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MATRICES: PREGNANCY, PIETY, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTITUTION OF HUMAN AGENCY

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MATRICES:
PREGNANCY, PIETY, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTITUTION OF HUMAN AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

It can be quite striking, on reflection, to consider the fact that nearly the first entire year of our lives are spent inside another human being. None of us is created *ex nihilo*: we are all forged within the crucible of another. It would behoove theorists and ethicists to concentrate on this undertheorized phase in human life. “Matrices: Pregnancy, piety, and the social constitution of human agency” thus foregrounds pregnancy and early motherhood to enrich our understanding of human responsibility and social obligation. Pregnancy, I argue, reveals the social constitution of persons and yet it also puts their discreteness into sharp relief.

Pregnancy can be deeply theoretically generative. On the one hand, pregnancy is unique, as only a subset of humans can experience and perform it; on the other hand, it is also universal, insofar as every single human is a product of a pregnancy. Moreover, even as pregnancy unites persons—childbearers, coparents, relatives, healthcare workers—it also powerfully demonstrates the fundamental separateness of persons. After all, no one else can endure morning sickness, insomnia, or labor on the pregnant person’s behalf. At the same time, it also complicates that separateness, given that, in pregnancy, the boundaries of the childbearer and her child’s respective personhoods are difficult to draw.

The dissertation identifies five lessons pregnancy teaches. First, it highlights the ways human social cooperation extends over time and necessitates human expectations. Second, it shows how humans are both interdependent *and* discrete, and that these characteristics are not merely to be counterbalanced but may be mutually reinforcing. Third, the dissertation focuses on the dissimilar sexed embodiment of human beings and what that means for the realization of gender justice. Fourth, it underscores the role communities play in childrearing and the ways socialization can be an important contributor to autonomy competency. Fifth, and finally, the dissertation concentrates on what we owe to our proximate and ultimate sources of being—often theorized as the virtue of piety. It examines past thinkers’ views of piety and presents a view which includes critical piety, which criticizes those sources that form us in condemnable ways.

to Max and Junia, who made me a mother
and to Justin, who made it possible

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It is to my children and to Justin that I dedicate this work.

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What do you have that you did not receive?
1 Corinthians 4:7

MATRICES:
PREGNANCY, PIETY, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTITUTION
OF HUMAN AGENCY

ma·trix

/ `meɪtrɪks / *noun*

1. a situation or surrounding substance within which something else originates, develops, or is contained.
2. *Archaic* the womb; uterus.

plural ma·tri·ces / `meɪtrɪsiːz /

Our humble beginnings

Not infrequently are academic ethicists charged with navel-gazing. This dissertation argues, however, that we don't navel-gaze nearly enough. The notch at the center of each of our bodies inscribes a truth about whence each of us has come, a truth which we overlook all too often in the discipline today. That truth is: we come to this world within and through another person.¹ Every single one of us spent the better part of a year inside another human being.² Not only our bodily organs, but our selves are first formed within the confines of another person's body.³ We are all, that is, forged within the crucible of another.⁴ This, I think, is a fitting starting point for ethicists' reflection on human agency.

To be sure, that humans are always situated within social contexts seems to be the new refrain. Our very selves have been granted to us. Though theorists have had increasingly more to say about the "givenness" of human life in recent decades, however, they have had scarce little

¹ "Between urine and feces," as Cornel West likes to say. For example, see West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 28.

² East Asian societies incorporated this fact in their identification of age. Traditionally, babies in most of East Asia were considered to be a year old at their birth. This system has all but disappeared in China, Japan, and Vietnam, but it still prevails in South Korea. A westerner travelling there thus must add a year to her age to correspond to the local age system.

³ I am not trying here to intervene in a vast literature on personhood and selfhood; I am rather using the word "self" in the common language usage sense of the term. I am grateful to Yoav Schaefer and Victoria van der Leyen for their caution that I be clear about this.

