiority issue. As she puts it, stigma not only reflects the preferences and views of the dominant group but also "reinforces that group's idealized self-description as neutral, normal, legitimate, and identifiable" by disparaging qualities of less powerful groups or those considered radically different.[368] The process of stigmatization thus "legitimates the status quo, naturalizes attributions of inherent inferiority and superiority, and obscures the socially constructed quality of both categories."[369] Put simply, the boundaries of the "normal human being" are established through the stigmatization of deviant others, although this important point often gets obscured. Hence, while Goffman does little to problematize normalcy, Garland-Thomson insists that if we are to fully understand the stigmatization process, then we need to pay close attention the way in which normality and abnormality are mutually constituted. In what follows, I will explore Garland-Thomson's concept of the "normate" and then examine its relationship to the ideal of invulnerability.

In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson coins the term "normate," which she defines as: "the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries" and "the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings."[370] As we briefly touched on earlier, the normate subject position is generally obscured or neutralized by the heavily marked (yet marginalized) figures of otherness that it relies on to reinforce its boundaries. Garland-Thomson argues that to shed light on the figure of the normate, we need to examine the social processes and discourses that establish physical and cultural otherness.[371] In particular, she is interested in analyzing the disabled figure and the role it

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[368] Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 31.
[369] Garland-Thomson, 31.
[370] Garland-Thomson 8.
[371] Garland-Thomson 8.

plays in a complex, hierarchical set of power relations. She is careful, however, to distinguish between actual disabled people and their representations (e.g., in literature and freakshows).

While representations of interactions between disabled people and normates point to actual social relations, they certainly do not replicate those relations in their original complexity. Time and time again, disabled people are depicted as freakish spectacles who reassure ostensibly normate audiences of their common identity. As Garland-Thomson puts it, "Cast as one of society's ultimate 'not me' figures, the disabled other absorbs disavowed elements of this cultural self, becoming an icon of all human vulnerability and enabling the 'American Ideal' to appear as master of both destiny and self."[372] If, as Gilson argues, the ideal of invulnerability is not only pervasive in our day and age but also *unattainable*, and if disabled people remind the "normate" of this unsettling truth, then avoidance of, and disidentification with, "disabled others" will likely have a reassuring effect. Although Gilson does not actually use the term "normate" when she discusses the bodily pursuit of invulnerability, her related discussion of the desire for mastery and control bears some striking resemblances to Garland-Thomson's concept of the normate.

As part of her critical analysis of Emerson's doctrine of "Self-Reliance," Garland-Thomson notes that the former invokes "invalids" in his effort to define the liberal self. In the 1847 version of the text, Emerson writes, "And now we are men…not minors and invalids in a protected corner, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors"; moreover, he ridicules conservatives by characterizing them as "effimated by nature, born halt and blind" and able "only, like invalids, [to] act on the defensive."[373] What interests Garland-Thomson here is the

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[372] Garland-Thomson, 41.
[373] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* New York: Tudor, 1847, 1938. Cited in Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 41-42.

way in which the liberal individual is defined over and against the "blind," the "halt," and "invalids." She argues that such figures, which define the liberal individual by opposition, are "above all else, icons of bodily vulnerability."[374] Thus, by excluding the disabled figure (and presumably women) from his notion of the liberal self, Emerson uncovers a tacit exclusionary norm included in the ideal of the self-sufficient, masterful individual. Next, I want highlight how both Gilson and Garland-Thomson use the word "ideal" in their descriptions of the kind of subject who seeks to disavow vulnerability.

While Gilson focuses extensively on the "ideal of invulnerability," Garland-Thomson borrows the term "American Ideal" from Robert Murphy, who argues in *The Body Silent* that he and other disabled individuals are "subverters of an American Ideal, just as the poor are betrayers of the American Dream."[375] As noted earlier, Gilson argues that the ideal of invulnerability and the disavowal of vulnerability are merely two sides of the same coin. Insofar as vulnerability is equated with weakness, powerlessness, and passivity, it will be viewed as an undesirable quality that carries a stigma. In a similar vein, if disabled people are viewed primarily as icons of bodily *vulnerability* (understood in this reductively negative way), then they will be considered as threatening to the "American Ideal." And as we have seen, a common way of responding to those who are viewed as threatening or fear-inducing is to avoid them altogether. If I can't control how an encounter with a particular individual will affect me, then the easiest way to prevent this feeling of a lack of mastery is to make every effort to ensure that the encounter never happens in the first place. So far, I have focused on Gilson's and Garland-Thomson's uses of the word 'ideal.' Let us return, however, to my above claim that Garland-Thomson's notion of the normate bears some striking

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[374] Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 42.
[375] Robert Murphy, *The Body Silent* (New York: Holt), 116-17. Cited in Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 41.

similarities to Gilson's discussion of the bodily pursuit of invulnerability. First off, what is the relationship between the "American Ideal" and the "normate"?

Drawing on Murphy's claim that disabled people are "subverters of the American Ideal" and Emerson's distinction between the liberal self and the "invalid," Garland-Thomson argues that the "American Ideal" posited by liberal individualism is structured by "a four-part self-concept" that is deeply threatened by the "mortal lessons" or human limitations that disability represents.[376] She contends that "this normate self" is informed by the following four interconnected ideological principles: self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress.[377] Notice, in particular, how she equates the "American Ideal" posited by liberal individualism with "this normate self." I take this to mean that, in her view, these two figures are synonymous (or at least that the "American Ideal" constitutes one version of the normate subject). It is also worth noting that the four principles Garland-Thomson enlists to characterize the normate are closely connected to what Gilson calls the "isolated, self-sufficient, masterful subject," which, as the latter points out, is much critiqued by feminist thinkers.[378]

As I've been arguing, masterful subjectivity, along with the closely associated ideal of invulnerability, is an utter impossibility. Yet, this doesn't prevent it from exerting a powerful hold over most of us, even if we would like to believe otherwise. Part of what makes the ideal of invulnerability so appealing is the way in which it accords with societal expectations of how one ought to look and behave. Indeed, the desire to belong—to be accepted rather than rejected by others—often leads us to make significant compromises to

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[376] Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 42.
[377] Garland-Thomson, 42.
[378] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 111.

our freedom. Gilson reinforces this point in her chapter entitled "Risk and Control: The Formation of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity," which provides a Foucauldian analysis of the way in which Western neoliberal societies assess and manage risk through the deployment of biopower. She argues, moreover, that culturally predominant ideas of risk and danger (and the methods of *self*-control and *self*-management that these ideas set in motion) help to account for the allure of the ideal of invulnerability.

Gilson derives three major ideas from Foucault's 1978-79 lecture course *The Birth of Biopolitics*: (1) the interconnectedness of risk and control, (2), the economization of the social sphere, and (3) the entrepreneurial mode of subjectivity that attends both.[379] Yet, to make sense of these ideas, we first need to distinguish between classical liberalism and neoliberalism. According to Foucault's analysis, the difference between classical liberalism and neoliberalism has to do with a transformation of the role of the market in relation to the state. In classical liberalism, the government was invoked to "respect the form of the market and *laisser-faire*."[380] Here, the market remained under the supervision of the state, which was tasked with delimiting space for free market exchange. With neoliberalism, however, the situation is completely turned around so that the market is now viewed as "the organizing and regulating principle of the state."[381] This transformation also involves a shift in the meaning of "market."

In classical liberalism, the market was understood as *free exchange,* but with the advent of neoliberalism, it comes to be understood as *competition.* Moreover, Foucault argues that in American neoliberalism in particular, the expansion of the economic form of

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[379] Gilson, 104.

[380] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics,* trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 247.

[381] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics,* 116.

the market to all facets of life—what he calls an "economic analysis of the non-economic"—serves a "grid of intelligibility" that enables us to make sense of an entire range of processes, relations, and behaviors.[382] With the shift to neoliberalism, responsibility for well-being is transferred largely to the individual. Not surprisingly, then, this strong emphasis on *personal responsibility* leads to new methods of self-management and self-control. A successful entrepreneurial subject must be aware of the risks and dangers he faces—and decide in advance how to deal with them—so that he is not caught off guard. In describing the entrepreneurial subject, Gilson states that the individual, as an entrepreneur of himself, "governs himself, ostensibly freely, in accord with the prevailing political-economic ideals. He disciplines himself, producing not just goods and capital through his work, but, further and perhaps more significantly, producing himself as the bearer of human capital."[383] Notice her emphasis here on *self*-government and *self*-discipline, both of which are instances of the increasing emphasis on personal responsibility that comes with the shift to neoliberalism. Also of interest is her claim that the entrepreneurial subject governs himself "*ostensibly freely*," which we will come back to shortly. First, though, let us return to Garland-Thomson's notion of the American Ideal.

Drawing on Foucault, Gilson argues that risk and danger assume "significant rhetorical function" under both liberalism and neoliberalism in the perpetual interplay of freedom and security.[384] She contends, moreover, that the entrepreneurial mode of subjectivity accompanies both forms of liberalism. Hence, entrepreneurial subjectivity meshes nicely with Garland-Thomson's notion of the American Ideal (a version of the

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[382] Foucault, 243.
[383] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 107.
[384] Gilson, 107.

normate self), which she characterizes as a kind of liberal individualism. As stated above,

Garland-Thomson argues that the American Ideal is structured by four interconnected

principles: self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress. One consequence

of this way of viewing identity, whether it is conceptualized as entrepreneurial subjectivity or

liberal individualism, is that responsibility for personal successes and failures is shifted

largely to the individual. For instance, if I am a wealthy CEO who makes seven figures a

year, then I alone am responsible for my financial success. On the contrary, if I am working

multiple part time jobs and can barely afford to pay rent each month (let alone pay back my

college loans), then I, and no one else, am to blame for my unfortunate situation.

      If we think of this notion of the privatization of responsibility in relation to disability,

then things start looking even grimmer. All too often, disability accommodations are not

considered a public matter but instead are privatized so that only a select few can afford

adequate care. Entrepreneurial subjectivity, with its emphasis on the privatization of

responsibility, thus encourages us to take a "if it doesn't directly affect me, then it's not my

problem" attitude. Yet, as Garland-Thomson argues in "Becoming Disabled," "The fact is,

most of us will move in and out of disability in our lifetimes, whether we do so through

illness, an injury, or merely the process of aging."[385] In other words, disability is something

that affects all of us, even though most of us have a hard time accepting this. Indeed,

disability dependency is often viewed by the normate as a fate worse than death. For

instance, late disability rights activist Harriet Mcbryde Johnson, who had an incurable and

progressive neuromuscular disease and used a wheelchair, introduces herself in "Worth

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[385] Garland-Thomson, "Becoming Disabled," *The New York Times*, 19 August 2016,
https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/opinion/sunday/becoming-disabled.html.

Living" as "your worst nightmare."[386] She also mentions how a complete stranger stopped

her on the street, just the other day, to tell her they don't know where she finds the courage to

keep going. This common misconception that to be disabled means to have a low quality of

life stems largely from our societal disavowal of vulnerability and, more specifically, from

the idea that disability dependency amounts to an individual weakness or deficiency that

could have been avoided.

Let us return to Gilson's above claim that danger and risk assume significant

rhetorical function in both liberalism and neoliberalism in the incessant interplay of freedom

and security. According to Foucault, freedom is not merely given in liberalism but rather

produced; yet this very act of producing freedom simultaneously requires "the establishment

of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera."[387]

This is because the imperative of liberalism is not freedom per se but rather the management

of the conditions that enable freedom. Hence, freedom is always produced in connection with

that which threatens it. With the advent of liberalism, there arose a "culture of danger" that

stimulated a widespread fear of everyday dangers such as criminal activity, disease, sexual

degeneration, etc. Foucault argues that this fear of danger correlates with liberalism to such a

degree that "there is no liberalism without a culture of danger."[388] Here is where Gilson's

discussion of danger and risk in relation to entrepreneurial subjectivity comes into play. As

suggested earlier, the entrepreneurial subject is a prime manifestation of the ideal of

invulnerability and helps account for its overall allure. According to Gilson, risk is often

conflated with vulnerability in its reductively negative sense; to be "at risk" means to be

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[386] Harriet Mcbryde Johnson, "Worth Living," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2002), https://dsq-
    sds.org/article/view/338/424.
[387] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics,* 64.
[388] Foucault, 67.

vulnerable and vice versa.[389] Hence, the proper management of risk becomes key for the entrepreneurial subject.

Nonetheless, risk is not viewed by the entrepreneurial subject as something that is wholly negative, or as something that should be entirely avoided. As Gilson stresses, there is a crucial difference between "taking risks" and being "at risk."[390] Take, for example, Steve Jobs, who dropped out of college only to become one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the world. Most aspiring entrepreneurs would probably consider the risk he took (i.e., dropping out of college) to be a good one. On the contrary, a high school student who resides in a low-income community, gets poor grades, and lives in foster care would be considered by many to be "at risk." The difference here is between "good risks" and "bad risks," although the management of risk applies to both. The question we need to ask is: who is responsible for risk management—the individual or society as a whole? In liberalism, a significant part of this responsibility is still left to society. With the shift to neoliberalism, however, responsibility for risk is transferred almost entirely to the individual.

Now, one might contend that a stronger emphasis on personal responsibility allows for an expansion of autonomy on the part of the individual. Rather than submitting to an external authority, one obeys oneself and focuses on increasing his or her human capital. Yet, as Gilson argues, "when one disciplines oneself in order to develop one's capital enhancing capacities, one in effect engages in conforming behavior."[391] Indeed, to the extent that developing one's capital-enhancing capacities is considered economically beneficial, such behavior conforms to (and reinforces) the economic grid of intelligibility that underlies

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[389] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 112. She notes, however, that "risk tends to be understood more equivocally than vulnerability" (Ibid).
[390] Gilson, 112.
[391] Gilson, 108.

neoliberalism. To be clear, this is Gilson's view rather than Foucault's. In a footnote, she states that Foucault "regards neoliberalism as multiplying differences rather than enforcing conformity" and argues, on the contrary, that "conformity need not entail homogeneity, or take the form of rigid normalization and exclusion of those who cannot be normalized as Foucault describes it."[392] Thus, while Foucault argues that neoliberalism incites a massive withdrawal of normative mechanisms, Gilson contends that such mechanisms continue to play a crucial role under neoliberalism. For instance, the injunction that we should become "entrepreneurs of the self" is normative and produces conforming behavior. With this in mind, let us return to Gilson's claim that the entrepreneurial subject governs himself "ostensibly freely." In other words, why is it that neoliberalism didn't make good on its promise of an expansion of individual autonomy?

