Vulnerability, Courage, and Care

Robert L. Muhlnickel, Ph.D.

1. Introduction

This talk is part of a work in progress, developing a perfectionist consequentialist account of the virtues.¹ My talk tonight has two parts.

In the first part I defend the Vulnerability Thesis, which is a theory of what makes something a virtue for human beings. The Vulnerability Thesis accepts that we are biological beings, and claims that being vulnerable is constitutive of our kind of biological being. Our vulnerability explains what makes something a virtue for us. A virtue is a cluster of dispositions that have been found to have value in the course of reflection on how best to live a human life.

Christine Swanton usefully distinguishes virtue theories as kind-theories and free-standing theories.² A ‘kind-theory’ is structured so that the kind of being we are explains what the virtues are for us. A free-standing theory gives an account of the virtues independent of the kind of being we are. The Vulnerability Thesis is a kind-theory in Swanton’s terms.

The second part of this talk shows how the Vulnerability Thesis explains the status of courage and care as virtues. They are virtues because development of caring or courageous dispositions protects against the failures typical of the kind of biological

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¹ I am deeply indebted to the work of Thomas Hurka (1993; 2004) who has defended the framework within which I pursue this project. However, my views should not be attributed to him. I am indebted to Sean McAleer and Damian Zynda for comments and to the students in my Spring 2008 Philosophy 306/506: Health Care Ethics at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire for their reflections on care in that course.

² “Kind-theory” is Swanton’s term while free-standing is my term. The distinction is Swanton’s however.
being we are. I shall mention a subsequent issue, giving an account of which virtues are central to a virtuous life.

2. Vulnerability and the Virtues

Several virtue theorists have lately urged that more sustained reflection on human vulnerability would yield insights into moral theory and moral value. Alisdair MacIntyre, Barry Hoffmaster, and Collin Farrelly each argue that being vulnerable is a constitutive part of human biological nature. Farrelly surely overstates when he says that “what we really are” is beings that are vulnerable to biological failure if his intention is to assert a claim about human essence. But his claim is not an essentialist one. Rather, it is an emphatic assertion that we are vulnerable. The plausible claim is that humans are constitutively vulnerable and that we are constitutively vulnerable because of our biological nature.

I am confident that something like this claim is true. My confidence is based partly on knowledge by acquaintance. I am directly acquainted with my intended actions and thoughts and I know that sometimes my actions and thoughts fail to do as I intend them to do. So I am acquainted with the vulnerability of these central human powers. My knowledge by acquaintance is buttressed by propositional knowledge from common sense and the empirical sciences. I suspect that each of you also knows your vulnerability. But often we are not aware of our vulnerability, in a sense I explain below. The Vulnerability Thesis is a specification of these thinkers’ urgings to consider what our vulnerability implies about a good life.

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3 McIntyre (1999); Hoffmaster (2006); Farrelly (2007).
For reflection on our vulnerability to advance our understanding of the virtues, we first need to get clear what it means to be vulnerable. I first take up this conceptual task before stating the Vulnerability Thesis. I then argue that the Vulnerability Thesis gives us a plausible functional explanation of the virtues. The Vulnerability Thesis states that the virtues function as a response to our vulnerability and our vulnerability is good reason to perpetuate the virtues. In Section Three I show that the Vulnerability thesis explains both care and courage are virtues. I conclude by remarking on the relative centrality of care and courage to a good human life.

2.1. On Being Vulnerable

To be vulnerable is to be susceptible to being wounded. To be wounded is to suffer harm to one’s physical or psychological functions that reduce their scope, efficiency, or power. I use ‘functions’ broadly, to include both voluntary and involuntary processes. Functions include involuntary processes occurring in our bodies, neural processes in our brains, psychological processes associated with mental states. Functions are closely tied to the concept of abilities. Thinking about vulnerability shifts our focus from individuals’ abilities to the numerous threats that interfere with our abilities.