⁴ This may invite theological reflection that harkens back to debates about traducianism—the view that parents create the soul—versus creationism—the view that God creates the soul. For discussion, see Blosser, "The Ensoulment of the Body in Early Christian Thought." I am grateful to Johnny Walker for pointing me to these abiding theological debates.

to say about who exactly has been doing the giving.⁵ Reflecting on the givenness of the self from the perspective of the windows at the Labor & Delivery wing, however, gives this concept new force. We do not come into the world alone—the old cliché notwithstanding—but enter through and by the body of another human being. Many parents are doubly dumbfounded at their child’s birth: first by the seemingly miraculous emergence of their newborn from within her mother’s body, and thereafter by the dumbfounding realization that they, too, similarly emerged from the inner recesses of another. We all would do better to acknowledge not only *that*, but also *by whom*, we have inherited our lives.⁶

The dissertation, therefore, starts at that very beginning—or at least at the event that constitutes the beginning for each of us individually.⁷ I center that remarkable fact that humans come into being within the confines of another person. In what follows, I take up pregnancy from different angles and in different modes to foreground what pregnancy reveals about who we are and who we might be. Considering pregnancy from the wide variety of disciplines and methods integrated here—evolutionary biology, ethnography and autoethnography, Biblical exegesis, and, of course, gender theory—unearths new insights about human agency. Pregnancy, as we will see, is a fertile site for ethicists’ reflection.

The insights that might be generated from such reflection are manifold. This dissertation will focus on just a few significant takeaways. These include: the ways human agency unfolds over time; the relational basis of autonomy; the simultaneous interdependence *and* discreteness of individuals; the *disparately* embodied experience of human beings; and our indebtedness to our sources of being. Chapters two to six will foreground each of these five major insights in turn.

⁵ So goes Cavarero’s critique of Arendt’s notion of “natality”: according to Cavarero, Arendt—as so many in Western milieux—obscure the mother, even when foregrounding birth and natality. See Cavarero, “‘A Child Has Been Born unto Us’: Arendt on Birth.”

⁶ This is as much a religious as it is an empirical question, which is another reason this is so relevant in religious ethics.

⁷ Of course, as this project emphasizes, there are always matrices that precede our beginnings.

Each of these insights can be better recognized by paying close attention to the nature and experience of pregnancy, and so the first chapter of this dissertation illuminates what it is like to be pregnant by drawing on first-hand descriptions of pregnancy.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will offer a few important signposts to support the reader's reception of the argument of the project. First, I offer a short sketch of the motivations for this dissertation, its objects of inquiry, and its aims. Then, after enumerating and addressing a few of the concerns that readers might bring to the project, in a fourth section I will focus on one concern that some readers will have regarding the language I use throughout the dissertation. The fifth section of this introduction will discuss the methodology of the project, and the sixth will offer a brief overview of each of its chapters.

Matrices

This dissertation foregrounds the matrices in which we come to be. The word *matrix* comes from the Latin word for womb or uterus and has been used to identify any environment in which something originates or develops.⁸ In archaeology, *matrix* names the soil in which researchers dig; in biology, the intercellular substance that surrounds tissues is called a *matrix*; in geology, the word is used to identify the larger mineral substance in which crystals or gems form. Artists use the word to name molds, casts, or dies, from which sculptures, records, and engravings are made. Many readers may have in mind the matrices of eighth grade algebra, where entire arrays of numbers are added or multiplied at a time, rather than singly. In every case, what is

⁸ The word exhibits the “ma-” prefix that is shared in numerous languages worldwide, which almost universally means “mother.” Consider: mama (Swahili, Indonesian, Polish, Russian, German, and Slovak, among others); māma (Mandarin); mām (hindi); mamá (Spanish); māman (Persian); 엄마 or eomma (Korean); and maman (French). The reason that this “ma-” prefix appears almost universally in human language is because it includes the first sounds that children are able to make, especially as they are nursing. See Jakobson, “Why Mama and Papa.” The Latin word for breast, *mamma*, duplicates the “ma”; and is the root from which our word “mammal” comes. The word *matrix* is the root of English words like matrimony (which, historically, has made mothers) and matriculation (to enter into a developmental environment). It also is presumed to be an etymological root of “material” and “matter”: the stuff which comes from matrices.

noteworthy about each matrix is the dependence of the emergent thing on the matrix environment in which it is situated.