As stated earlier, a central feature of neoliberalism is its emphasis on personal responsibility. Yet, this individualistic approach to life only exacerbates existing inequities by (1) convincing the rich that they procured their wealth through merit and (2) blaming the poor for their lack of financial success. As David Harvey's puts it in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, "The social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility. Personal failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed."[393] In stark contrast to the entrepreneurial subject who increases her human capital by actively "taking risks," the individual who is passively "at risk" is considered largely responsible for her unfortunate situation. She could have prevented it, if only she had worked harder and smarter. Not only do others believe this, but she believes it too; as a result, her feelings of self-hatred and worthlessness grow

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[392] Gilson, 108 (footnote 5).
[393] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76.

stronger. Indeed, to the extent that neoliberalism views competition as the defining feature of human relations, it suggests that winners and losers deserve their respective positions. In this way, the privatization of risk and responsibility prevents us from recognizing that although vulnerability is differently manifested within and across populations, it is nonetheless a human condition *shared by all.* What are the ethical implications of our failure to acknowledge our share in this common vulnerability?

Again, one of my central aims in this chapter is to show that disability stigma is a highly illuminative example of our societal disavowal of vulnerability. Put differently, examining the stigma associated with disability tells us something about our more general disavowal of vulnerability. What does it tell us? First off, it suggests that the anxiety or unease that a self-proclaimed "normate" feels when encountering someone who is considered "disabled," "abnormal," or "deviant" often propels the former to avoid such encounters altogether. When such an encounter does take place, however, the disabled individual tends to remind the currently able-bodied individual of the tenuousness of existence—of the fact that "that could very well be me someday." As Johnson puts it in "Worth Living":

> Inside you, waiting to be born, is one of our kind. Unless it is your fate to be murdered, or run over by a train, or otherwise struck down suddenly in your prime, odds are you will someday need someone to turn you over, bring you a bedpan, get you dressed, and help you into your wheelchair. If you live long enough, you'll confront your limits and know you're mortal. It may happen when some illness overtakes you at age 95, or it may happen when you drive home from work tomorrow, with 40 years of life ahead of you.[394]

In this powerful (and arguably disquieting) message to her reader, Johnson identifies what it is that most of us are trying to avoid: our mortality, finitude, and fundamental dependency on

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[394] Johnson, "Worth Living."

others. By stressing that most of us will become disabled at some point in our lives, and thus rely on the assistance of others for our everyday needs, Johnson ruptures the boundary between able-bodied and disabled. Her goal is not simply to strike fear into the hearts of her readers but to force us to confront our mortality and fundamental dependency on others.

In particular, Johnson's above claim that "inside you, waiting to be born, is one of our kind" suggests that, even if I currently view myself as a sovereign, self-sufficient subject, all of this could come crashing down within a matter of seconds. Moreover, her invocation of the birth metaphor stresses the mutable, temporal nature of the embodied self. The unsettling truth is that all of us are affected by external forces in uncontrollable ways, and our efforts to insulate ourselves from these forces will ultimately prove futile. What Johnson tries to stress, however, is that disability dependency need not imply a low quality of life. As she argues, all it takes for her—and others like her—to enjoy life are some basic resources. Nevertheless, she recognizes that most people who think that disability doesn't directly affect them won't do much to remedy the problem of a lack of government funding.

By emphasizing that unless we are killed suddenly in an accident, chances are we will someday become disabled, Johnson reminds her readers that disability dependency is something that directly affects (or *will* directly affect) almost all of us. Yet, acknowledging this will hardly change things overnight. As we saw in our analysis of entrepreneurial subjectivity, the increasing privatization of risk and responsibility in our society reinforces existing inequities by convincing privileged entrepreneurial subjects that they alone are responsible for their success, while exacerbating the vulnerability of those who lack the resources to take active control of their situations.[395] What is more, this pervasive mode of

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[395] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 112.

thought, which is a prime manifestation of the bodily pursuit of invulnerability, stigmatizes poverty and social dependency, causing many of these situationally vulnerable individuals to blame themselves for their failures. How might we change our attitude toward vulnerability so that responsibility for this common, but differently distributed, human condition comes to be shared? As I will argue in the next chapter, the answer to this question entails a radically renewed understanding of the meaning and significance of vulnerability.

Chapter 4: Reframing Vulnerability

In the closing pages of the previous chapter, I highlighted three unsettling aspects of our existence that Johnson forces us to confront in "Worth Living": our mortality, finitude, and fundamental dependency on others. While these concepts play a central role in the writings of Heidegger and Beauvoir, the two thinkers discuss our possible reactions to these human conditions primarily at the level of the individual: Dasein either flees from its ownmost death or faces it; the individual either masks its fundamental ambiguity or assumes it. In contrast, Butler and Gilson stress how our attitude toward our primary *vulnerability*—which is inextricably entwined with our mortality, finitude, and fundamental dependency—necessarily affects others. Butler also insists that if we want to resist the differential allocation of our affective responses, then we must first be supported by a new bodily ontology, which is necessarily a social ontology, since the body is given over to others from the start. Following this line of reasoning, Gilson defines vulnerability as an openness to affecting and being affected in turn. She argues, moreover, that a more ethical response toward our shared vulnerability entails an understanding of our reasons, as a society, for disavowing vulnerability. As such, Butler and Gilson take as their starting point not the individual in and of itself, but rather the way in which our collective behavior is shaped by social norms.

In this chapter, I argue that if we are to minimize our societal disavowal of vulnerability, and the violence towards others that this disavowal motivates, then we must replace the conventional understanding of vulnerability as mere susceptibility to harm with a renewed conception of it. Drawing on Butler, Cavarero, and Gilson, I redefine vulnerability as an ambiguous openness to unexpected change and transformation, an openness that is

shared by all but differently manifested and experienced. Although Gilson draws on several

concepts from Deleuze's philosophy, including his notions of the virtual and the actual, in

order to develop her non-reductive concept of vulnerability as "openness to affecting and

being affected," she does not directly engage with Deleuze's writings on Spinoza's theory of

affects. In my view, this is a missed opportunity since there is a fruitful connection between

(1) Gilson's conception of vulnerability and (2) Spinoza's and Deleuze's notion of affect as a

lived passage or transition from one state to another through which a body's *puissance*

("power of acting") is increased or diminished.[396] Generally speaking, when we encounter a

body that increases our power of acting, we experience joy, and when we encounter a body

that diminishes our power of acting, we experience sadness.[397] Although we can strive to

minimize sad encounters, we can never eliminate them entirely. Indeed, insofar as we are

finite humans, we are subject to external causes that limit our power of acting. Yet this need

not be a source of despair; for even though we cannot eliminate passive affects—such as

sadness and grief—from our lives, we can struggle to understand these passions and, in doing

so, avoid being determined to act by them.[398] It would be incorrect, however, to assume that

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[396] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 121.

[397] Nonetheless, I think there are some exceptions to this rule, at least for Deleuze, even if he doesn't explicitly assert this. Take, for instance, his claim in *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* that "Joy is not self-satisfaction…Rather, it's the pleasure in conquest (*conquête*), as Nietzsche said, but the conquest does not consist of enslaving people, conquest is, for example, for a painter to conquer color…That's what joy is, even if it goes badly because… in these stories of power of action, when one conquers a power of action…it happens that it is too strong for one's own self, so he will crack up (*donc il craquera*), Van Gogh." Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, "J is for Joy," *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze,* trans. Charles J. Stivale, dir. Pierre-André Boutan (1996), https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/lectures/en/ABCMsRevised-NotesComplete051120_1.pdf. In other words, an artist could experience joy, in the sense described above, while simultaneously undergoing a profound crack up or destruction of their sense of self. This would, I propose, result in joy for the pre-individual singularities of the artist (i.e., the larval subject) but sadness for his or her sense of self.

[398] If we think of this in terms of someone who, upon being injured, unthinkingly lashes back at what they take to be the source of their injury, then we can see how being determined to act by our passions can have fatal consequences.

Spinoza subscribes to a Cartesian dualism wherein the active mind exerts control over the passive body. Why would this assumption be faulty?

Deleuze argues that Spinoza makes a profoundly anti-Cartesian claim in Book II of the *Ethics* when he affirms that "we can only know [connaître] ourselves and we can only know external bodies by the affections that external bodies produce on our own."[399] For Deleuze, this excludes the possibility of the cogito, since it implies that I can only ever know myself through my encounters with others.[400] This means that, for Deleuze and Spinoza, our encounters with external bodies—which affect us with joy or sadness, that is, increase or diminish our power of acting—are the very foundation of knowledge. In other words, knowledge about ourselves, others, and the world would be impossible without such encounters. This emphasis on the communal nature of concept formation reinforces our discussions, in the previous chapters, of our necessary exposure to and dependence on others. Nonetheless, denials of this necessary interconnectedness are all too common. How might a renewed understanding of vulnerability help us affirm, rather than disavow, our fundamental dependence on others? Moreover, what can a careful analysis of Spinoza's and Deleuze's theory of affects contribute to our renewed conception of vulnerability? In the following pages, I attempt to answer these questions and explore what a more ethical response to our shared vulnerability might look like.

In Section 1, I focus on Deleuze's notion of the *chance encounter* and show how it is closely related to a renewed conception of vulnerability as an ambiguous openness to

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[399] Deleuze, "Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought." Although Deleuze does not refer to particular passages from the *Ethics* to support this claim, I think the following propositions by Spinoza are especially relevant: "The human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected" (II, P19) and "The mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body" (II, P23).

[400] Deleuze, "Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought."

unanticipated change and transformation that is shared by all but differently manifested and experienced. I also explore Deleuze's distinction between *puissance* ("immanent power" or "power of acting") and *pouvoir* ("transcendent power" or "power to dominate others"), and then show how the latter conception of power encourages a reductively negative understanding of vulnerability. Indeed, if I believe that power is necessarily hierarchical, then my only options are to dominate or be dominated. On the contrary, *puissance* (Lat. *potentia*) allows for the formation of what Spinoza calls "common notions," or adequate ideas that are generated when two or more bodies with something in common combine their characteristic relations of motion and rest.[401] Since *puissance* is closely related to Deleuze's account of the affects, I also dedicate part of this section to elaborating the important connection between them.

In Section 2, I apply Deleuze's question of "What can a body do?" to some contemporary instances of disidentifying with or rejecting disabled people. I argue that, by presuming that we know in advance what a particular body can do—and even basing our conception of a person's worth on this—we reinforce social hierarchies that naturalize relations of privilege and oppression. As Deleuze and Spinoza might put it, we form inadequate ideas, that is, ideas that are based on effects separated from their real causes. To form an adequate idea about someone, it is not enough to merely think about the effect that their body has on me (e.g., that the sight of it fills me with unease); instead, it entails observing their life, considering their experiences, and, crucially, listening to their first-person testimony. Indeed, if we want to respond ethically to another's vulnerability, we should be wary of approaches that encourage us to act solely based on our visceral reactions.

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[401] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 36, 54. Spinoza, *Ethics,* II, P39.

Nonetheless, some leading affect-theory scholars distinguish sharply between affect and cognition, leading to what Kasper Kristensen calls "the differentiated registers of affect and cognition."[402] I argue that this view is inconsistent with a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the affects and show why it is vital to affirm the intermingling of affect and cognition if we want affect theory to live up to its potential to help us reconceptualize vulnerability. In addition, I show how a Spinozist-Deleuzean conception of the body fortifies the argument that taking away someone's long-term prosthetic device is akin to taking away a part of their physical body and social identity.[403]

Finally, in Section 3, I focus on the reality that although vulnerability is a fundamental human condition, it is nonetheless differentially manifested within and across populations. I argue that a more ethical response to vulnerability would first entail an adequate understanding of this differential and open-ended (as opposed to homogenous and static) nature of vulnerability. I will also show how a Spinozist-Deleuzean conception of the individual challenges the fundamental assumptions of liberalism individualism, which go hand-in-hand with our societal disavowal of invulnerability.

4.1 Deleuze on Spinoza, Affect, and the Chance Encounter

As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, one of Butler's central concerns in her later work is the differential allocation of our affective responses. She argues that affect is never merely our own but is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere and shaped by dominant frames of intelligibility. Yet, she does not see this as a reason for despair but rather as a potential

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[402] Kasper Kristensen, "What Can an Affect Do? Note on the Spinozist-Deleuzean Account," *LIR.journal* 7, no. 16 (2016), 14.

[403] Joel Michael Reynolds, Laura Guidry-Grimes, and Katie Savin, "Against Personal Ventilator Reallocation," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 30, no. 2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180120000833.

source of resistance. By better understanding how our affects operate, we can actively resist the differential distribution of our affective responses, and thus minimize precariousness. In his work on Spinoza, Deleuze also engages extensively with affect theory but approaches the matter from a different angle. Following Spinoza, he understands the individual in terms of its dynamic power of acting (*puissance*). For both thinkers, the aim of ethics is to increase our power of acting, which must be sharply distinguished from asserting power over others.[404] In the following pages, I will show how Deleuze's engagement with Spinoza's concept of affect helps to restore vulnerability's ambivalent potentiality and thus challenges reductively negative conceptions of vulnerability that equate it with mere susceptibility to harm. First, though, I will give a brief overview of Deleuze's and Spinoza's theory of affects. A good place to start is with Deleuze's distinction between "affect" and "affection."

In *Spinoza: A Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze stresses the importance of Spinoza's distinction between "affection" (*affectio*) and "affect" (*affectus*). He begins his Chapter Four discussion of "Affections, Affects," by noting that the affections (*affectio*) are "the modes themselves," that is, the modes of an infinite substance or of its attributes.[405] At a second level, however, affections designate the modifications made to a mode by other modes. More specifically, these affections are images or corporeal traces "whose *ideas* involve both the nature of the affected body and that of the affecting external body."[406] In other words, image affections or ideas (*affectio*) are traces of interaction, or remainders of experience, that endure in thought and in the body. Feeling affects (*affectus*), on the contrary, are lived

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[404] Indeed, Deleuze condemns priest, tyrants, and judges for inciting and exploiting the sad passions of others.