The cause of a wound is an event or object, over which the sufferer has no control or limited control. For instance, take a case in which someone is shot. The event of being shot causes the gunshot wound. The bullet that pierces the body causes the wound to the internal organ. Even where we speak of someone wounding herself there is usually an implicit claim that the agent who wounds himself, by psychological self-sabotage or by

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4 The Oxford English Dictionary emphasizes that one who is vulnerable is passive in relation to what threatens them, leading me to use ‘susceptible,’ which means ‘undergo,’ in contrast to ‘capable,’ which is closer to neutral between passivity and activity. The OED cites one use of the passive form ‘being vulned’ in Middle English.
accidental stabbing, lacks control over the act by which he wounds himself. We
distinguish intentionally harming oneself from being wounded. These concepts are vague
when we press the boundaries but I have indicated paradigm uses of the concepts in
which we use them without concern for vagueness. Worries about their boundaries can be
set aside for now.

Impaired functioning is more central to the concept of being wounded than the
experience of pain or suffering because one can be wounded without experiencing pain or
discomfort. The wound may only partially disable the function—ability and disability to
function come in degrees. The ascription of being wounded signifies a change from the
state in which a person can exercise the ability normally or freely to a state in which she
cannot exercise it normally or freely. It is unusual to say that a chronic illness, multiple
sclerosis for example, wounds someone; though we might hypothesize that a particular
response to having multiple sclerosis reflects wounded self-esteem. But on the usage I
have adopted here chronic illness is a harm to one’s abilities that reduces their scope,
efficiency, and power, so I have adopted an extended meaning of being wounded. My
extended usage reflects greater coherence with the fact that we are more vulnerable than
ordinary usage suggests. For, we are more vulnerable than we ordinarily think, a claim I
defend shortly.

Call the things to which we are vulnerable threats and the state of being
vulnerable being under a threat. Individual threats have varied natures, sources, and
effects that give them different levels of importance in moral psychology.
Being under a threat and being aware of being under a threat are conceptually distinct. That one is under a threat is a fact; being aware that one is under a threat is a complex mental state. Awareness of being under a threat is more complex than mere belief that one is under a threat, though awareness can be intermittent. Belief that one is under a threat is the disposition to respond affirmatively to the proposition that one is threatened. Awareness is belief and more. Awareness connotes having a concept of the threat, motivational efficacy, and the concept’s having role in intentional behavior. So awareness of being under a threat implies incorporation of belief that one is under a threat into relatively stable patterns of feeling, behavior, and belief.

The best explanation of our awareness of the threats of which we are aware is that those threats are salient to our functioning, safety, or survival. We are unaware of threats that do not reach some level of salience. This lack of awareness has a protective function. We could not function and survive except that we remain unaware of some threats. We could not get through our days if we were aware of every threat to our selves and activities. The number of things that threaten us exceeds the number of which we are aware. In ordinary awareness the number of threats we are under and our awareness of the number of threats to which we are vulnerable come apart.

Threats from sources external to the organism we inhabit are more salient than threats from sources internal to the organism we inhabit. Modern moral and political philosophy reflects this greater attention to external than internal threats. Though Hobbes is aware of individual powers, he is more concerned that the monarch constrains external threats than that individual ability is developed. Nozick and libertarians generally think

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5 See MacIntyre (1999) and Hoffmaster (2006) on our ordinary unawareness of our vulnerability.
the external threat of governmental coercion is a central moral fact. An important concern in Bentham’s moral and political thought is that the power inherited by landed classes and lawyers’ control of a system of their own making threatens the general happiness. Bentham is concerned with threats external to the individual in the social and legal structure. Rawls first principle of justice guarantees the absence of threats external to the individual citizen to political liberty.

However, despite the focus on external threats in ordinary thought and in the philosophical work cited above, we are at least equally vulnerable to threats from objects and events occurring in the organism we inhabit. Threats internal to the organism have their primary causal factors in our biology and psychology. We are biological beings, and biological processes break down, misfire, or over-produce, with great consequence for the good of the person in whom biological failures occur. And individuals have limited ability to control the frequency, timing, and severity of biological failures.