We, too, come to be within matrices. Like the analogies drawn in geology and art and mathematics, we can use the word *matrix* to identify the environments in which humans develop: daycares, schools, religious institutions, healthcare systems. This dissertation, therefore, joins the panoply of scholars who underscore human beings' situatedness in networks of relationships. We are constituted by our induction into these social environments. But I join the refrain by identifying not only those *analogical* matrices in which we develop. I suggest that we can learn more about our social constitution by paying attention to the *literal* matrices in which we come to be: those wombs that sustain us for almost a year—and, importantly, the women who bear them.⁹

Motivations: Rethinking Social Sin

In fact, I want to suggest paying attention to the matrices that bear us in pregnancy would allow us to better address challenging questions regarding collective agency and collective responsibility by considering our development within and on account of our mothers. Focusing on these matrices will allow us to overcome challenges that Christian ethicists have struggled with in recent years. As Derek Nelson has detailed, though Christian ethicists have helpfully shifted from conceiving of human agents as disembodied, detached monads, this development has risked overcorrecting the problem, giving methodological and normative primacy to social

⁹ As I discuss below, I use the word “women” advisedly. I encourage readers concerned with my use of the term to read carefully the fourth section of this introduction, and to turn to the fourth chapter of this project for a more detailed explanation of my choice to use the word. For now, I can note that it is important not to elide the fact there remains a distinction between those who are (presumptively) capable of becoming pregnant and those who are not. It is of course true that several transgender men have birthed children; I do not intend to exclude their stories or experiences and lament the degree to which my choices do so. The fact remains, however, that the work of childbearing in the great preponderance of the cases is borne by women. Overlooking this biological and social disparity between the sexes regarding this important work of care would be an injustice.

systems.¹⁰ Even as we are interdependent, there are nevertheless theoretical and ethical hazards to certain collectivist conceptions that merit caution. One such danger arises when thinking about social structures inclines us to prioritize the efficient functioning of the structure as such over the individual dignity and freedom of its members. Human beings aren't cogs in a machine. Even as they are social and interdependent, that sociality ought not to justify the instrumentalization of any one member of the social body. Granting political or moral primacy to the social collective runs this risk.

Neither ought social systems themselves be conceived of as agents. Perhaps this does not seem to be a danger so much as a theoretical shortcoming. While it is certainly the latter, I think there is danger here, too, insofar as attributing agency—and, correlatively, responsibility—to social structures impedes us from devising effective ameliorative strategies. Statutes and social norms can't stand trial, just as they cannot themselves perform a wrong in the first place. It may be difficult to decipher how we ought to appropriately distribute responsibility in the face of complex social structures, but that does not mean that social structures *as such* ought to be the target of our blame or praise.

Another hurdle facing contemporary discourse about social structures has to do with the abstraction that thinking about structures often requires. It has taken long enough for academics to even *see* the operations of structural racism, much less address them.¹¹ Massive systems are hard to grasp. Determining how to allocate responsibility for such a diffuse phenomenon is even

¹⁰ See Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin?* For a similar discussion in non-theological moral philosophy, see Madva, "A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism: How Oversimple Psychology Misleads Social Policy." In a different literature, Matthew Desmond points out that thinking systemically has obviated our ability to acknowledge the ways poverty is attributable to the many of us that benefit from it. See Desmond, *Poverty, by America*. Ruha Benjamin's newest book moves in a similar direction, though she points to the individual level of analysis as a source of hope as much as a venue for criticism. See Benjamin, *Viral Justice*.

¹¹ Of course, that may have more to do with motivated ignorance than with abstraction. But I would also argue that the way that systems position people of privilege vis-à-vis those who are denied privilege obscures those relationships such that they are difficult to identify.

more laborious. Who might be said to be responsible for the maintenance of social structures, especially when any one person alone is unable to discontinue them? Much of the literature on the environment and factory farming, for example, meditates on the minimal difference any individual's action makes.¹² How might people be responsible for things that they can't really change? Another formidable danger facing anyone interested in considering collective agency emerges here: the danger of sliding into despair about the apparent impossibility of progress.