[405] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 48. Or, as Spinoza puts it, "modes are nothing but affections of God's [or substance's] attributes." Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, P28. For Spinoza, God or substance is both absolutely infinite and consists of "an infinity of attributes," each of which "expresses an eternal and infinite essence." Spinoza, I, D6, P11. He argues, moreover, that substance *is* its attributes.

[406] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 48. This suggests that not all modes are images and that *affectio* are specific modes (i.e., modes of thought) that are images or ideas.

passages, transitions, or durations "through which we pass to a greater or lesser perfection."[407] Put differently, affects are passages from one state to another that increase or diminish the body's power of acting.

To be sure, the *affectus* always implies the *affectio*; nonetheless, the former is not confined to the latter. Instead, "it [*affectu*s] is of another nature, being purely transitive, and not indicative or representative, since it is experienced in a lived duration that involves the difference between two states."[408] For this reason, *feeling affects* illustrate our dynamic, temporal nature in a way that *image affections* or *ideas* do not. Next, let us explore how affections and affects relate to the chance encounter (Lat. *occursus*), which, according to Deleuze and Spinoza, can be good or bad. This will also require us to familiarize ourselves with Spinoza's distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas.

Spinoza's view of the human being differs markedly from those who follow the Adamic tradition, according to which the first man was perfect until he committed the original sin. As Deleuze notes, Spinoza finds this idea not only amusing but also impossible because "supposing that one is given the idea of a first man, one can only be given this idea as that of the most powerless being, the most imperfect there could be since the first man can only exist in chance encounters and in the action of other bodies on his own."[409] Thus, in sharp contrast to proponents of the Adamic theory of perfection, Spinoza thinks that humans are, in their natural condition, powerless, imperfect beings who are ignorant of causes and condemned to chance encounters. At first glance, this might seem like a pessimistic conception of the human being; yet further investigation reveals that this is far from the case.

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[407] Deleuze, 48.
[408] Deleuze, 49.
[409] Deleuze, "Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought."

In *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, Deleuze addresses the question of how we come to form adequate ideas. He notes that inadequate ideas, which we defined earlier as ideas that are based on effects separated from their real causes (or ideas that are fragmented and confused), involve a privation of knowledge rather than absolute ignorance. Hence, there is "something positive in an inadequate idea, a sort of indication that we can grasp clearly."[410] Although we are born ignorant of the causes of things, and for this reason necessarily have inadequate ideas, these very ideas can spur us to form adequate ideas. How, then, do we come to form adequate ideas? For Spinoza and Deleuze, the answer lies in the production of *common notions.* To understand the process through which we manage to form common notions, we will need to begin with chance encounters, which we are given over to from birth.

A chance encounter is a random, unexpected, or accidental encounter with an external body that immediately affects us with a *sad passion* (which decreases our power of acting) or a *joyful* one (which increases our power of acting). Let's say I run into an acquaintance from high school who blurts out, "Wow, you've gained a lot of weight over the years!" This encounter leaves me feeling hurt and embarrassed, filling me with sadness. Or perhaps I run into this same person, who instead exclaims, "Wow, it's so good to see you! I don't know if you know this, but I wouldn't have graduated if it wasn't for all your help!" This encounter brings back a bundle of fond memories of us sitting in class together, which fill me with joy. For Spinoza and Deleuze, a joyful passion is good insofar as it increases our power of acting; nonetheless, it is still a *passive* affection, when what we really want are *active* affections. Hence, with this first kind of knowledge—which consists solely of inadequate ideas—we are

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[410] Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza,* trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 150.

not yet in full possession of our power of acting. As Deleuze puts it, "A sum of passions does not make an action. It is not enough, then, just to accumulate joyful passions; we must find the means, through such accumulation, to win the power of action and so at last to experience active affections of which we are the cause."[411] Put simply, although experiencing joyful passions is necessary for the formation of adequate ideas, it is not sufficient. We need something more, something that serves as a springboard to the next kind of knowledge. This springboard is the common notion. How does Deleuze define the common notion, and what makes it an adequate idea?

In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze defines a common notion as "the representation of a composition between two or more bodies, and a unity of this composition."[412] When we encounter an external body that affects us with a joyful passion, this sometimes leads us to form an idea of something that is common to, and peculiar to, both of our bodies. In such cases, our bodies' characteristic relations of movement and rest agree with each other, or "adapt themselves to one another," and thereby form a new, more extensive body.[413] As noted above, common notions are adequate ideas, that is, ideas that express the true order and connection of things. When we succeed in forming common notions, this is because our power of acting has sufficiently increased to the point that we are now in possession of it (i.e., we experience active affections rather than passive ones). However, Deleuze stresses that the meaning of *sufficient* "undoubtedly varies in each case,"

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[411] Deleuze, 274.

[412] *Deleuze, Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 54. By "unity of composition," Deleuze means that common notion is "in the part and the whole alike" (Ibid). As Spinoza puts it, "it is equally in the part and in the whole of *each of them* [i.e., each of the bodies; my emphasis]" (*Ethics*, II, P39). However, it can also happen that a body that I encounter doesn't agree with mine, which generally leads to a *decomposition* one of my relations (or even the totality of my relations). In such cases, my power of acting decreases, that is, I am affected with sadness.

[413] Deleuze, 54.

which suggests that we can never completely know in advance whether a joyful passion will give rise to a common notion.[414] Moreover, Spinoza and Deleuze argue that it is impossible to eliminate all passions. Even when we succeed in replacing passional affects with active ones, the former will still live on, although they will lose their exclusive or overbearing quality. Indeed, to the extent that we are finite modes of an infinite substance, we are subject to external forces that exceed our understanding and control. Nonetheless, as Deleuze puts it, we can strive to "select and organize good encounters, that is, encounters of modes that enter into composition with ours and inspire us with joyful passions."[415] This, in turn, will maximize the production of active affects, that is, put us in possession of our power of acting.

For Spinoza, the common notions are the very foundations of our reasoning.[416] If we contrast this with Descartes' foundationalism, which maintains that the *cogito* is the basis of knowledge or reason, then we can see that Spinoza's epistemology stresses the importance of the collective to a much greater extent. In other words, Spinoza, unlike Descartes, acknowledges that we depend on others not only for our survival but also for the formation of adequate ideas. As Genevieve Lloyd puts it in *Spinoza and the Ethics*, "For him [Spinoza], we do not gain our true selves by withdrawing behind our frontiers. We become most ourselves by opening out to the rest of nature."[417] Spinoza's rejection of the solipsistic self thus allows him to radically reconceive the process by which we come to know ourselves, others, and the world. This process of attaining adequate knowledge is, from the start, a tenuous one, considering that we are born ignorant of causes, subject to chance encounters,

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[414] Deleuze, "Spinoza and the Three 'Ethics,'" in *Deleuze: Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. (London: Verso, 1998), 144.

[415] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 55.

[416] Spinoza, *Ethics,* II, P40s1. In his words, "With this I have explained the cause of those notions which are called *common*, and which are the foundations of our reasoning."

[417] Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 95.

and prone to passive affects. Yet, it is also positive in that it allows us to jointly compound our powers of acting so as to form composite bodies that maximize joyful passions and active affects. But how does this relate to the project of reconceiving vulnerability as an ambivalent openness to unexpected change and transformation that is shared by all but differently manifested and experienced?

For Spinoza, the boundaries of the individual are fluid, which means that it is impossible to close ourselves off from the world. As Lloyd puts it, "Our lack of insulation from the world is the source of both our *vulnerability* to alien conatus and of the power we gain from joining forces with congenial ones."[418] Although this instability of our bodily boundaries leaves open the possibility that we will be overcome by external causes, it also allows us to form symbiotic or collaborative relationships with friendly forces. Moreover, for Spinoza and Deleuze, the formation of composite bodies is not limited to humans. To take one of Deleuze's and Guattari's later examples, the wasp and the orchid co-evolve, or adapt themselves to one another, to create a becoming, assemblage, or "symbiotic emergent unit."[419] In the next section, I will consider this notion of the *composition of forces* together with Deleuze's question of "What can a body do?", which will allow me to apply these ideas to some contemporary debates in disability studies. First, though, we need to familiarize ourselves with Deleuze's distinction between *puissance* and *pouvoir.* This, in turn, will enable us to better understand what Deleuze means by "power of acting," which plays a key role in his Spinozistic theory of affects.

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[418] Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics,* 95. My emphasis. Here, it is worth noting that Lloyd relies on a reductively negative conception of vulnerability that equates is with mere susceptibility to harm. Nonetheless, her emphasis on the ambiguous nature of our "lack of insulation from the world" meshes well with the renewed conception of vulnerability that I have been arguing for.

[419] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 10.

In *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, a posthumously published interview with Claire

Parnet, Deleuze states:

> But the confusion between powers of action [*puissance*] and powers [*pouvoir*] is
> quite costly because power (*pouvoir*) always separates people who are subjected to
> it from what they are capable of doing. Spinoza started from this point, and you
> were saying that sadness is linked to priests, to tyrants… to judges, and these are
> perpetually the people, right? who separate their subjects from what they are
> capable of doing, who forbid them from realizing powers of action.[420]

Here, Deleuze helps clear up any misgivings his readers may have about his continual

emphasis on power. *Pouvoir*—that is, transcendent power or power over others—separates

those who are subjected to it from "what they are capable of doing" or from realizing their

power of acting. This is *not* the kind of power Deleuze has in mind when he refers to

puissance, that is, "power of acting" or "immanent power." Although he lists priests, tyrants,

and judges as "perpetually the people" who separate subjects from what they are capable of

doing, the list could be expanded to include normative mechanisms that inhibit the capacities

of certain bodies.[421] Put simply, such people and mechanisms exercise *pouvoir* (rather than

puissance) when they exploit others. For Deleuze, this is precisely what *wickedness* consists

of, that is, "preventing someone from doing that of which he/she is capable."[422] Let us now

consider an example of such inhibiting or obstructive forces as they relate to disability

accessibility.

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[420] Deleuze and Parnet, "J is for Joy," *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*.

[421] It is important to note that, for Deleuze and Spinoza, "bodies" are not limited to human bodies. For example, rocks, trees, beetles, and blood cells are all bodies. For our purposes, however, I will mainly be considering human bodies, which are the primary subjects of disability studies literature. Nonetheless, there are a plethora of examples in biology of animals that are abnormal or disabled in some way but have successfully adapted to their environment.

[422] Deleuze and Parnet, "J is for Joy."

Consider the following scenario: there is only one elevator in the Humanities Division building at the University of Hawaii, and the university fails to regularly maintain this elevator. One day, the elevator breaks and Dr. Amundson, who uses a wheelchair—and whose office is located on the second floor—is unable to reach his office, where he usually does his research.[423] Two or three weeks go by, and the elevator still isn't fixed. Eventually, Dr. Amundson decides to file a civil rights complaint against the university because they failed to maintain the elevator, and this has caused an opportunity loss. Drawing on Deleuze, we might say that Amundson is separated from his power of acting (or from doing that of which he is capable) due to neglect on the part of the university. By failing to accommodate wheelchair users and other people who rely on the elevator to get where they need to go, the university is demonstrating itself to be an inhibiting force that is limiting the power of acting (*puissance*) of certain bodies. As I will show, a careful analysis of the meaning of "disability" forces us to ask: where is the locus of a disability? Is it in the individual or the environment?

In "Impairment, Disability, and the Environment," Ron Amundson makes the important distinction between *disability* and *impairment.*[424] He states, "The property of having a particular impairment is an attribute of a particular person. It amounts to having a species sub-typical function at the basic personal level. The property of being disabled, however, is relational. A person with an impairment is disabled only with respect to a

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[423] This is based on a true story, which is recounted by Amundson in his audio lecture "Impairment vs Disability," Philosophy 393: Normality, Abnormality, and Society (Hilo: University of Hawaii, Fall 2011).

[424] Amundson, "Disability, Handicap, and the Environment," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 23, no.1 (1992): 105-119, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.1992.tb00489.x. Updated version of the article: "Impairment, disability, and the Environment," *Coursepack of Supplemental Readings,* 3rd ed., PHIL 393: Normality, Abnormality, and Society. In this latter, updated, version of "Disability, Handicap, and the Environment," Amundson revises the distinction between disability and handicap to the more contemporary distinction between impairment and disability.

particular environment and a particular goal."[425] Hence, while an impairment is a property of

a particular person, disability is a *relational* concept. When someone with an impairment is

disabled, this is because the environment is structured in such a way that it prevents her from

accomplishing a particular goal (e.g., reaching her office). Moreover—and this is a crucial

point—the environment in which we pursue our goals is not a state of nature, but rather

"largely constructed by humans themselves."[426] To clarify, this is the *social model of*

disability, which holds that the locus of a disability is not in the individual but rather in the

relationship between the individual, the environment, and a particular goal. Hence, according

to this model, Dr. Amundson's disability, in this circumstance, is not located in his legs, but

rather in the relationship between him, his impairment (paraplegia), the environment (which

includes a broken elevator), and his goal of reaching his office in the Humanities Division

building.

In sharp contrast to the social model of disability, *the medical model of disability*

maintains that disability is caused by the individual's impairment; it thus tends to emphasize

the impairment and ignore environmental barriers. While it is true that if a doctor fixes a

particular impairment, then the disability associated with it can be removed, the reality is, not

all impairments are fixable.[427] Indeed, un-fixable or incurable medical conditions are

something that we, as a society, must learn to acknowledge and accept. Moreover, if we want

people with impairments to have equal access to environmental opportunities, then we must

pay attention to the way in which environmental barriers can prevent such individuals from

doing what they would otherwise be capable of doing. As Deleuze puts it, "you do not know

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[425] Amundson, "Impairment, Disability, and the Environment," 114.
[426] Amundson, 114.
[427] Amundson, "Impairment vs Disability."

beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination."[428] Indeed, for Deleuze and Spinoza, a body is not defined by its form or function, but rather by its capacity for affecting and being affected, together with its characteristic relation of movement and rest. Since environments are not merely given, but rather largely constructed by humans themselves, an environment that separates someone from their power of acting need not remain that way; instead, it can be altered so that it accommodates a diverse array of bodies, thus facilitating a maximum of joyful encounters. Before we move to the next section of this chapter, I will briefly show how a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of substance is consistent with the social model of disability's claim that our environment is not merely given, but rather open to human modification. By stressing this fluid nature of environments, we can move past the stifling natural/artificial binary that is still pervasive in our day and age.