I conceive of biological functions to include the psychological processes of sensation, desire, emotion, and much of our cognition. These psychological processes are rooted in our biology and the operations of biological processes are necessary to the experiences of sensing, desiring, feeling, and cognizing of which we are aware and that seem to proceed from the self. Even if we identify the self with these experiences, unaware of the biological processes, a threat reaching the level of salience brings to awareness the self’s constitution by its organism’s biological processes. These functions fail in illness, aging, and grief. When these functions fail us in athletic, social, or economic competition, we become aware that our experienced self depends on unexperienced biological processes. And individuals have limited ability to control those
processes. Though we often are unaware of it, each of us is under the threat of failure by the biological processes that constitute our self.

Many threats lie outside ordinary awareness. But given that we are vulnerable to threats from events both external to us and internal to us, sometimes we are aware of what threatens us. Awareness includes both recognition of what threatens us and responsiveness to what threatens us. We are now ready to consider the Vulnerability Thesis.

2.2. The Vulnerability Thesis

Organisms have innate dispositions to kinds of behaviors. For instance, startled animals have an innate disposition to fight, flight, or freeze. These innate dispositions develop into functions and abilities, some by recognizably canalized processes that produce a limited range of behaviors, other by varied processes leading to highly varied behaviors. Despite the variety of behaviors that human innate dispositions produce, some threats occur frequently enough and have such important effects that they are frequently recognized. Some are recognized near universally across human cultures. One hopes that recognition leads to response. The Vulnerability Thesis claims that the conjunction of recognition and response is the basis for a functional theory of the virtues.

VT: The function of the virtues is to (i) prevent the occurrence of threats to common human vulnerabilities or (ii) should they occur, to ameliorate the effects of threats to common human vulnerabilities.

According to the Vulnerability Thesis, the virtues are the means required to attain the goods of human life, given the threats to which we are vulnerable. When the complex of behavior, cognition and feeling that constitutes a virtue satisfies this requirement it

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See Nussbaum (1986). I use ‘recognition’ as a general term for the cognitive processes of representing, identifying, and remembering threats we are under.
fulfills its function. The Vulnerability Thesis asserts that these responses originate in our awareness of what threatens us and are perpetuated by our continued vulnerability to threats. Those virtues that are perpetuated individually and socially are believed to be effective at preventing the occurrence of threats or ameliorating their effects should they occur.

Recognition of threats that have serious effects on well-being often result in something longer-lasting and more systematic than the innate responses of fight, flight, or freeze we share with other animals. Recognition sometimes leads to what we can call systematic response. Systematic responses include both individual and social processes. Both individual practical reason and social practices of instruction and behavioral control include processes for acquiring, communicating, and storing information about the threats we are under, the consequences of the threat’s occurrence, and means of learning how to prevent the threat from occurring or ameliorating its effects. The information in question consists of commonsense factual beliefs, empirically confirmed relations, and familiarity with social practices.

The individual agent responds to threats she is under by planning and learning to perform automatic behaviors (or maybe automatically planning and learning behaviors) that she believes reduce the risk of the threat’s occurrence. Social practices of training, instruction, and behavioral control that are believed to reduce the risk of a threat’s occurrence get formally or informally institutionalized. Systematic responses of both kinds typically take the form of developing and promoting clusters of behavioral, cognitive, and conative dispositions that are unified by their relation to preventing or ameliorating some threat to which we are vulnerable.
Some responses to threats are better than others; they have greater value than other responses. When a cluster of dispositions to respond to vulnerability has value, it sometimes gets institutionalized and promoted. A complex cluster of factors determines the value of a particular cluster of dispositions. We can identify, at the level of commonsense reflection, three factors: the nature and seriousness of the threat to survival and well-being; the ends of the agent who exhibits the virtue; and the consequences of agents’ acquiring the response. Some responses make such valuable contributions to well-being in particular circumstances they are considered excellences. Those excellences are the virtues.