These are significant challenges, but they ought not deter us from thinking seriously about collective agency. Too many of the troubles we face today are the product of collective action: climate change, structural racism, gender inequality. It is imperative that we face these challenges and search for resources to help us through the mire. This dissertation proposes that we begin by focusing on matrices: the flesh and blood which gives us our being and makes us who we are. From conception, each of us is socially constituted and socially dependent. Meanwhile, many of us will find ourselves on the other side of the dependency vector, as parents, caregivers, educators, neighbors. As I will underscore throughout the dissertation, an unequal share of the burden of that work is done by women. A significant task of the project is to consider how the responsibility for childbearing can be shared more equitably—while recognizing that some degree of redistribution is not currently biologically possible.

By focusing on the relationship between the child and its mother, we avoid some of the dangers identified above in recent work in Christian ethics on collective agency. Doing so enables us to balance our identification of humans' social situatedness with a sharp focus on the discreteness and irreducible value of individuals. After all, the very wombs that sustain us through our first near year of life exist within persons, who each deserve respect—not merely as

¹² See Kagan, "Do I Make a Difference?"; Budolfson, "The Inefficacy Objection to Consequentialism and the Problem with the Expected Consequences Response."

potential bearers of children, but as persons. Considering the mother-child relationship, therefore, enables us to attend to both humans' social dependence *and* their distinct value. It helps us to see that, while the relationship between mother and child has features that shape the agency of both parties, the relationship does not have any agency of its own. Perhaps most importantly, centering the mother-child relationship keeps concrete, everyday practices at the forefront of our inquiry, which enables us to think about the social constitution of human agency without getting caught in the morass of abstraction.

Foregrounding the relationship between a child and its mother does not require foregoing attention to wide-scale networks of social relationships—in fact, it makes such attention essential. While concentrating on motherhood helps us focus on particular, concrete relationships between mother and child, it also highlights the way that those relationships always depend on the cooperation of others, those some theorists call “Thirds.”¹³ Childbirth is rarely safe, for example, without the assistance of a health care worker, whether that be a midwife or doctor. But the dependence on Thirds only begins there.¹⁴ Mothers know well that their work is not possible without the support of countless helpers: the co-parent, the daycare worker, the grandparent, the obliging neighbor. It takes a village, after all. The matrices, or wombs, in which we first have our being are themselves situated within larger matrices of social relationships and arrangements. (We ought to remember that at the center of each pregnant person's belly is another navel, signposting a continuous chain of human sociality.) Thus, even as focusing on motherhood helps

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas is foremost among such theorists, but by no means is he alone in identifying the importance of thirds. For discussion of Levinas' work on the topic, see Bernasconi, “The Third Party. Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political”; Fagan, “The Inseparability of Ethics and Politics.” A full chapter of Mara Benjamin's recent book on motherhood discusses the value of Thirds. See Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*.

¹⁴ Some might rightly insist that the mother's dependence on thirds begins not at childbirth but at conception.

us to stay close to the ground, it also usefully points beyond the dyadic relationships that receive the lion's share of attention in religious ethics.¹⁵

Thinking through the social aspects of human agency with motherhood in mind thus helps us to carefully integrate an attention to the particular experiences and entitlements of individual persons with an emphasis on each persons' embeddedness in networks of relationships. The view that I outline in this project, which we might call a *matric view*, plots a middle way between atomism and collectivism without losing sight of the valuable insights of either.