Drawing on Spinoza's notion of Substance, God, or Nature, Deleuze conceives of substance as *a common plane of immanence* on which all bodies, minds, and individuals are situated.[429] He contends, moreover, that this plane of immanence, which distributes affects, doesn't distinguish between "natural" and "artificial." Rather, "Artifice is fully a part of nature, since each thing, on the immanent plane of Nature, is defined by the arrangements of motions and affects into which it enters, whether these arrangements are artificial or natural."[430] In other words, since the natural/artificial distinction cannot be maintained, it makes no sense to privilege the natural as more primordial, proper, or pure than the artificial.

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[428] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 125. In an interview with the translator of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza,* Deleuze states, "What interested me most in Spinoza wasn't his Substance, but the composition of finite modes. I consider this one of the most original aspects of my book. That is: the hope of making substance turn on finite modes, or at least of seeing in substance a plane of immanence in which finite modes operate, already appears in this book," Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* 11.

[429] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 122.

[430] Deleuze, 124.

For Deleuze, what matters are affects and capacities for affecting and being affected; focusing on the supposed "purity" or "impurity" of a body only inhibits our creative potential. As I will demonstrate in the next section, discarding this natural/artificial binary plays a key role in Deleuze's neo-Spinozistic reconceptualization of the body.

4.2 Disability Stigma, Common Notions, and Power of Acting

As I argued in Chapter 3, disability stigma serves as a highly illuminative example of disavowing vulnerability. If disabled people remind the self-proclaimed normate of the unsettling truth that nearly everyone will become disabled at some point in their lives, then avoidance of, and disidentification with, such people will probably have a reassuring effect on the normate. Of course, it is not my intention to persuade the non-disabled reader to avoid encounters with disabled people. Instead, I want to draw attention to a crucial way in which our societal disavowal of vulnerability is expressed in everyday life; for if we want to minimize this disavowal and the violence it often motivates, then we first need to recognize it for what it is. In the following pages, I argue that Spinoza's and Deleuze's claim that we do not know in advance what a body can do, or the affects of which it is capable, can help us combat dominant stereotypes and prejudices about disabled people. More specifically, I show how Spinoza and Deleuze's trifold distinction between inadequate ideas, adequate ideas, and common notions can help undermine such harmful forms of judgment. I then critically examine the claim made by some leading affect-theory scholars that affect and cognition exist in different, non-interacting registers. This claim, I argue, is not only inconsistent with the Spinozist-Deleuzean account of affects but also prevents us from replacing inadequate ideas with more adequate ones. In addition, I apply the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas to Elizabeth Barnes' claim in *The Minority Body* that discounting the

testimony of disabled people about their own well-being is a form of testimonial injustice. When we stereotype disabled people, we form inadequate ideas based on a lack of knowledge about their lived experience. As Spinoza puts it, "the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies."[431] For Spinoza and Deleuze, affection-ideas or images are traces of external bodies on our own body. Since they say more about us than the external bodies that affect us (and hence don't reflect the true order and connection of things), they are necessarily inadequate ideas. Let us begin by considering an encounter between a disabled person and a non-disabled person, along with the inadequate idea to which it gives rise.

In her video "In My Language," autism rights activist Amanda Baggs states, "I would like to honestly know how many people, if you met me on the street, would believe I wrote this."[432] The first part of the video consisted of her engaging in various non-neurotypical activities: stimming in front of a window, dragging her fingers horizontally across a keyboard, dangling a necklace with one hand while flicking it with the other, looking down a slinky, repeatedly tapping a wire loop around a doorknob, rubbing her face in a book, caressing a knob on a dresser, and so on (all while humming a two-tone song). The second part of the video provides a translation of the first part. As Baggs types, an artificial voice synthesizer repeats her words aloud. She tells us that the first part of the video was in her "native language," which is not about "designing words or visual symbols for people to interpret" but rather "being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my

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[431] Spinoza, *Ethics,* II, P16c2.
[432] Amanda Baggs, "In My Language," YouTube, January 14, 2007, video, 8:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc&t=4s&ab_channel=silentmiaow.

environment."[433] Furthermore, she is well-aware that many viewers will find her behavior to be profoundly unsettling. Now, let us return to her above assertion that she would honestly like to know how many people, if they saw her on the street, would believe she wrote this.

Imagine that a neurotypical person does in fact encounter Baggs on the street. He asks her a question about how to get somewhere, and she fails to look at him or respond in his language. Based on her mannerism and his engrained stereotypes about autistic people, he assumes she is non-communicative or "in her own world." All in all, he is profoundly unsettled by this experience. Yet, by making hasty assumptions about Baggs, he forms inadequate ideas that indicate the state of his own body more than the state of her body. Furthermore, his unilateral focus on how this encounter affects *him* (i.e., on how it makes *him* uncomfortable) prevents any common notions from being formed. One question worth asking is: if a given external body does not agree with my body, that is, if it affects me with sadness, then should I arrange my life so as to avoid encounters with this body? For example, in the movie 50/50, Rachael refuses to accompany her boyfriend Adam during his chemotherapy treatments because she doesn't want to mix the grim reality of the hospital with her sheltered, artistic world. In her words, "it's like an energy thing." In my view, this is selfish and insensitive. Just because an environment is outside of our comfort zone doesn't mean we should avoid it; on the contrary, immersing ourselves in such contexts often enables us to connect with others in unforeseen, yet joyful, ways.

In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze states, "These first common notions and the active affects that depend on them give us the force to form common notions that are more general, expressing what there is in common even between our body and bodies that do

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[433] Baggs, "In My Language."

not agree with ours, that are contrary to it, or affect it with sadness."[434] For Deleuze, the first common notions represent something in common between our body and another that affects us with joy, and therefore are the least general ones. Yet, they can give us the vitality (via new active affects) to form more general common notions, which express what our body has in common even with bodies that are opposed to it or affect it with sadness. Returning to the example of Rachael refusing to accompany Adam to his chemotherapy treatments, we might say that his cancerous body affects her with sadness. Since she focuses primarily on how his body disagrees with hers, she is not induced to form any common notions. But what if she had instead focused on what Adam's body has in common with hers, namely, that both are part of the human community or that both depend on innumerable external bodies for their survival?

To be clear, I am not suggesting that focusing on what we have in common with someone will necessarily, or somehow magically, transform our relationship with them or our behavior toward them. Still, it's a start. As Timofei Gerber puts it, "even in a sad encounter—for us!—, there is something that composes with something else."[435] In other words, such an encounter is sad only insofar as it is viewed from our limited perspective. By forming common notions, beginning with those that represent something common to two bodies and gradually including more and more bodies, we increase our active affects, and are thus able to better cope with sad encounters. This means that someone who manages to produce active affects won't be worried about "mixing energies" like Rachael was. So, in short, neither Spinoza nor Deleuze would advocate an approach to life that involves avoiding

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[434] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 56.
[435] Timofei Gerber, "Spinoza and 'Anti-Oedipus.' On Desiring One's Own Suppression," *Epoché* 37 (2021), https://epochemagazine.org/37/spinoza-and-anti-oedipus-on-desiring-ones-own-suppression/.

encounters with people whose disabilities or terminal illnesses affect us with sadness or unease. Instead, as Spinoza puts it, we ought to always "attend to those things which are good in each thing so that in this way we are always determined to acting from an affect of joy."[436] Next, let us explore how the Spinozist-Deleuzean account of affects differs from the view, maintained by Massumi and some other leading affect theorists, that affect and cognition (or reason) constitute two entirely different systems. As I will argue, affect theory can aid us in our project of reconceptualizing vulnerability only if it allows for an intertwining of affect and reason. Indeed, if our affective responses were wholly unconscious, autonomic processes, then it would be impossible to harness their emancipatory power.

In "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," Ruth Leys discusses what she calls "the general turn to affect," inspired by the neurosciences of emotion, that has recently taken place in both the humanities and social sciences.[437] She is particularly concerned with the way in which the new affect theorists sharply distinguish between affect and cognition—a distinction she argues is untenable. One major proponent of this distinction is Brian Massumi, who not only translated both volumes of Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (*Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus)* into English, but also draws on Spinoza frequently in his work. In his "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements" to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Massumi describes affect as a "prepersonal intensity" and claims that neither *affect* nor *affection* "denotes a personal feeling [or emotion]."[438]

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[436] Spinoza, *Ethics,* V, P10d.

[437] Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011), 434.

[438] Brian Massumi, "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgments," in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus,* xvi.

In her critique of the new affect theorists, Leys stresses that Massumi's account of the affects is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's collaborative work. She states, "Massumi, widely credited with emphasizing that distinction [between affect and emotion], defines *affect* as a nonsignifying, nonconscious 'intensity' disconnected from the subjective, signifying, functional-meaning axis to which the more familiar categories of emotion belong."[439] Put simply, according to Massumi, affect is largely unconscious and nonconceptual. But this is inconsistent with the Spinozist-Deleuzean account of affects, which holds that affects (*affectus*) are lived passages or transitions of the body from one state to another, which always follow from affections (*affectio*), that is, images or corporeal traces whose ideas indicate the state of both the affected body and the affecting body. Affect and affection are like two sides of the same coin; they refer to each other. Hence, according to this model, it would be a mistake to assume that affects are necessarily nonsignifying, unconscious, prepersonal intensities. Although Deleuze argues that affects, for Spinoza, are "not indicative or representative" since they are experienced in lived durations, this does not mean that they are devoid of meaning; instead, the "*feeling affects*" are passages that increase our power of acting (a feeling of joy), or diminish our power of acting (a feeling of sadness).[440] Indeed, if it were the case that affects are necessarily nonsignifying, then it would be impossible to replace passive affects with active ones through the formation of common notions.[441]

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[439] Leys, "The Turn to Affect," 441.

[440] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 49.

[441] Still, I think it is important for Spinoza, and especially for Deleuze, to preserve the sense in which affects are basically non-representational. I would argue, moreover, that affects can be signifying without being representational. In other words, an affect can be a non-representational signifier or sign.

Part of the appeal of Spinoza's philosophy is that it doesn't consider affect as opposed to reason, nor does it simply invert Descartes' view that the mind is superior to the body. Instead, as Deleuze puts it, "it disallows any primacy of the one over the other."[442] This is precisely the claim that Massumi and the new affect theorists seem to ignore. So, when Massumi equates affects with autonomic processes or prepersonal intensities that are necessarily distinct from feelings, he has something other than Spinoza's view in mind.[443] To be sure, this account of affects may be consistent with Deleuze and Guattari's work, but we need to be careful to distinguish Deleuze's writings on Spinoza from his collaborative work with Guattari. In a similar fashion, Kristensen argues that the Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the affects, in which Deleuze engages explicitly with Spinoza, "should not be confused with Deleuze's full account of the affects."[444] In other words, it is important to clarify which account of the affects we are dealing with. Let us now return to our earlier discussion of Deleuze's question of "What can a body do?" and how it relates to the formation of inadequate ideas about disabled people. To connect this topic to the question of whether disability is inherently bad or suboptimal, which is a key point of contention between many disabled and non-disabled people, I will turn to a recent book by Elizabeth Barnes that deals with this very issue.

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[442] Deleuze, 18. In the *Ethics,* Spinoza famously argues that "the order and connection of ideas [thought] is the same as the order and connection of things [extension]." Spinoza, *Ethics,* II, P7. This proposition is often referred to as his *parallelism doctrine*. For him, thought and extension are different attributes of the same substance; whether we conceive substance under the attribute of thought or under the attribute of extension, we will discover one and the same order and connection of causes. This helps explain Deleuze's claim that, for Spinoza, there is no primacy of the body over the mind, or vice versa.

[443] Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

[444] Kristensen, "What Can a Body Do?", 14. He states in footnote 11 that, "This [latter] account would need to include at least his *Nietzsche and Philosophy*; *What Is Philosophy*, Two Volumes of *Cinema* and Two Volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*."

In *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability*, Barnes argues that disregarding the testimony of disabled people who claim to value being disabled constitutes a form of *testimonial injustice*.[445] She borrows this term from Miranda Fricker, who argues in her innovative book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* that testimonial injustice "occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word."[446] Barnes is especially concerned with how common stereotypes and presuppositions about disabled people often lead non-disabled people to discount the former's testimony about their own well-being rather than taking their word for it. According to her, the *adaptive-preference model*—which argues that preferences are adaptive "when they are preferences for something suboptimal formed in response to constraints on options"—gives us an easy way of justifying and perpetuating our disbelief in cases where disabled people claim to value being disabled.[447] But how, exactly, does the adaptive preference model allow us to discount such testimony?

Recall Johnson's claim, which we addressed in Chapter 3, that a stranger stopped her on the street, just the other day, to tell her they don't know where she finds the courage to keep going. This rude and unsolicited comment was based on the flawed assumption that to be disabled necessarily means to have a low quality of life. In *The Minority Body*, Barnes cites another article by Johnson, entitled "Unspeakable Conversations," in which the latter

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[445] Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

[446] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1. This recalls our discussion, in Chapter 3, of Goffman's *Stigma,* where he claims that a person who is stigmatized possesses an attribute that is socially discrediting insofar as it is inconsistent with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be.

[447] Barnes 133. According to Barnes, the version of the adaptive-preference model that is most suited to skepticism about disability-positive testimony is the Nussbaum-Sen model, which stresses that for preferences to be adaptive, they must involve "*both* a change in preference due to a constraint of options *and* a change in preference toward something suboptimal" (128). Hence, when Barnes refers to the adaptive-preference model, she has this specific model in mind.

recounts a conversation she had with Peter Singer. Pressing Johnson to "admit a negative correlation between disability and happiness," he asks her to "imagine a disabled child on the beach, watching other children play."[448] She notes that the image is straight out of the Jerry Lewis Telethon and admits that she expected a more refined example from an academic philosopher. In response to Singer, she states that even when she was a little girl, she was already aware that other children felt sorry for her, and this annoyed her (and still does). She also took the time to write a detailed description of how she, in fact, "had fun playing on the beach, without the need of standing, walking, or running."[449] Johnson recognizes that Singer, like many others, has already made up his mind about disability and that, as a result, he will simply discount the testimony she gives about her own well-being. And, quite understandably, she finds this tedious and exhausting. Barnes, who herself is disabled (she has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome), argues that many philosophers treat the claim that disability is not inherently bad or suboptimal with "open skepticism, and sometimes even with scorn."[450] Where does this skepticism come from? For Barnes, the answer has to do with the stereotypes and presuppositions that non-disabled people have about disabled people.