A theoretical point deserves mention; though I cannot fully discuss it here. The Vulnerability Thesis echoes the corrective theory of the virtues, which asserts that the virtues are rational responses to the impulsive, irrational motives of the passions. The corrective theory of the virtues conceives of our psychology as subject to passions that require correction by rationality. The Vulnerability Thesis retains the notion of failure or malfunction found in the corrective theory but rejects its dualist psychology. The Vulnerability Thesis accepts contemporary biology’s claims both that all of our psychological states are biologically determined and that those biological processes are subject to several sorts of failures. The Vulnerability Thesis is compatible with evolutionary theories claiming that psychological mechanisms have been selected, in this case responses to our vulnerability.

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7 One might hope that valuable responses get institutionalized more frequently than they do. I only need you to accept that valuable responses sometimes get institutionalized for the truth of my claim.
Two Examples: Conscientiousness and Generosity

The Vulnerability Thesis is an explanatory hypothesis; it hypothesizes that certain mechanisms and entities explain the origin and persistence of the virtues. I shall sketch how the explanation gives a plausible account of conscientiousness and generosity. The next section discusses care and courage.

Conscientiousness is the virtue of being motivated to fulfill one’s duties as duties, rather than as the result of self-interest. The conscientious person develops the behavioral, conative, and cognitive habits that result in fulfillment of moral obligations to honesty, fairness, and non-deceptive social life. The conscientious person develops an internal motivation to do what is right. The Vulnerability Thesis explains why conscientiousness is a virtue.

We are vulnerable to boredom, distraction, self-interest, misplaced loyalty, and doing what increases the esteem in which we are held by members of groups to which we belong. Conscientiousness is the development of the motivation to do what is right or is believed right independent of the socially reinforcing processes just because we are vulnerable to these psychological and social processes that sometimes undermine our intention to do what is right. Consider a person who laughs at a racist joke or listens while signaling approval to accounts of misogynist cruelty. The person might laugh or listen attentively to relieve boredom on a long flight or to please an associate who can influence one’s social position. The conscientious person has developed the independent

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10 I am not sure the Vulnerability Thesis is an inference to the best explanation. I am sure it is an inference to a very reasonable explanation.
11 J. Wallace (1978), *Virtues and Vices*
motivation to behave fairly and does not join in the laughter or telling the stories despite the boredom or threatened loss of social esteem.

Generosity is the virtue of responding to the needs of others, with minimal worry about being deceived by the needy person and diminished concern for the economic worth of what one gives or the economic merit of the recipient. The Vulnerability Thesis explains the virtuousness of generosity. We learn to make socially endorsed judgments based on rank, strength, and appearance that indicate success. We are vulnerable to imitating the successful by the mechanisms identified by evolutionary psychologists. Our vulnerability about to anxiety about our own success and the evolutionary mechanism that makes us identify with the powerful and successful result in a tendency to restrict giving generously. Our vulnerability to these threats to generosity suggests the function of practices by which individuals develop generosity and social systems promote generosity. Generosity is the virtue of being disposed to give economically based on need of the recipient, without regard for success or self-interest. Let us now turn to the Vulnerability Thesis as an explanation of care and courage.

3. The Vulnerability Thesis Explains Care and Courage

According to the Vulnerability Thesis a cluster of behavioral, conative, and cognitive dispositions is a virtue if it has the function of enabling the realization of human goods that are threatened by our common vulnerabilities. The nature of the threat and seriousness of the threat to survival and well-being; the ends given to the agent who has the virtue; and the consequences of the virtue determine its value.

\[12\] Much more is needed to fully develop the Vulnerability Thesis account of conscientiousness and generosity. These brief statements are merely illustrative.
3.1. Vulnerability and Courage

The Vulnerability Thesis explains the common features of courage. The function of courage is to prevent the failure to fulfill what are considered obligations to impersonal or supra-personal values. Two forms of threat to which we are vulnerable make courage a virtue. The first threat is fear, emphasized in physical courage. The second threat is the need for social esteem, emphasized in moral courage. The end given to the courageous agent in these cases is to “stand firm” against these threats and, sometimes, to exploit the weaknesses of others to defend the good.