It deserves mention that I am not the first to foreground matrices in social theory. Judith Butler writes at length about the matrices of power and intelligibility that support what she famously calls the "heterosexual matrix" in her 1990 *Gender Trouble*.¹⁶ For Butler, gender, sex, and sexuality are all imbricated in a cultural system—a matrix—that enables us to understand and express ourselves within our social contexts. This matrix delimits the kinds of practices and expressions available to us, and according to Butler, many of these limitations are injurious to those who find themselves culturally unintelligible. The same year that Butler published *Gender Trouble*, Patricia Hill Collins wrote about the way the operations of what she called the "matrix of domination" oppress black women.¹⁷ As Collins shows, white women and black men are both often conscripted in the oppression of black women, albeit in contrasting ways. Collins' theorization of matrices anticipated the groundswell wrought by Kimberlé Crenshaw with her

¹⁵ So many of the relationships that we participate in today are mediated by other relationships. My ability to compose this dissertation, for example, is certainly facilitated by my adviser and the kind readers of our subfield's workshop who have read and responded to drafts of the project. But it is also made possible by workers who developed the software and assembled the hardware the draft is composed on—as well as both my spouse and many daycare workers, who cared for my son and daughter while I wrote. This is the major trouble that I have with those ethical frameworks that privilege dyadic relationships, obscuring our constant dependence on networks of "Thirds" throughout our daily living.

¹⁶ "The term heterosexual matrix ... designate[s] that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized." Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 208.

¹⁷ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 227–28.

introduction of the concept of intersectionality.¹⁸ What is significant about Collins' theory is that it shows how variously situated persons participate in oppressive systems, not as cogs in a system, but as human agents.

Both these thinkers help to point us to questions that Christian ethicists must consider even as we foreground humans' social constitution. While it is true that humans are fundamentally social, more must be said. What follows from such an observation? What are the limits of this sociality? It can't be the case, for example, that merely *because* we are socially constituted, we cannot have anything critical to say about that social constitution. Nor can it be the case that our mere social constitution bestows upon us unlimited social, political, and moral responsibilities. In fact, as Butler and Collins show, it is precisely *because* of the harms enacted in the social constitution of so many of us today that we must foreground our fundamental sociality—to critique the maltreatments that may come thereby.

It is along these lines of inquiry that I hope to introduce pregnancy and motherhood as a starting point for thinking not only about collective agency but also moral and political obligation. "Maternity," Mara Benjamin writes, "compels acute attention to the fact of being planted in and responsive to a world. ... Tied by knots of obligation and service to another person and to her world, the adult caregiver knows what it is to be tethered, materially and bodily. Maternity simultaneously induces and reveals this inner core of our existence as given."¹⁹ Focusing on pregnancy and motherhood puts both our givenness and our obligations in sharp relief, and concretely so. The social value of pregnancy, for example, cannot be used as a justification for making childbearing mandatory. Rather, some of the most odious rights

¹⁸ Collins had been working on her model before Crenshaw published the first article in which she used the term in Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Many are more familiar with Crenshaw's 1991 piece; see Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."

¹⁹ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 4.

violations in human history involve the state's intrusion into individuals' reproductive choices.²⁰ Nor could it be the case that, because women ought to have autonomy in their choices about whether to bear children, those who choose to do so do not deserve social support.

Objects of Inquiry: Centering Mothers

It is noteworthy that, often, when I talk about my work, people assume that I am interested in the kinds of questions that recur in political spheres concerning, for example, whether and when fetuses might be considered “persons.” To be sure, I think those questions are important, and merit our attention. But a major aim of this project is to turn our attention away from these unrelenting debates and toward the subjects they often obscure: mothers. It is lamentably ironic that while the “absent mother” is a particularly despised character in the American imagination, we spend quite a great deal of time absenting mothers.

As such, in this project, I concentrate more on the agents of pregnancy than its patients. That we are all a product of pregnancy offers some perspective and motivation, I hope, to the reader; it certainly has offered both to this author. Yet in the chapters that follow, I repeatedly center pregnant mothers—matrices—and the way that their agency facilitates the agency of those who they carry.

Why, some might ask, not focus on “gestation,” rather than “pregnancy”? Perhaps I could concentrate on “gestators,” as do some recent authors, to clarify that I am focusing on the ones doing the gestating.²¹ There are at least three reasons that I choose not to do so. First, this kind of language reduces the work that pregnant people do to an act: gestating. Yet, one of the main commitments of this project is that the work that pregnancy requires extends beyond the bounds

²⁰ Think of the use of rape as a war crime in Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Congo, or the Lebensborn program in Nazi Germany, or the compulsory sterilization of thousands of black women and native American women in the United States. For discussion of the latter, see Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*.