As Barnes argues, Johnson's above-described experiences reflect a common scenario for those in the disability rights community: "They make claims, repeatedly, about the value of disability and about their own well-being. And yet those claims can't seem to get past the stereotypes and presuppositions that people have about disability."[451] According to Barnes, this is a clear-cut example of testimonial justice. But how does the adaptive preference model

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[448] Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations," *New York Times,* February 16, 2003, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/16/magazine/unspeakable-conversations.html
[449] Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations."
[450] Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 1.
[451] Barnes, 138.

give us an easy way of justifying and sustaining our stereotypes about disabled people, rather than carefully considering their testimony, as a charitable interpreter ought to do? As stated above, the adaptive preference model allows us to diagnose a preference as adaptive *only* if it involves a change of preference in response to a diminished set of options *and* a change of preference toward something suboptimal. Hence, the adaptive preference model can apply to the testimony of disabled people only if we presume that disability is something bad or suboptimal. Yet, as Barnes puts it, a diagnosis of adaptive preference tells us to be suspicious of testimony that "reports valuing something *we think* is suboptimal. In doing so, it lets us defer to our pre-existing stereotypes of what people's live are like in order to discount their testimony, rather than listening to their testimony in order to reevaluate our stereotypes."[452] Put simply, the adaptive preference model allows us insulate ourselves from reexamining our presuppositions about disability. Drawing on Gilson's notion of *epistemic vulnerability*, we can view such disregard for the testimony of disabled people as a case of pursuing "epistemic *in*vulnerability" or closure to being affected (i.e., not wanting to know). How does this tendency of non-disabled people to defer to their pre-existing stereotypes and presuppositions about disabled people relate to a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of inadequate ideas?

Recall Spinoza's rejection of the Adamic theory of perfection and his corresponding claim that humans are, in their natural condition, powerless, imperfect beings who are ignorant of causes and condemned to chance encounters. Although this may initially seem like a bleak view of humanity, further investigation reveals that this is far from the case. For Spinoza, it is inevitable that we will form inadequate ideas and experience sad passions; yet, through hard work and discipline, we can learn to replace these with adequate ideas and

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[452] Barnes, 139.

active joys. To relate this to potential encounters between disabled and non-disabled people, let us start with the chance encounter and then work our way toward the joyful encounter. Johnson's encounter with a stranger on the street, who tells her he doesn't know how she finds the courage to go on living, is a prime example of someone who defers to their pre-existing stereotypes of what disabled people's lives are like. This is an example of a sad encounter, which decreases the participants' power of acting. As Spinoza and Deleuze might put it, the stranger forms an inadequate idea (or a fragmented and confused idea) that indicates the condition of his body more than the condition of Johnson's body. This inadequate idea might be formulated as follows: Johnson experiences a low quality of life.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza gives an example of an inadequate idea that we often form about the sun: "when we look at the sun, we imagine it as about two hundred feet away from us, an error which does not consist simply in this imagining, but in the fact that while we imagine it in this way, we are ignorant of its true distance and the cause of this imagining."[453] This idea does not explain its own cause, that is, the nature or essence of the sun. Instead, it involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by it. In his work on Spinoza, Deleuze stresses the former's claim that inadequate ideas are like conclusions separated from their premises. We lack knowledge of the causes of our ideas, but nonetheless make assumptions based on our limited perspective (and on whether the body we encounter agrees or disagrees with us). As Deleuze puts it, "Our knowledge is doubly lacking: we lack knowledge both of ourselves, and of the object that produces in us an affection of which we have an idea."[454] Nevertheless, neither Deleuze nor Spinoza thinks that inadequate ideas amount to an absolute privation of knowledge. There's a difference between saying, on the

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[453] Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, P35S.
[454] Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza,* 148.

one hand, that we *lack knowledge* and, on the other, that we are *completely ignorant.* Hence, we find a kind of optimism in this theory of knowledge: even if most of my ideas are currently inadequate, I can strive to replace them with more adequate ones. And as we have seen, this can be done by forming common notions. Now that we have considered the inadequate idea that the stranger formed when he encountered Johnson on the street (i.e., that she experiences a low quality of life), let us shift our focus to an encounter that instead gives rise to the formation of a common notion.

In "Non-disabled Ableism," anthropologist Rannveig Svendby reflects on her experiences of working in the ethnographic field with young adults who had recently sustained serious injuries in motor vehicle accidents.[455] Svendby's various encounters with these disabled people during the five-year period of the study not only shed light on her ableist assumptions, but also prompted her to engage in extensive self-reflection and to develop a more nuanced understanding of disability. She notes that although she is non-disabled, she has often found herself at odds with normative ideals and in accordance with people that tend to be viewed as "different." Indeed, as a woman who is bisexual and voluntarily childfree, she often perceives herself as "somewhat 'different', too."[456] Hence, she is caught off guard by the profound sense of anxiety, discomfort, and inadequacy she feels while interacting with the participants of the study. In the essay, she reflects on several

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[455] Ranneveig Svendby, Grace Inga Romsland, and Kåre Moen, "Non-disabled Ableism: An Autoethnography of Cultural Encounters between a Non-disabled Researcher and Disabled People in the Field," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 20, no. 1 (2018): 220. Svendby clarifies that these individuals had been the drivers of a motor vehicle at the time of the accident and that "The overall aim of the study was to explore how young adults may experience their everyday lives after such an occurrence, including their experiences of rehabilitation, their approach to motor vehicle driving, and their experiences of un/employment. There were 14 participants, 12 men and two women, between 20 and 36 years of age. The accidents had taken place between 2 and 15 years before the fieldwork for this study started."

[456] Svendby et. al, "Non-disabled Ableism," 220.

of her unsettling encounters with these disabled young adults, but I want to focus on one that

is especially relevant to our current discussion of common notions.

As Svendby notes, recent research demonstrates that disabled people face significant

stereotypes and prejudices related to their sexuality. [457] One such stereotype about disabled

people is that they are asexual. Svendby admits that she herself made this very assumption

about several participants in the study, which was plainly reflective of a pathologizing notion

of disability. She cites the following excerpt from her fieldnotes, which describes a

conversation she had with a study participant who had sustained a spinal cord injury:

> I talked with Jonas on the phone today and was taken aback when he said he had
> been separated [from his wife] since we last spoke. It seemed like he and his wife
> were doing so well. I was even more surprised when he told me why. He had 'had
> dessert somewhere other than at home', he explained. It was not the first time he
> had been unfaithful, but now his wife had had enough. This really hit me, because I
> must admit that it simply had not occurred to me that this man, who had sustained
> such major injuries, had a sex life. And it certainly had not occurred to me that he
> was having sex with women behind his wife's back. How on earth could I have
> assumed that he was not having sex?[458]

By recounting her conversation with Jonas, Svendby shows how her pre-existing stereotypes

about the (a)sexuality of disabled people, which were based on a pathologizing view of

disability, were fundamentally challenged by his first-person testimony. When she learned

that Jonas was cheating on his wife, Svendby was doubly astonished because not only did

they seem to be doing so well, but also, and more importantly, it had not occurred to her that

this man, with "such major injuries," even had a sex life. In other words, she realized, to her

astonishment, that some of her ideas or presuppositions about what it's like to be disabled

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[457] Sendby et. al, 224. Rogers 2009; Kim 2011; Gronningsaeter and Haualand 2012; Sparkes, Brigthon and Incle 2014.
[458] Svendby et. al, "Non-disabled Ableism," 224.

were *inadequate* or confused. Yet this experience ultimately led her to form a common notion—namely, that both she and Jonas are sexual beings. Instead of automatically discounting Jonas' testimony, she attentively listened to it and thereby opened herself to the transformative potential of this encounter. Moreover, according to this Spinozist-Deleuzean theory of knowledge, Svendby's realization that Jonas is a sexual being not only affects her with joy but also combines their power of acting: the two bodies together form "a composite body having a greater power, a whole present in its parts."[459] In other words, this composite body has a greater power of acting (*puissance*) than either of the two bodies could possibly have on their own. Now let us shift our focus from Svendby's encounters with the disabled participants in her study to the broader social norms and attitudes that help perpetuate disability stigma.[460]

In "Unspeakable Conversations," McBryde Johnson describes how she used to try to explain to strangers who made negative comments about her disability that she genuinely enjoys her life and has no more reason to kill herself than most people. But, as one can imagine, schooling people in disability awareness "gets tedious," especially when many are quick to dismiss disabled people's testimony.[461] As she puts it, "[T]hey don't want to know. They think they know everything there is to know, just by looking at me. That's how stereotypes work. They don't know that they're confused, that they're really expressing the discombobulation that comes in my wake."[462] We might describe the attitude of people who think they know everything there is to know about McBryde Johnson as one of *epistemic*

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[459] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 54. He gives Spinoza's example of "chlye and lymph as parts of the blood" from the latter's *Letter XXXII*, to Oldenburg.

[460] As noted in chapter 3, one major criticism of Goffman's stigma theory is that by focusing primarily on interpersonal encounters, it fails to examine stigma as the outcome of larger historical and structural forces. Yet, an analysis of disability stigma need not repeat this mistake.

[461] Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations." Cited in Barnes, *The Minority Body,* 137.

[462] Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations."

invulnerability. Rather than accepting their primary vulnerability, they've convinced themselves that they'll fare better in life if they adopt an attitude of mastery or closure to being affected. Gilson characterizes the individual who cultivates such an attitude as "the masterful, invulnerable knower who has nothing to learn from others."[463] I think this is precisely the kind of person that McBryde is describing in the above passage. Instead of admitting that perhaps he's confused, such a person defers to his pre-existing stereotypes and presuppositions about disabled people in order to shore up his attitude of invulnerability. Now, what does this tell us about the social norms and attitudes that help perpetuate disability stigma?

Recall the distinction we made, in section one of this chapter, between the *social model of disability* and the *medical model of disability.* In short, the social model of disability argues that the locus of a particular disability is not in the individual but rather in the relationship between the individual, the environment, and a particular goal. On the contrary, the medical model of disability maintains that disability is caused by the individual's impairment. In a review of Barnes' *The Minority Body,* Amundson refers to professional philosophers who subscribe to the latter model, and who consider the disability rights movement to be misguided, as "mainstream bioethicists."[464] As an example of this tradition, he cites *From Choice to Chance: Genetics and Justice* (coauthored by the prominent bioethicists Buchanan, Brock, Daniels, and Wikler 2000). However, the list could be expanded to include Peter Singer, who Barnes characterizes as a proponent of the

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[463] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 93. To be clear, Gilson is not claiming that one who aspires to be epistemically invulnerable *in fact* has nothing to learn from others; instead, such a person *thinks* they have nothing to learn from others.

[464] Amundson, "Review: Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body,*" *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27, no. 2 (2017), 6.

conventional *bad-difference* view of disability, which maintains that "disability is by itself something that makes you worse off."[465] In order to believe that disability by itself lowers one's quality of life, one must assume that disability is caused by an individual's impairment (medical model of disability). Since such a view of disability tends to focus on the impairment and ignore environmental barriers, it suggests the individual alone is responsible for his or her disability. It thus defines the individual in atomistic terms and ignores the relational nature of our existence. In stark contrast to this, Deleuze states that "an animal, a thing [or a human], is never separable from its relations with the world."[466] He argues, moreover, that a body is partly defined by its capacities for affecting and being affected on the plane of immanence. Put differently, an adequate account of the body must include the ways in which it interacts with the environment.

Let's return to our earlier discussion (in section one) of Deleuze's claim that the plane of immanence that distributes affects does not distinguish between "natural" and "artificial" things. In short, since the natural/artificial binary cannot be maintained, it is absurd to privilege the "natural" as more pure, proper, or primordial than the "artificial." Deleuze argues that Spinoza's ethics is not a morality but rather an *ethology*, which conceives of bodies, animals, or humans as composite relations of movement and rest and by "the affects of which they are capable."[467] Yet, as we saw earlier, we do not know in advance what a body can do (or the affects of which it is capable) in a particular encounter or arrangement of bodies. Instead, such knowledge requires ongoing experimentation. According to Deleuze, a

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[465] Barnes, *The Minority Body,* 55. In opposition to this standard view, she defends the *mere-difference* view of disability, which argues that "having a disability makes you physically non-standard, but it doesn't (by itself or automatically) make you worse off."

[466] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 125.

[467] Deleuze, 125

body is not defined by its form or by its functions, but rather by "the arrangement of motions or affects into which it enters, whether these arrangements are artificial or natural."[468] Moreover, a body can be almost anything: an animal, a physical object, a body of sounds, an idea, a literary corpus, a social body, etc.[469] Since my body is never separable from its relations with the world, it is not only mutable but can also extend beyond the skin. As noted earlier, an encounter with another body can do one of two things: it can either increase my power of acting or diminish it. By applying this renewed conception of the body—including its rejection of the natural/artificial binary—to the long-term use of prosthetic devices, we arrive at a more inclusive notion of what counts as a body part. As I will demonstrate, this issue has important ethical implications in contemporary society, especially as it relates to chronic-use ventilators and triage protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In "Against Personal Ventilator Allocation," Joel Michael Reynolds, Laura Guidry-Grimes, and Katie Savin argue that taking away someone's personal ventilator is "akin to taking away a part of their physical body and a part of their social identity."[470] Hence, they conclude that personal ventilators (PVs) should not be part of the reallocation process during a Crisis Standard of Care (CSC), and that hospitals should immediately clarify this. Although the debate surrounding how chronic-use ventilators should figure in triage protocols in a public health emergency has existed for over a decade, Reynolds et al. rightly note that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly fueled the intensity of this debate.[471]

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[468] Deleuze, 124.

[469] Deleuze, 127.

[470] Reynolds et al., "Against Personal Ventilator Allocation."

[471] Institute of Medicine (US). "Guidance for Establishing Standards of Care for Use in Disaster Situations, ed. Bruce M. Altevogt, Clare Stroud, Sarah L. Hanson, Dan Hanfling, and Lawrence O. Gostin," (US: National Academies Press, 2009), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK219958/.