Both professional philosophical and popular accounts hold that courage is the capacity to set aside individual interest for the sake of an impersonal or supra-personal entity. Aristotelian courage is displayed when someone is motivated to preserve “the fine” against a threat to the fine despite risk of harm to oneself. The paradigm of courage is standing firm when death is imminent, as is true in war. Aristotelian courage is sometimes called physical courage because it is the virtue of acting well despite fear for one’s life or bodily well-being. If emphasis is put on the threat to the fine, we can understand Aristotelian courage to require setting aside individual interest for an impersonal good. The polis exemplifies the fine for Aristotle, though perhaps not for us, because it is the ordering of many lives for the good, so military service and defense of the polis are responses in defense of the fine. Hence, Aristotelian courage requires setting aside individual interest for the supra-personal good of the polis. Courage prevents or ameliorates the threat to the fine that comes from fear. But in relation to an enemy, the soldier is also required to exploit the threats to which the enemy solider is vulnerable.

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13 Aristotle; Wallace; Kidder
14 Nichomachean Ethics, Book III, Chapter 7.
Most contemporary moral philosophers hesitate to elevate physical courage, as Aristotle does, and to claim the state is the good or the fine for which the courageous person should risk one’s life. But they also locate the end of courage in an impersonal or supra-personal value continues. We see this in both philosophical accounts of courage and in popular accounts of courage for general readers.\(^{15}\) Since setting aside individual interest for an impersonal good is central to courage, moral philosophers suggest other impersonal goods besides the state. Moral courage is the virtue of acting on moral principle or obligation despite the threats to one’s interest required by acting on moral obligation or principle. The standard case is the whistleblower who publicizes information about a company or government agency to expose an illegal practice or failure to fulfill responsibility. The whistleblower risks economic security, sources of social esteem, and the comfort of loved ones. The morally courageous agent is vulnerable to the threat that of conceding or betraying a moral good in order to maintain these personal goods. The morally courageous agent also faces circumstances in which she might need to exploit the vulnerability of those who would prevent her from standing firm. For example, recall the Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*. Roberts’ character exploits the lawyer’s guilt and the nerdy clerk’s sagging sexual esteem in order to pursue justice against the energy company.

Loyalty to an impersonal entity is present in cases of courage even where it is not immediately apparent. We sometimes ascribe courage to a person with a life-threatening illness. “She faces her cancer with courage,” we say. This ascription concerns what we might call ‘epistemic courage.’ The courage of acknowledging one’s medical condition involves setting aside an individual interest for a kind of impersonal entity, truth. The

\(^{15}\) See Wallace (1978) and Kidder (2005).
person with epistemic courage is aware of a threatening truth about her bodily state that we often avoid recognizing. The ascription of epistemic courage in these cases depends on the background knowledge that we ordinarily avoid awareness of what threatens us. The background knowledge is presupposed when we ascribe the virtue of being aware of that truth. The truth about one’s bodily state when one has cancer is impersonal in this sense: becoming and maintaining awareness of that truth requires standing firm against our ordinary psychological tendency to avoid recognition of what threatens us. It is in our long-term interest to recognize our illnesses, but recognition requires standing firm against the tendency to avoid awareness, just as physical courage requires standing firm against the tendency to self-preservation.

The nature of the threat in courage is that some interest is endangered – bodily safety in physical courage, social esteem in cases of moral courage, untroubled avoidance of one’s mortality in epistemic courage about one’s illness. In each case, the courageous agent has the end of standing firm against the motive of individual interest for the sake of the impersonal or supra-personal good. The consequence of an agent being courageous is that the agent “reflects what something is worth and what reason prescribes,” Aristotle says. The ascriptions of courage in these cases indicate a belief that standing firm for the sake of the fine, defending the community or state, acknowledging a moral obligation, or being aware of the truth have a worth that is greater than the interest courage requires the person to forego. Now consider the Vulnerability Thesis and care.

### 3.2. Vulnerability and Care

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16 The problem of ‘patient compliance’ in health care arises from the tendency to avoid recognizing one’s vulnerability.