²¹ Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*.

of the nine months in which humans are gestated. Pregnancy, for many, involves planning, waiting, wishing—and, indeed, praying. Pregnancy also induces the lactation that, for some, is at least as onerous, if not more, than the gestation itself. Women order their lives around pregnancy—the lifeworld they enter when they become pregnant—not around “gestation.”

Second, I am troubled by the rampant medicalization of our language, which reduces what women go through in advance of, during, and following pregnancy to a mere medical condition. To be sure, for many, pregnancy is largely or even primarily a medical condition: it involves endless visits to doctors, blood draws, and tests of all sorts. But pregnancy is *so* much more than its medical aspects. As is discussed in the first chapter of the project, pregnancy is a transformative experience that can recolor women’s worlds. To use medical language occludes this world-shifting aspect of the experience of pregnancy.

Finally, I am committed to using, to the greatest degree possible, language that is commonly used. Scores of sitcoms and movies involve the shocking revelation—“I’m pregnant!” Young women grow up hearing from their parents: “don’t you *dare* get pregnant.” These conversations are not focused merely on the task of gestation. They also turn us to the social meaning of pregnancy, which is something I hope to evoke here. Perhaps some readers may want to say that we must be inventing new terms, rather than falling back on those currently available to us, in order to better address the wrongs that are wrought by our language. I am sympathetic to this view and discuss it favorably at length in chapter four of this project. However, we also must start where we are, and where we are is a world populated with (and by) many, many pregnant people.

Aims

This dissertation, briefly, has two goals. First, it aims to highlight the experience of pregnancy, to work against its present neglect in the contemporary West. To be fair, novels and memoirs on pregnancy and motherhood have proliferated in the last decade or so; the insights these offer will be synopsized in the first chapter of this project. Yet thoroughgoing treatments of what pregnancy is and entails continue to be woefully scarce in religious ethics, with a few noteworthy exceptions. As such, part of the work I do in this project is to simply *present* what it is to be pregnant, to put the experience that is so often marginalized squarely in the center of our attention.

Second, and more ambitiously, it hopes to use the phenomenon of pregnancy and motherhood to think anew about the social constitution of human agency and about humans' political and moral obligations. In what follows, I substantiate a view that benefitting from others' contributions to our well-being devolves upon us particular obligations. As Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "what do you have that you did not receive?" He furthermore insists that his readers should not act as if the things they possessed were granted to them. That surely suggests that there are certain ways that we should and should not behave relative to those goods we have received in life.

Paul's insight, I want to suggest, takes on new force in reflections about pregnancy. We all have benefited directly from the work of those who carried us, and indirectly from the work of those who carried all of the others upon whom our life depends.²² We owe certain debts—of gratitude, and of reciprocal care—to those who have done the life-granting work of pregnancy, as I discuss in the final chapter of this project. Yet we also have inherited harms as well as

²² Strikingly, this second group includes our grandmothers and other foremothers, whose pregnancies made possible our own mothers' pregnancies.

benefits, and these inheritances attenuate the form and degree of obligations that we might bear toward our parents. These are difficult aspects of our moral and social obligation to contend with, and yet they deserve our careful attention. There is little better of a site to think about these questions, I propose, than that of our first social relationship, the relationship that both constitutes and shapes every single one of us.

Complications

In the early days of my first pregnancy, as I began to confront my own former failure to appreciate the role that pregnant women play in the development of human agency, I was deeply ashamed of my oversight. Yet, upon further reflection, I realized that my negligence in that respect was not just my own. After all, as this dissertation argues, we are socially constituted; my personal failure revealed a social failure. As a social body, we have not yet come to terms with the fact that mothers are the lifeblood upon which not only young children, but the entire social order, depends.