In the early months of the pandemic, concerns about ventilator supply shortages, in the U.S., Italy, and worldwide, received widespread attention in public discourse. For example, former New York governor Andrew Cuomo declared in a press conference in March 2020 that "Ventilators are to this war what missiles were to World War II," as part of an effort to mobilize people against COVID-19.[472] Reynolds et al. begin "Against Ventilator Reallocation" by noting that among clinicians and bioethicists, the standard approach is to prioritize the maximization of lives saved during a pandemic. They observe, however, that in the past few months, there have been considerable objections to this approach. One reason for this is "the implication that patients who could benefit from a ventilator might have the ventilator withheld or withdrawn if triage officers/teams decide that more patients could be saved by taking it from them."[473] According to Reynolds et al., such reasoning could be extended to chronic-use ventilators outside of hospital settings: if more lives could be saved by seizing chronic-use ventilators in the community, then these ventilators should be included in reallocation pools.[474]

Yet, as the authors stress, this is not merely a theoretical point. For instance, the FDA issued guidelines in March 2020 for the modification of ventilators during the COVID-19 pandemic.[475] Moreover, in New York, after Trump refused to invoke the Defense Production Act and hospitals became increasingly overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, Cuomo signed a provocative executive order allowing the National Guard to take control of excess

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[472] Emily Crane, "Ventilators are to this war what missiles were to World War II," *Daily Mail*, March 20, 2020, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8135457/NY-Gov-Cuomo-says-ventilators-like-missiles-WWII.html.

[473] Reynolds et al., "Against Personal Ventilator Allocation."

[474] Reynolds et al.

[475] U.S. Food and Drug Administration, *Enforcement Policy for Ventilators and Accessories and Other Respiratory Devices During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Public Health Emergency Guidance for Industry and Food and Drug Administration Staff,* March 2020, https://www.fda.gov/media/136318/download.

community ventilators statewide.[476] In yet another example, multiple hospitals reached out a

nursing home in Long Island, hoping to borrow its unused ventilators; in response, the

nursing home leant 11 to the first hospital, leaving just 5 for its residents.[477] In light of these

examples, and considering our disconcerting history of disability discrimination, it is not

surprising that disability advocates are pushing for explicit policies concerning ventilator

reallocation during a pandemic like COVID-19. For many long-term ventilator users, the

possibility of going to a hospital for routine care, only to have their PV taken away, is not

only anxiety-provoking but also makes them feel disposable. Yet, as Reynolds et al. argue, to

fully appreciate the sense of terror felt by such individuals, we must examine their lived

experience. The question then becomes: how do long-term ventilator users experience their

ventilator?

In "Disabled Oracles and the Coronavirus," disability rights activist Alice Wong states:

> I use a non-invasive form of ventilation called a Bi-Pap. My vent is part of my
> body–I cannot be without it for an hour at the most due to my neuromuscular
> disability. I have sleep apnea and cannot properly remove carbon dioxide from my
> body without the Bi-Pap which can lead to respiratory failure. I am so dependent on
> my ventilator that it is attached to my wheelchair where it draws continuous power
> from my chair's battery–it is part of my cyborg being.[478]

Put simply, Wong experiences the ventilator as part and parcel of her body. In the same

way that surgically removing someone's 'natural' lungs from their body would result in

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[476] Douglass Dowty, "Gov. Cuomo clarifies plan to seize ventilators, expects to get 500 statewide." *Syracuse*, April 4, 2020, https://www.syracuse.com/coronavirus/2020/04/gov-cuomo-clarifies-plan-to-seize-ventilators-expects-to-get-500-statewide.html. French J. Marie. "Cuomo plans to use National Guard to seize ventilators from upstate facilities." *Politico,* 3 April 2020.

[477] Joanne Faryon, "Nursing homes have thousands of ventilators that hospitals desperately need," *Kaiser Health News*, April 7, 2020, https://khn.org/news/nursing-homes-have-thousands-of-ventilators-that-hospitals-desperately-need/.

[478] Alice Wong, "Disabled Oracles and the Coronavirus," *Disability Visibility Project*, March 18, 2020, https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus/.

their death, Wong will die if her ventilator is taken away. Moreover, she acknowledges

the extent of her dependency on her ventilator and even weaves it into the story she tells

about herself—it helps constitute her "cyborg being." In "Sustaining Self: The Lived

Experience of Transition to Long-Term Ventilation," Winnifred Briscoe and Roberta

Woodgate present the findings of their study on Long-Term Mechanical Ventilation

(LTMV), which was based on 11 interviews they conducted with patients who had

recently transitioned to LTMV.[479] Although one might assume that such a transition

would be largely negative, Briscoe and Woodgate's interviews suggest otherwise. As

one participant put it:

> It's a life-altering transition for me, but a positive life-altering transition in that I can
> be me again right now. You know, I take this whole disease day to day. But for
> now, and for over a year now, it has enabled me to be back to my old self again as
> far as my physical abilities will let me.[480]

I think Reynolds et al. would agree that the above two examples help illustrate what they

mean when they argue that taking away someone's PV would be akin to removing one of

their body parts or violating their bodily integrity. Yet, as they and others contend, this claim,

in and of itself, is not enough to resolve the ethical problem at hand (i.e., whether PV should

be reallocated during a public health crisis).[481] In other words, even if someone insists that

their PV is a part of their body, this is not sufficient to ground the ethical claim that it is

wrong to take it away. To strengthen their argument against PV relocation, Reynolds et al.

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[479] Winnifred P Briscoe and Roberta L Woodgate, "Sustaining Self: The Lived Experience of Transition to Long-Term Ventilation," *Qualitative Health Research* 20, no. 1 (2010), 58. They clarify that all the participants in the study were enlisted from a respiratory outpatient clinic and a respiratory unit at a long-term care facility, and that "all were invasively ventilated via a tracheotomy tube."

[480] Briscoe and Woodgate, "Sustaining Self," 62.

[481] Reynolds et al., "Against Personal Ventilator Reallocation." Also see Sean Aas and David Wasserman, "Bodily Rights in Personal Ventilators?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy,* July 7, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12537.

propose that a PV is morally distinct from other sorts of related technologies. More specifically, a PV is neither a curative technology nor an assistive technology, but rather a *corporeally integrated technology,* which means that without it, "the person would die or would be thrown into a medically dangerous situation."[482] Put in Spinozist-Deleuzean terms, a PV is so integral to one's functioning that taking it away would result in a destruction of one's characteristic relation of movement and rest. Deprived of the process of breathing, the individual would cease to exist. Yet, as important as this life-sustaining aspect of the PV is, the term *corporeal integrated technology* needs further defining.

Reynolds et al. argue that corporeally integrated technologies are not only essential to one's biological functioning but are also a part of one's *relational narrative identity*. For this reason, a long-term ventilator user's PV will inevitably be a part of the story she tells about herself. Even if a long-term ventilator user denies that her PV is a part of her relational identity, this does not change the fact that it necessarily *is* a part of her relational identity. As Reynolds at al. put it, "Ventilators, based on current technologies, cannot be hidden; on the contrary, ventilators are the sort of thing that one *has to* explain or that are simply *taken as* an aspect of another's relational identity, even if that person wishes them not to be so."[483] Indeed, the socially obtrusive quality of a ventilator marks its user as "different" from others in a way that cannot be hidden. As Sean Aas and David Wasserman argue, a ventilator is "a salient marker of disability," even if its user doesn't self-identify as disabled.[484] This is not to say that someone's relationship with their PV is necessarily negative. For instance, in the above quote, Wong describes her ventilator as part of her "cyborg being," which suggests

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[482] Reynolds et al., "Against Personal Ventilator Reallocation."
[483] Reynolds et al.
[484] Aas and Wasserman, "Bodily Rights in Personal Ventilators?"

that she takes some pride in it (or at least accepts it). This leads us to an important criticism, made by Aas and Wasserman, of Reynold et al.'s claim that taking away someone's PV amounts to taking away a part of their social identity.

In "Bodily Rights in Personal Ventilators?" Aas and Wasserman argue that "there seems to be neither a decisive case for or against bodily status for ventilators."[485] They contend, moreover, that arguments against ventilator reallocation that are based solely on claims to bodily status fail to motivate expected ethical concerns. In response to this perceived shortcoming, they propose an argument against reallocation based on "widely accepted anti-discrimination principles," such as equal treatment and respect.[486] Although I think they offer some valuable insights into the matter that are worth exploring, I would first like to consider their criticism of the social identity component of Reynold et al.'s argument.

Aas and Wasserman think that Reynold's et al. are right to stress the centrality of social identity when it comes to ventilator reallocation debates but that "they misconstrue its role."[487] According to Aas and Wasserman, removing someone's PV does not take away her social identity as disabled but, quite the contrary, reinforces this identity by foregrounding her dependence on that alternative form of respiration that is now withheld from her. While I agree with Aas and Wasserman that the removal of a PV underscores its user's dependency on it, such that they are disabled without it, I think that their understanding of "social identity" is too narrow. As Barnes argues in *The Minority Body,* disability rights activists do not understand their disabilities merely in terms of lack (or as something negative) but rather as a potential source of pride, meaning, and connection with others. Hence, if we accept this

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[485] Aas and Wasserman.
[486] Aas and Wasserman.
[487] Aas and Wasserman

claim that disability identity is not reducible to lack and helpless dependency, then we will recognize that it would be a mistake to assume, following Aas and Wasserman, that taking away someone's PV does not amount taking away a part of their social identity. Indeed, when Wong describes her ventilator as a part of her "cyborg being," she suggests that it is more than just a stigmatized trait. Her PV is not something that she resents or wishes she could hide, but rather a source of meaning, pride, and connection. Yet, regardless of this and the above-mentioned points of contention between Reynolds et al. and Aas and Wasserman, I propose that the latter's argument against PV reallocation fortifies the former's already-compelling argument. As I will show, it does this by highlighting the disconcerting role that *discrimination* plays in prevailing, largely utilitarian, attempts to justify ventilator reallocation.

Regarding PV reallocation, Aas and Wasserman state, "in treating a breathing device integral to the user's biological functioning and social identity as disposable in a way that 'natural' lungs are not, it [PV reallocation] discriminates against her, treating her as a moral and social inferior."[488] In other words, removing someone's PV, which is not only functionally essential but also socially obtrusive, sends the message that the ventilator breather's life is less worthy of protection than that of the 'natural' lung breather. Indeed, since 'natural' lungs are hidden from view, they, unlike PVs, are not generally viewed as potential candidates for reallocation. Even if proponents of PV reallocation do not *intend* to suggest that PV user's lives are more disposable than those of lung breathers, this is the message they are conveying. Additionally, our protracted history of disability discrimination

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[488] Aas and Wasserman.

ought to be factored into triage decisions during a public health crisis like COVID-19. The saying "history repeats itself" didn't just grow out of thin air.

Ventilators and other stigmatize-able traits mark their users as different in a way that, historically speaking, has led to the marginalization and social exclusion of disabled people. Take, for instance, the so-called "ugly laws" that were implemented in various cities in the United States between 1867 and 1974. These laws banned the appearance in public of people who were, as one of these laws put it, "diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object" (Chicago City Code 1881).[489] This is a prime example of disabled people being discriminated against merely because their bodies don't fit the norm. Such laws, like laws that discriminate against Black and LatinX people, gay people, and women, treat their targets as second-class citizens.

Since the ethical import of maximizing the number of lives saved in a pandemic has received broad support from medical practitioners and bioethicists, so much so that it often appears to eclipse concerns for social equality, the worry that PV reallocation discriminates against people with disabilities is clearly well-founded. As Aas and Wasserman put it, the "proposal to treat the lives of vent breathers as more vulnerable to life-maximizing sacrifice than the lives of lung breathers…appears, not unreasonably, to be the latest and most severe expression of the devaluation of disables lives by health-care institutions and society."[490] Another reason why ventilators have become a prime focus of resource triage debates in many disability communities has to do with the symbolic meaning they have assumed. For many, ventilators have come to symbolize "a perception of one's social worth," that is,

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[489] Susan Wilson and Robert Wilson, "Ugly Laws," *Eugenics Archives,* February 5, 2015, https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/tree/54d39e27f8a0ea4706000009#:~:text=So%2Dcalled%20%E2%80%9Cugly%20laws%E2%80%9D,(Chicago%20City%20Code%201881).

[490] Aas and Wasserman, "Bodily Rights in Personal Ventilators?"

whether one's life is "worth saving" or "worth living."[491] As Reynolds et al. rightly point out, such phrases invoke the language of the T4 euthanasia program of Nazi Germany, which not only legalized the systematic murder of institutionalized people with disabilities, but also paved the way for the Holocaust.

In *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life* (1920), German doctor Alfred Hoche describes the "mentally dead," "incurable idiots," and other seriously impaired individuals as "empty human shells" and argues that their existence is completely worthless to society. He claims, moreover, that, for the doctor, the selection of such worthless individuals "can be carried out with 100% percent certainty."[492] The influence of this book was far-reaching: it introduced the concept of the "mentally dead" into German medicine, helped legitimize the notion of "mercy killing" among German doctors and psychiatrists, and laid part of the philosophical groundwork for the T4 program. My goal here is not to compare the doctors and medical ethicists of the COVID-19 pandemic to Nazi doctors. Instead, I want to show how the hubristic assumption that one can predict, with full accuracy, a patient's worth and quality of life can have dire consequences. Let us consider a contemporary example of medical professionals' lack of ability to predict how a disability impacts a person's life. According to a recent survey of U.S. doctors, more than 80% of non-disabled doctors presume that disabled people have a worse quality of life than non-disabled people.[493] Yet, as we saw earlier in this chapter, the first-person testimony of disabled people strongly contradicts this assumption. Moreover, as Barnes argues, discounting the testimony

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[491] Reynolds et al., "Against Ventilator Reallocation."

[492] Alfred Hoche and Karl Binding, *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life*, trans. Cristina Modak. (Suzeteo Enterprises, 2015), 40.

[493] Lisa Lezonni, Sowmya R Rao, Julie Ressalam, Dragana Bolcic-Jankovic, Nicole D Agaronnik, Karen Bonelan, Tara Lagu, and Eric G Campbell, "Physicians' Perception of People with Disability and their Healthcare," *Health Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2021), https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33523739/.

of disabled people regarding their own well-being is a form of testimonial injustice. What can a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the body contribute to this discussion?