17 Nichomachean Ethics, 1115b15-20
We need to distinguish between caring-for and caring-about as different functions of caring. Though one can care-for and care-about the same object of care, caring-for and caring-about have different ends. Caring-about is the concept of identifying oneself with some project, relationship, or life-plan in such a way that, if Harry Frankfurt is correct, one is autonomous. Caring-about is essentially a means to a person’s attaining autonomy as Frankfurt conceives of it. Caring-for is not essentially about the person’s autonomy; rather, it is a receptive attitude that can be taken toward oneself or another. Caring for is not aimed at self-direction; caring-for is aimed at self-discovery when one cares for oneself and assisting the other’s self-discovery when one cares for another.

Caring-for is the virtue that involves receptivity to the possibilities or potentialities of oneself or the other and is intended to promote the good. As a receptive attitude, care can sometimes have the emotional intensity of love.\footnote{Swanton (2004), p. 23.} But it need not reach such levels of emotional intensity in the care-giver’s psychology. Even if a person cares-for some potential of himself, caring-for is not necessarily a means to autonomy in Frankfurt’s sense.

This case illustrates the conceptual difference caring-for and caring-about: a parent of a severely disabled child can be receptive to their potential to become a caregiver for that child. They can care for the child by becoming an attentive caregiver, and becoming an attentive caregiver can promote the good overall. This parent would exhibit the virtue of caring-for. However, the parent might fail to identify with being a
caregiver in the way that caring-about requires. They remain divided between caring-for what is morally good and caring-about their identity and project of caring for the infant. Christine Swanton points out that caring-for draws out possibilities or potentialities of the one who is cared for. To educe something is to bring out or draw out some condition from a prior condition in which what is drawn out was potential, rudimentary, or latent. This leads me to call caring-for an eductive virtue. Caring-for is the virtue associated with the practices that have to do with educing what is possible in our biologically rooted dispositions. Child-rearing, health care, teaching, pastoral care, mentoring, nurturing, nursing, and educating are practices that require the eductive virtue of care in order to successfully attain their ends. The end of agents who exercise care is educing the abilities and skills of the cared-for other. By educing the abilities and skills of the other, the care-giver develops the other’s dispositions to respond effectively threats to common human vulnerabilities.

Care lacks the philosophical pedigree of courage, justice, and temperance. Care is not an Aristotelian virtue. Care is a recent entry into philosophical thinking about virtue, thanks largely to the contributions of feminist philosophers. Feminist philosophers and thinkers have reminded us that the so-called public virtues such as courage and justice, have as a necessary condition that someone, usually female, lower in social status than males engaged in public life, and often a slave or wet-nurse who faces very limited opportunities, cares for the children, homes, and the psychology of the courageous agent, whether warrior or whistle-blower. An element in the appeal of Erin Brockovich starring

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19 My conception of the virtue of care makes care by the agent for the agent’s self conceptually possible and morally permissible in some cases. In the interest of time I focus only on care for others in this paper. 20 The Oxford English Dictionary lists no uses of ‘eductive’ since Boyle’s in 1667. But ‘eductive’ seems to me to be a fine adjectival form for ‘educa,’ which has continued in general use. I use ‘eductive’ as a more general term than ‘educative,’ so that ‘eduction’ is a genus of which ‘education’ is a species.
Julia Roberts mentioned above is that the male character provides care for the children, home, and psychology of the courageous agent. However, care is an intrinsic element in the human species. We are helpless at birth, unable to walk until long after birth, have large brains that are underdeveloped at birth and acquire two-thirds of their full size long after our birth. Humans require longer periods than other animals of protection, feeding, and training during which the skills needed for survival, procreation, and pursuit of the good are educated by care-givers. If evolution had not selected humans who cared for their young in the Pleistocene era, no member of the species would exist today. 21

The Vulnerability Thesis gives an account of the virtue of care in what were domestic activities in the pre-industrial West and are now called “caring professions” or “helping professions.”22 If members of the human species are not well cared-for by nurturing, feeding, teaching, their ability to pursue the goods of human life is impaired. The threat to the life and minimal competence in pursuing the good for oneself when a human infant is not cared for is almost always overwhelming.