Recall Deleuze's claim that we do not know in advance what a body can do, in a given encounter, arrangement, or combination.[494] To make full sense of this claim, we need to address an aspect of Spinoza and Deleuze's account of the body that we have not hitherto considered. We have already examined how a body, for them, is partly defined by its characteristic relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness, on the plane of immanence. Simultaneously, however, a body's existence corresponds to its singular essence, which is a *degree of power.* Although this degree of power varies as one passes from childhood, to adulthood, to old age, it nonetheless retains a relative constancy. A body's *conatus* is its effort to preserve this relative constancy or, as Deleuze puts it, "the effort to preserve the relation of movement and rest that defines it, that is, to maintain *constantly renewed* parts in the relation that defines its existence."[495] Since a body is not only defined in *kinetic* terms but also by its *dynamic* capacity to be affected, its conatus is also its efforts to maintain its "ability to be affected in a great number of ways."[496] Notice, however, that the continued existence of a body doesn't hinge on the fixed identity of its organs or body parts, but rather on whether its characteristic relation of movement and rest and corresponding affective capacity can be preserved. If we apply this to the question of whether a PV counts as a body part, then I think we can answer in the affirmative. In other words, according to a Spinozist-Deleuzean definition of a composite body, a PV counts as body part insofar as it helps

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[494] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 125.

[495] Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 230. My emphasis. Spinoza refers to this characteristic relation of movement and rest as "the proportion of movement and rest the human's body parts have to one another." Spinoza, *Ethics,* IVP39.

[496] Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 230.

preserve that body's characteristic relation of movement and rest and its capacity to be affected. As Deleuze puts it, these parts are "constantly renewed," which suggests that the decisive question is not "is this body part *natural*?" but rather "does this thing or object (whether 'natural' or 'artificial') help preserve this body's characteristic relation and its unique affective capacity?"

For Deleuze and Spinoza, asking "*What is the structure* (fabrica) *of a body*? is equivalent to asking, "*What can a body do*?"[497] In contrast to a bioethicist like Christopher Boorse, who argues that health equals normal function, Deleuze suggests that a healthy body is one that manages to produce active affections. Yet, both he and Spinoza acknowledge that a body cannot be separated from its relations with the world. That is, a body can produce active affections only insofar as it adequately cared for and nourished. As Spinoza puts it, the human body consists of "a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things at once."[498] Put simply, we cannot physically neglect our bodies and then expect to flourish mentally. As Deleuze repeatedly stresses, Spinoza's philosophy vehemently rejects all transcendent organization in favor of pure immanence. In Deleuze's words, "pure immanence requires as a principle the equality of being, or the positing of equal being: not only is being equal in itself, but it is seen to be equally present in all beings."[499] I propose that since prejudices against disabled people are pervasive in our society, the positing of equal being could help reverse or nullify such prejudices. Indeed, disability

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[497] Deleuze, 218
[498] Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, P45s.
[499] Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 173.

discrimination in clinical settings is widespread, which not only reflects non-disabled

clinicians' ignorance about what it's like to be disabled, but also undermines disabled

people's access to equal care and ethical caregiving.[500] In what follows, I show how

examining such discrimination can help us better understand the twofold nature of

vulnerability: that it is both a universal or shared condition and a particular condition that is

experienced differently by each of us.

4.3 Vulnerability as Both Universal and Particular

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, vulnerability is a fundamental human

condition shared by all. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that particular forms of

vulnerability are often unequally distributed.[501] Put differently, some individuals and social

groups are more situationally vulnerable than others. Moreover, the environments we reside

in are not simply given but rather are open to human modification. If we apply these insights

to the treatment of disabled people in clinical contexts, especially during public health crises,

then some important ethical considerations arise. Although labeling certain groups as

"vulnerable" can have positive effects, such as non-paternalistic forms of social protection

and increased attentiveness on the part of clinicians, such labeling can also have a

stigmatizing effect. As legal theorist Martha Fineman puts it in *The Vulnerable Subject,* "In

discussions of public responsibility, the concept of vulnerability is sometimes used to define

groups of fledging or stigmatized subjects, designated as 'populations.'"[502] For instance, at

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[500] Omar S. Haque and Michael A. Stein, "Humanizing Clinical Care for Patients with Disabilities," in
Disability, Health, Law, and Bioethics, ed. Glenn Cohen, Carmel Sshachar, Anita Silvers, and Michael
Ashley Stein, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

[501] Indeed, Butler and Gilson stress this point repeatedly in their work.

[502] Martha Fineman. "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition," *Yale Journal of
Law and Feminism*, 20, no.1 (2008), 8.

the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, news updates repeatedly assured us that we only need to be worried about getting sick with COVID-19 if we're "old or have underlying medical conditions." In such cases, there is an implicit distinction between an "invulnerable" in-group and a "vulnerable" out-group, which serves to reinforce the normality of the former over against the latter. As Reynolds et al. note, many disabled activists responded to such claims with sarcastic remarks such as, "Do they not know we can read?"[503] This is just one example of how our societal disavowal of vulnerability has harmful real-world consequences.

Recall Thomson's claim in *Extraordinary Bodies* that, "Cast as one of society's ultimate 'not me' figures, the disabled other absorbs disavowed elements of this cultural self, becoming an icon of all human vulnerability and enabling the 'American Ideal' to appear as master of both destiny and self."[504] I think this assertion gets at the heart of the sacrificial logic that has crept its way into many states' healthcare rationing policies for public health emergencies. Take, for instance, Alabama's initial rationing policy, which stated that people with "severe mental retardation…may be poor candidates" for a ventilator.[505] After disability advocates complained that the policy was discriminatory, it was taken down from Alabama's website and replaced by a new one, but the new policy offered no guidelines on how to choose between patients if ventilators need to be rationed. The assumption behind such guidelines is that a disabled body is less worthy of protection than a "healthy" or "normal" body. And, as we have seen, this flawed assumption is partly based on the bare intuition that disabled people just *obviously* have a worse quality of life than non-disabled people. This

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[503] Reynolds et al., "Against Ventilator Reallocation." Charis Hill, ''The cripples will save you': Coronavirus message from a disability activist," March 6, 2020, https://creakyjoints.org/living-with-arthritis/coronavirus-disability-activism/.

[504] Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies,* 41.

[505] Annex to ESF 8 of the State of Alabama Emergency Operations Plan, "Criteria for Mechanical Ventilator Triage Following Proclamation of Mass-Casualty Respiratory Emergency," (Revised April 9, 2020), 8, https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/6824966/Alabama-Ventilator-Triage.pdf.

way of thinking goes hand in hand with the medical model of disability, which tends to focus on the impairment and ignore environmental barriers. Yet, an over-emphasis on the medical model of disability obscures the social model's recognition that most of the difficulties and injuries experienced by disabled people are caused by the underlying social structure rather than the disabled person.[506] Hence, the harmful situational vulnerability (or precarity) experienced by such individuals is not simply a given, but instead is produced by inequitable social relations.

In "Beyond Bounded Selves and Places," Gilson explores how one of the consequences of pursuing security on the grounds of a reactive fear of vulnerability is "imbalanced reciprocity between inhabitants of places of relative safety and those of places of greater precarity."[507] Put simply, the purchase of relative safety and security for *some* often results in a heightened exposure to harm for *others.* Accordingly, Gilson argues that vulnerability is better understood as a process than a quality, while preserving her earlier claim from *The Ethics of Vulnerability* that vulnerability is both an ontological condition shared by all and a condition of those in specific circumstances.[508] More specifically, since we are social creatures, our ontological vulnerability is always mediated by our relations with others. These relations can be empowering or exploitative—or, in Spinozist-Deleuzean terms, increase or decrease our power of acting. For instance, the Trump administration's fear and contempt of undocumented immigrants, and corresponding attempt to build an impenetrable wall between the US and Mexico, resulted in greater precarity for such

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[506] Daniel Goldberg, "Epistemic Injustice, Disability Stigma, and Public Health Law," in *Disability, Health, Law, and Bioethics*, 35.

[507] Gilson, "Beyond Bounded Selves and Places: The Relational Making of Vulnerability and Security," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 49, no. 3 (2018), 230.

[508] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 37.

immigrants. Yet, as Gilson points out, "US residents depend upon both documented and undocumented immigrants from Mexico, Central, and South America, in particular for agricultural labour and the resulting artificially affordable meat and produce."[509] Such an illusory sense of autonomy or self-sufficiency not only sparks toxic nationalism, but also ignores the inevitable permeability of selves and places. Let us consider another, more recent, example of the negative repercussions of the pursual of safety and security for some based on a reactive fear of vulnerability.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has responded to news of viral outbreaks in foreign countries by banning travel from those countries. Soon after the first known infections of COVID-19 were detected in Wuhan in December 2019, the United States closed its borders to China. Trump repeatedly referred to the virus as the "kung flu," sparking backlash over his use of racist language. In November 2021, the US—as well as countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia—imposed travel bans against South Africa and seven of its neighboring countries after South Africa informed the world of its discovery of the Omicron variant. In a speech, South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, urged countries to reverse these "scientifically unjustified" travel restrictions that "unfairly discriminate" against South Africa and its sister countries and further damage their economies.[510] Similarly, the WHO has clarified that it does not generally support travel bans, arguing that they are "usually not effective in preventing the importation of cases but may have a significant [negative] economic and social impact."[511] Indeed, I think many would

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[509] Gilson, "Beyond Bounded Selves and Places," 238.

[510] "South African president calls for lifting of Omicron travel bans," *Al Jazeera*, November 28, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/28/president-ramaphosa-calls-south-africa-travel-bans-unjustified.

[511] "Updated WHO travel recommendations for international traffic in relation to COVID-19 outbreak," *World Health Organization,* February 29, 2020, https://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/updated-who-recommendations-for-international-traffic-in-relation-to-covid-19-outbreak. Additionally, Prof Mark Woolhouse, a scientist advising the UK government, said that changes to the country's travel rules (in

agree that it is unfair to respond to South Africa's sharing of valuable public health information with the world by punishing it and its neighboring countries. Moreover, this discourages other countries from telling the world about any dangerous new variants that may be circulating.[512]

One thing the above examples make clear is that COVID-19 has led to a surge of nationalism and survivalist fantasies among richer countries at the expense of poorer ones. Rather than acknowledging that borders are porous and that a global pandemic requires a global effort to end it, these wealthier countries keep making vain attempts to insulate themselves from outside influences. For instance, researchers at Duke's Global Health Innovation Center found that, as of March 2021, high- and upper-middle-income countries had secured more than six billion out of 8.6 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines.[513] Yet, as epidemiologists warned, the unfettered spread of COVID-19 in countries with low vaccination rates quickly led to viral mutations that wreaked havoc on not only those countries, but countries across the globe—irrespective of their income. This phenomenon of wealthy countries buying up a disproportionate number of vaccines, only to have millions go to waste, has come to be known as "vaccine nationalism" and "vaccine hoarding." However, it is based on the flawed assumption that borders are like physical walls when, in truth, as Michael Marder argues, they are more like "living membranes."[514] Put simply, the ideal of invulnerability or impermeability ensnares nations no less than people. And as we have seen,

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response to South Africa detecting the Omicron variant) were too late, stating that it was "a case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted," Reality Check team, "Omicron: Do travel bans work against new Covid variants?" *BBC News*, December 6, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/59461861.

[512] Michael Barbaro, "What We Know About the Omicron Variant," November 20, 2021, in *The Daily: New York Times,* produced by Jessica Cheung, Diana Nguyen, and Michael Simon Johnson, podcast, 22:39, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/podcasts/the-daily/omicron-variant-coronavirus.html.

[513] Aisling Irwin. "What it will take to vaccinate the world against COVID-19." *Nature*, 25 March 2021.

[514] Michael Marder, "The Coronavirus Is Us," *New York Times*, March 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/opinion/the-coronavirus-is-us.html.

the pursuit of invulnerability on the part of wealthier nations tends to marginalize people and countries that are perceived as threatening, creating unjust patterns of relation. Still, Gilson's assertion that vulnerability is a *process*, rather than a static property of people or places, suggests that these injustices can potentially be ameliorated. Moreover, a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the affects reinforces the claim—made by Beauvoir, Butler, and Gilson—that our constitutive openness to others is neither good nor bad but fundamentally ambiguous.

Contra Descartes, Spinoza and Deleuze argue that we can only ever know ourselves through our encounters with external bodies. And unlike Descartes, they claim that knowledge is grounded in our bodily affections, which either increase or diminish our power of acting. This understanding of the affects (*affectus*) as lived passages or transitions from one state to another, which aid or restrain a body's power of acting, dovetails with Gilson's assertion that vulnerability is a process rather than a property. If we want to truly acknowledge this fluidity of vulnerability, then we must examine the quality of our relations with others and the contexts in which they take place. As our discussion of the social model of disability demonstrated, our environments are not simply given but rather are open to human modification. And these environments, if they are built to serve only a narrow range of interests, can generate (or exacerbate) harmful vulnerability for those who are not included within that range.

In "The Coronavirus Is Us," Marder argues that transnational border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic adhere to the same basic logic as the building of physical walls for political reasons. As he puts it, "Both acts are meant to reassure citizens and give them a

false sense of security."[515] Indeed, this way of thinking is closely associated with feminist critiques of the sovereign, self-sufficient individual who views vulnerability as a weakness. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such disavowals of our vulnerability and interdependency have not only harmed low-income countries, but also backfired on the wealthy countries that took this approach. In other words, now, more than ever, this logic of "each for himself" has been shown to be gravely ineffective. By breaching national and species boundaries, and cutting across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic divides, COVID-19 has painfully reminded us that invulnerability is a fantasy. Still, it is important to recognize that it is a disease that unduly affects socially disadvantaged groups. As Stephen Mein puts it in "COVID-19 and Health Disparities," "pandemics have the unique ability to amplify existing health inequities, disproportionately affecting socially disadvantaged groups, including racial and ethnic minorities and low-income populations."[516] In short, although none of us are completely insulated from outside forces (whether good or bad), some of us are less insulated than others. Similarly, although vulnerability is a fundamental condition shared by all, some of us experience more harmful—and preventable—forms of vulnerability than others. Acknowledging this will by no means guarantee that we respond to ours and others' vulnerability more ethically, but it is a starting point. Indeed, if we want more equitable relations, then we must first acknowledge this twofold, dynamic, and ambiguous nature of vulnerability.

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[515] Marder, "The Coronavirus Is Us." This does not imply, however, that if a border wall could be reasonably built and would effectively lead to the control of immigration, then, the sense of security being a "true" one, there would be no problem. Instead, we should be looking for "security" in this sense at all.