The consequence of the caring agent’s caring is similar to the consequence that Aristotle states for the courageous agent: it “reflects what something is worth and what reason prescribes.” Care for the young, the sick, the injured, the miserable, and the ignorant reflects their worth as agents who have potentials to exemplify the good life and pursue the good. Care for them is prescribed by reason, though our tradition’s conception of reason and its requirements has been deficient in its recognition of this requirement.

The end given to the caring agent has a different relation to vulnerability than that of the courageous agent. Care is often associated with empathy. Empathy is the means by

21 I am indebted to R. Joyce (2006), pp. 19-20; 45-46.
22 See Phillips and Benner, eds., (1994) for an interdisciplinary anthology devoted to the caring professions.
which much caring-for gets done, and there are some caring-for relationships in which empathy is constitutive of caring, not merely a means of caring. To empathize is to have an experience similar to the experience of the one with whom one empathizes. But empathy alone is not sufficient for caring. In Bernard Williams’ striking example, the torturer must have empathy for the victim of torture, in order that the torturer know best how to use the instruments of pain and suffering to achieve the torturer’s ends. Care is directed toward the growth of the other, giving empathy its goal.

I think of empathy on a continuum of caring relationships. Caring in which empathy is a means is caring in which the activity of caring is directed at a less personal end. By “a less personal end” I mean an end in which the psychology of the person is not the object of caring. The surgeon might empathize with the chest pains that bring the patient to the operating room but the surgeon’s care is directed toward restored physical function of the person. The negotiator might empathize with the suffering associated with repression but the negotiator’s care when negotiating is directed toward restoring political agreement of the parties. Perhaps the negotiator’s care when conducting a “truth and reconciliation commission” differs in its aim at the personal psychology and character of the persons. Caring in which empathy is constitutive of caring is caring that has the end of affecting growth in the psychology and character of the person toward whom caring is directed. When caring has the end of the other’s growth, caring has the end of helping the other reduce their vulnerability. The contrast with courage helps bring out the significance of care.

Recall, the courageous agent aims at preventing his vulnerabilities from being exploited and aims to exploit the vulnerabilities of others. The caring agent, by engaging
in care, risks being vulnerable and aims to assist the other in reducing the other’s vulnerability. The caring agent is concerned with the dispositions to behavior, cognition, and feeling of the object of care. The caring agent aims at a different realm than the external threats that dominate the concerns of influential modern moral and political philosophers. The distinctiveness of the virtue of care is its concern with development of the person’s dispositions, with their abilities to pursue the good. When care is most intimately involved with developing the person’s ability and willingness to pursue some good, we find cases in which empathy is constitutive of care. When empathy is constitutive of care, care has the end of developing the internal experiential life of the cared-for so that the one who is cared for can better realize some good.

The best way I know to show this sort of care is to relate an example of its discovery by a philosopher who at one point in his career did not recognize it. My example is John Stuart Mill. Mill was raised by his father James Mill and educated under a highly demanding regimen designed by his father and Jeremy Bentham. The goal of their educational regimen was to produce someone who would pursue the good, where the good is understood as the impersonal social, legal, and economic structure that provides incentives to behaviors that increase happiness. The young man Mill absorbed this conception of the world, other people, and of himself. Early in his *Autobiography* Mill recounts the first time he can recall his father explaining that his unusual education give the younger Mill great advantages over his peers. His father tells him:

> that whatever I knew more than others, could not be ascribed to any merit in me, but to the very unusual advantage what had fallen to my lot, of having a father who was able to teach me, and willing to give the necessary trouble and time; that it was no matter of praise to me, if I knew more than those who had not had a similar advantage, but the deepest disgrace to me if I did not. I have a distinct remembrance, that the suggestion thus for the first time made to me, that I knew
more than other youths who were considered well educated, was to me a piece of information, to which as to all other things which my father told me, I gave implicit credence, but which did not at all impress me as a personal matter.\textsuperscript{23}

Notice that the description here is entirely about what has been done to Mill to make him the brilliant young man he was. His brilliance is not ascribable to “any merit in me” but is due to the power and structure of the external forces that shaped him. Mill has absorbed this lesson thoroughly, as his final remark shows. His father’s remarks did not seem to him in any way a “personal matter.” This account exemplifies an education and rearing of a child that is either absent of or includes very minimal care-for. What is absent in the explanation of Mill’s brilliance and his response is the acknowledgement of the structure of responses to which Mill disposed to make.

Mill’s impersonal understanding of himself and of other persons changes after his depression, which occurs a few years after the conversation described above. After the depression Mill reports recovering a sense of purpose and value in his reforming work but he also records changes in his philosophical thought. He states:

The other important change which my opinions at this time underwent, was that I, for the first time, gave its proper place, among the prime necessities of human well-being, to the internal culture of the individual. I ceased to attach almost exclusive importance to the ordering of outward circumstances, and the training of the human being for speculation and for action.

I had now learnt by experience that the passive susceptibilities needed to be cultivated as well as the active capacities, and required to be nourished and enriched as well as guided. I did not, for an instant, lose sight of, or undervalue, that part of the truth which I had seen before; I never turned recreant to intellectual culture, or ceased to consider the power and practice of analysis as an essential condition both of individual and social improvement.\textsuperscript{24}

In contrast to the earlier conversation, Mill here asserts that the “internal culture of the individual” has a proper place which was not evident to him earlier. This place is not

\textsuperscript{24} Mill, Autobiography, pp. 92-93.
among the luxuries of aesthetes or the privileged. It is “among the prime necessities of human well-being.” This necessary of human well-being is the personal, the internal structure of feeling, attachment, and desire. These are “passive susceptibilities” arising from the person’s biology and psychology, not merely the effects of external forces on behavior and cognition.

Mill’s discovery of the personal element provides a counter-weight to the demands of rationalist programs social reform, economic analysis, and scientism that were widely discussed and promoted, by Mill and others, in early Victorian England. Mill discovered, I think, the need for care and the end of empathy when its end is the development of the individual disposition to pursue the good. It is by being the object of care, when the carer’s empathy helps one discover one’s own internal culture of feeling, desire, and cognition that one learns to care about one’s own internal culture. The caring agent in health care, education, child-rearing, and mentoring is the agent whose care for the internal culture of the object of care teaches how to care. One who experiences another’s care for their internal culture is in position to care for yet another.

4. Conclusion

The Vulnerability Thesis has several advantages as a theory of the virtues. It is an explanatory hypothesis that is coherent with traditional understandings of the virtues and with evolutionary theories of human origins and development. The Vulnerability Thesis explains virtues as dispositions to behavior, cognition, and desire involved in living a good human life in the face of recognized threats. In addition to coherence with evolutionary theory, the Vulnerability Thesis takes account of individual practical reason and social history to explain changes in conceptions of the virtues.
The Vulnerability Thesis explains the relational aspects of courage and care. The courageous agent, according to the Vulnerability Thesis, must develop the dispositions to avoid internal threats to which she is vulnerable. At the same time the Vulnerability Thesis explains that the courageous agent must develop the ability to exploit the vulnerabilities of others. Exploiting the vulnerabilities of others is a means by which the courageous agent protects “the fine” or the supra-personal good. The courageous whistle-blower, for example, needs the imagination, empathy, and skills to exploit the vulnerabilities of those who would undermine the whistle-blower’s persistence in defense of the good.

The Vulnerability Thesis explains the virtue of care as a group of dispositions that have the end of developing the internal biological and psychological structures, processes, and abilities that enable the cared-for to attain some good. The Vulnerability Thesis explains the plausibility of care of self and care for others. The Vulnerability Thesis identifies the importance of the internal structure of the individual, which exclusively act-focused theories neglect. The Vulnerability Thesis explanation of care explains the importance of social activities and institutions that are neglected in the traditions dominated by masculine concerns for courage and heroism and shows that the virtues and strengths of the caring professions and processes deserve greater attention than heretofore given.

I think the Vulnerability Thesis implies that the virtue of care is more central to a good human life than previously thought and that care is at least as central as courage to living a virtuous life. So care deserves equal status with courage in any ranking of virtues.
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WORKS CITED