[516] Stephen Mein, "COVID-19 and Health Disparities: the Reality of 'the Great Equalizer.'" *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 35, no. 8 (2020), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7224347/.

Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to support and further develop the view that vulnerability is not merely susceptibility to harm but also *openness* to unanticipated change and transformation. I have argued, moreover, that vulnerability is not a static property but rather a relational process that is both universal and differently distributed. My contribution to vulnerability studies involved tracing the mechanism of disavowal across 20th and 21st century figures in philosophy. By combining a Spinozist-Deleuzean account of the affects with work from disability studies on wellbeing, I also attempted to shed light on our societal disavowal of vulnerability and to critically examine some common misconceptions about vulnerability. One such misconception is that vulnerability is a shortcoming, weakness, or personal failure—a sign of undesirable dependency that could have been avoided. To make matters worse, framing vulnerability as a stigmatized trait tends to foster an "Us vs. "Them" mentality. In such cases, the identity of those who consider themselves "invulnerable" is constituted over against "vulnerable" others. Disidentification with these vulnerable others thus becomes an integral part of pursuing autonomy and self-sufficiency. Yet, as I have tried to show, avoidance and disavowal of vulnerability only exacerbates the harmful vulnerability experienced by certain individuals and populations. Hence, a renewed conception of vulnerability as not wholly negative is crucial for opposing the injustices associated with such avoidance and disavowal. Still, as Gilson suggests, a careful examination of the ideal of invulnerability is also key if we want to begin to understand what deters us from engaging our and others' vulnerability ethically.[517]

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[517] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 73.

As we have seen, the entrepreneurial subject is a prime manifestation of the ideal of invulnerability. Such an individual takes risks, and even lets his guard down in a sense, but this is ultimately to enhance his human capital, or "capital-ability." In other words, when vulnerability is viewed as a means to some self-serving end, it becomes yet another tool in the service of entrepreneurial subjectivity. As Gilson puts it, "Cultivating openness, receptivity, or what Brené Brown calls 'wholeheartedness'…can become just another way to develop status and social capital, especially when these virtues are regarded as having instrumental value."[518] Hence, if we want our engagement with vulnerability to amount to more than just an exercise in entrepreneurial subjectivity, then we need to pay close attention to how our actions—or failure to act—affect(s) others. This requires putting aside our normative assumptions about what it's like to be someone else and really *listening*, whenever possible, to their firsthand account of their experience.[519]

The pursuit of invulnerability can also take the form of a vindictive response to injury. As Butler's example of the Bush administration responding to 9/11 by declaring a "War on Terror" demonstrates, sometimes a glimpse of our vulnerability provokes denial, along with a desire for revenge. Another context that this could be applied to is mass

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[518] Gilson, 178. She also compares the co-opting of vulnerability by entrepreneurial subjectivity to New Age spirituality's obsession with an individualistic, watered-down notion of "authenticity," citing Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster's *New York Times* article "The Gospel According to 'Me'" (2013), which expresses the same concern. In *The Gifts of Imperfection,* Brené Brown states, "Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable." Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Center City: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 46. Here, Brown uses the word "risky" in a manner that recalls Gilson's critique of entrepreneurial subjectivity and the way in which the entrepreneurial subject boldly "assumes risks" rather than being "at risk" like the stigmatized poor. Moreover, by arguing that we should flat-out "embrace our vulnerabilities," Brown presumes that her audience is not suffering from precarity or harmful vulnerability, which—as Butler and Gilson argue—is unacceptable and should not be embraced but rather minimized. In other words, viewing vulnerability as a personal virtue is not always appropriate, especially in situations where an individual or group is suffering from the politically induced condition of precarity.

[519] This is not to suggest that it's possible to identify *all* of our assumptions. Indeed, as Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Butler, and others repeatedly stress, many of these assumptions are unconscious; however, this does not mean that we should simply give up on our efforts to loosen the hold they have on us.

shootings in the US. For instance, we might ask: To what extent are such tragic events a response to painful experiences of vulnerability (e.g., being the victim of bullying, feeling lonely, or being rejected)? Of course, the aim would not be to justify the behavior of mass shooters, but to better understand it so we can hopefully reduce the number of shootings in the future. Here, Deleuze's distinction between *puissance* ("immanent power" or "power of acting") and *pouvoir* ("transcendent power" or "power over others") may be helpful. As Deleuze makes clear in his writings, increasing our power of acting, through the formation of common notions, is not the same as asserting power over others. Since our power of acting is necessarily affected by our encounters with others, and vice versa, there is a fruitful connection between this affective capacity and the ambiguous potentiality of vulnerability.

Although this dissertation has focused primarily on vulnerability and disability, and especially on challenging negative assumptions about disability, the potential areas of practical application are perhaps endless. One important part of vulnerability that I did not address in detail is the relationship between humans, animals, and ecosystems. For example, what are the ethical implications of the bodily vulnerability we share with animals? While this is a question that Derrida considers at length, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the significance of our relationship with nonhuman others. As Michael Marder notes, COVID-19 belongs to a group of RNA viruses that are transmissible between animals and humans, which indicates that it "does not obey natural systems of classification and species boundaries, either."[520] And while COVID-19 originated in animals before transmitting to humans, naturally occurring infection is relatively rare in animals, with most

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[520] Marder, "The Coronavirus Is Us."

reported cases occurring in domesticated animals that came into close contact with humans carrying the virus.

Yet, researchers at Penn State University recently discovered appallingly high rates of COVID-19 infections among wild white-tailed deer, with 1,200 of the nearly 2,000 samples collected testing positive.[521] Although there is no evidence that infected deer show any symptoms of the virus, samples from the study indicate that they got the same variants as we did. More precisely, the study suggests that this was a "spillover event," meaning that the virus that was circulating among humans "spilled over into the wild animal population."[522] These findings raise some key questions: First, what is the ethical significance of our inevitable openness to affecting and being affected by nonhuman others? Second, what does a virus like COVID-19 tell us about the human/animal binary and its tenability? Third, what might a renewed relationship between humans, animals, and ecosystems look like—one that acknowledges and respects our shared vulnerability? These are just a few questions that could be addressed in future philosophical inquiries into vulnerability.

Another issue that needs to be further addressed is the way in which discourses about "protecting the vulnerable" can be used to justify unwarranted paternalism. More specifically, labeling certain populations as "vulnerable," and then developing political policies to protect them can, in some cases, exacerbate conditions of precarity. Moreover, as Butler argues in "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," such methods "tend to underestimate, or actively efface, modes of political agency and resistance that emerge within

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[521] Lorna Baldwin and William Brangham, "Scientists discover shockingly high rates of COVID infections among white-tailed deer," February 2, 2022, *PBS News Hour*, video, 7:27, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/scientists-discover-shockingly-high-rates-of-covid-infections-among-white-tailed-deer.

[522] Baldwin and Brangham, "Scientists discover shockingly high rates of COVID infections among white-tailed deer."

so-called vulnerable populations."[523] In other words, when we posit a population as vulnerable and in need of protection, we often disregard their capacity to engage in active resistance. Yet, when we assume we know what's best for others, without ever asking them what they want, or thinking about what they would be capable of if they simply had access to some basic resources, we are acting in an objectionably paternalistic manner. In a similar vein, paternalistic colonialism often presents itself as a desire to help those in need. Recall, for instance, Mill's claim that despotism is a legitimate mode of government for dealing with "barbarians," as long as its overall aim is to "improve" them. Or consider France's 2010 "burqa ban," which prohibits Muslim women from wearing full-faced veils. Although proponents of the law claim that it promotes gender equality, many consider it to be Islamophobic; nonetheless it remains in place today and is punishable by fine and/or participation in citizenship education.[524] In light of these and other examples of paternalistic responses to perceived vulnerability, it is worth asking: Do such strategies for dealing with so-called vulnerable populations really help improve their lives? What role, if any, do these people play in the formation of such strategies?

While it is crucial to acknowledge ours and others' capacity for active resistance against oppressive conditions, this does not mean that we should refrain from helping those in need out of fear that we may be perceived as paternalistic. Recall Beauvoir's and Bergoffen's suggestion that the attitude of generosity, which simply lets the other be, is not appropriate when it comes to oppression. Yet, the *we-project*—which also entails

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[523] Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham and London: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 25.

[524] Gregory Warner, Diaa Hadid, and Eleanor Beardsley, "From Niqab to N95," *NPR*, May 27, 2020, podcast, 20:00, https://www.npr.org/2020/04/28/847433454/from-niqab-to-n95. In the podcast, the contributors point out that, while the French government doesn't see any conflict between the "burqua ban" and the country's mask mandate—"it claims that one is to promote gender equality and the other is to maintain public health— the situation has left many, including some French Muslims smirking at the apparent irony."

generosity—allows us to temporarily put aside our differences and work toward a shared goal.[525] Notice, however, that such an acknowledgment of our interdependency is antithetical to liberal individualism's emphasis on sovereignty and self-sufficiency.

In "Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience," Sarah Bracke argues that in a neoliberal political economy, resilience has become an ethical imperative: "one ought to overcome the hazards and shocks of our time and…moral good is to be found in this overcoming."[526] Put differently, the moral code of resilience tends to place the burden of overcoming hardships on the individual rather than on the social and economic networks of support that have failed her. What is more, when such responsibility is shifted away from society and onto the individual, collective resistance becomes highly unlikely. Bracke also notes that a neoliberal conception of resilience seeks to *overcome* vulnerability, that is, "to contain and evade it, to bounce back from it, to minimize its traces, to domesticate its transformative power."[527] For this reason, vulnerability and resilience operate as political adversaries: vulnerability enables social transformation, while resilience stifles it.

When a particular event shakes us to the core, the thought of returning to our original shape—of reviving an earlier version of ourselves—may be reassuring. Yet, the neoliberal imperative to simply "bounce back" from a shocking or traumatic event, possibly stronger than before, tends to obstruct vulnerability's transformative or emancipatory potential. As Bracke notes, Robert James describes such an imperative as a transformation of Nietzsche's "'What doesn't kill me makes me stronger' into a universalizable maxim: 'You ought to be

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[525] Similarly, a *common notion* allows us to increase our power of acting by forming an idea of something that is common to two or more bodies (i.e., their characteristic relations of movement and rest agree with each other).

[526] Sarah Bracke, "Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 62.

[527] Bracke, "Bouncing Back," 69.

stronger.'"[528] However, since such a conception of resilience focuses primarily on our ability to adapt to catastrophes, which are supposedly inevitable, it discourages us from imagining and acting otherwise. The question then becomes: What might it look like to cultivate our capacity to imagine new social realities, ones that acknowledge our shared vulnerability (rather than disavowing it or attempting to overcome it)? For starters, this would involve resisting or rejecting neoliberalism's emphasis on personal responsibility and replacing it with a community-based conception of responsibility.

Indeed, when we assume that because someone is resilient, they will withstand whatever life throws at them (presumably, with little-to-no help), we are foreclosing the possibility of adopting a collective notion of responsibility grounded in our shared vulnerability. As Mark Neocleous argues in "Resisting Resilience," "The beauty of the idea that resilience is what the world's poor needs is that it turns out to be something that the world's poor already possesses; all they require is a little training in how to realize it. Hence the motif of building, nurturing and developing that runs through so much of the IMF literature."[529] In other words, those who are struggling to make ends meet are often forced to become adept at bouncing back from all sorts of shocks; however, this does not make it right for the world's wealthy to take advantage of this. Bracke refers to such a learned capacity to absorb shocks as the "resilience of the wretched of the earth."[530] She argues, moreover, that this "resilience"—if it's even fair to call it that—is both fetishized and exploited by political

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[528] Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism,* Winchester: Zero Books, 2015. Cited in Bracke, 62.

[529] Mark Neocleous, "Resisting Resilience," *Radical Philosophy*, 178 (Mar/April 2013), https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/resisting-resilience#fnref5. Cited in Bracke, "Bouncing Back," 60. Neocleous also notes that a search for the word "resilience" on the IMF website "reveals that almost 2,000 IMF documents contain some reference to the term." A more recent search (March 3, 2022) yields 7,070 publications that include "resilience."

[530] Bracke, "Bouncing Back," 60.

and economic institutions that are in a large part responsible for "the contemporary

conditions of precarity that are (designed to be) met with resilience."[531] Put differently, these

wealthy institutions, which play a large role in creating such wretched living conditions, end

up romanticizing the adaptability and endurance of the people subjected to these conditions.

As suggested above, the problem with this approach is that stifles potential emancipatory

efforts; instead of working to prevent catastrophes (e.g., environmental, economic, political),

and the violence and suffering that they give rise to, it assumes that they are inevitable. What

would it take to both respect the other's capacity to actively resist conditions of precarity *and*

to assume shared responsibility for minimizing this precarity?

      In *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, Lisa Guenther argues that

the act of imagining is crucial for resisting the suffering and injustices caused by solitary

confinement. She states:

> It is impossible to imagine. And yet both the attempt to imagine solitary
> confinement and the impossibility of knowing what it is like without having
> undergone it…are crucial for resistance. The act of imagining opens up an
> *elsewhere* and an *otherwise* within our current situation; it allows us to transpose
> ourselves into another place and time, another social position, and another
> subjectivity."[532]

Although Guenther's focus here is on solitary confinement, her claims about the

importance of imagining can be applied to the politically induced condition of precarity

more broadly. In other words, even though it is impossible to know what it's like to be

someone else, attempting to put ourselves in their shoes disrupts our sense of being at

home in the world and transposes us, as Guenther puts it, "into another place and time."

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[531] Bracke, 60.

[532] Guenther, S*olitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, 164-65.

Similarly, Johnson's provocative claim that "Inside you, waiting to be born, is one of our kind" encourages a rupturing of the boundary between "Us and Them," non-disabled and disabled, normal and abnormal. This rupturing of binary oppositions is crucial if we want to minimize our societal disavowal of vulnerability. Of course, I am not arguing that we ought to overcome all differences between ourselves and others—indeed, that would be both impossible and undesirable. Rather, I am suggesting that the imagination is an indispensable tool for holding open the possibility of alternate futures, ones that acknowledge our shared vulnerability but also recognize that it is differently manifested and experienced. As José Medina argues in *The Epistemology of Resistance,* "Imagination is not a luxury or a privilege, but a necessity."[533]

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[533] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 268.

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