It deserves mention, however, that this eclipsing of pregnant mothers is not wholly vicious. Part of the concern that motivates this dissertation is that too many contemporary feminist movements have exacerbated the problem. There are at least four good, judicious reasons that they do so: to avoid gender essentialism, to sever the bond between womanhood and motherhood, to avoid excluding those unable to have children, and to maintain political unity. In this section, I'll attend each of these discrete, but interconnected concerns in turn; in the next, I will focus on an additional concern about language.

The first reason that feminists tend to avoid talking about the phenomenon and experience of pregnancy is that it tends to evoke essentialist interpretations of what womanhood consists in. This challenge has taken center stage at least since the publication of Carol Gilligan's *In a*

Different Voice, where, in the pursuit of gender equality, Gilligan highlights the value of the kind of reasoning girls exhibit in contrast to that of boys.²³ Her work is noteworthy for the way it calls into question the methods employed by the psychologists and researchers of the mid-twentieth century, ascribing to girls an inferior ability to engage in moral reasoning to the same extent as boys. She was right to show that her predecessors made assumptions about what counted in the process of moral reasoning which privileged the socialized behaviors of the boys in their studies. To this critique, however, she added a recommendation that developmental psychologists notice and value the nurturing, socially supportive work that young girls are taught to do. Unfortunately, Gilligan's account was all too easily conscripted in the service of a view that females are "naturally" more caring or gentle. Even though Gilligan and her adherents insist that her account was not itself meant to substantiate an essentialist reading, it is not difficult to read *In a Different Voice* as an essentialist text.

This kind of thinking—that women are "by nature" predisposed to be more nurturing because of their congenital uterus-having—often resurfaces whenever attentions are turned to pregnancy. Too often, discussions of women's capacity to gestate children crosses into the dark waters of sexist pseudoscience, which attributes to women a natural propensity to be more caring, gentle, or emotive. While humans' reproductive systems are certainly not limited to their genitalia, the association of women's childbearing and childrearing with purported rational or psychological weaknesses is troublesome and unjust.²⁴ It is true that reproductive systems can induce specific forms of distress for many women during their monthly periods and during and after pregnancy. But these biological dynamics have all too often been foregrounded in the service of arguments (or mere claims) that women ought not to be in positions of power or work in the hard sciences,

²³ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.

²⁴ See the work of Cordelia Fine, in particular, for a wholesale dismissal of this view.

or other absurd notions. As such, feminists may fairly worry that focusing on pregnancy can exacerbate an already troubling essentialism that both pigeonholes and subordinates women.

Second, it is important to vacate motherhood from the ideals of womanhood to which women are often subjected. Almost any woman in their mid-thirties or older can testify that, entangled in the social standards against which they are measured as a woman are expectations that they will also be a mother. Their value as a woman is tightly associated with their value as a mother. For a modest share of women, that is not a problem: either by socialization or personal preference, they enjoy inhabiting the role of mother, and are gratified by the encouragements that many offer to those who take up that role. For too many women, though—including those who do, in fact, relish their role as mother—they also want to be able to be recognized as socially and personally valued for reasons other than their mothering. The association of womanhood with motherhood is multiply painful: for those who choose not to have children, for those *unable* to have children, for those who have children but have also accomplished noteworthy professional feats. In the idiom of a recent book on the subject, there are a whole host of reasons that women want to be able to identify as “someone other than a mother.”²⁵ Feminists have long focused on trying to uncouple womanhood from motherhood, and to at least moderate success: women have increasingly been able to take on positions of power and status in politics, business, the academy, and religious institutions. Of course, there is much more to be done in this undertaking. By focusing on pregnancy, however, we might risk losing some of the ground that has been made and undercutting the continued work that must be done in making space for women to be someone other than a mother.

Third, pregnancy is an act of care that some people—including many women—cannot participate in, and so to highlight it can be exclusionary. Some of those who are harmed by the

²⁵ Lane, *Someone Other Than a Mother*. I am grateful to Dawn Hyde for introducing this text to me.

association of womanhood with motherhood are those who are unable to bear children. Many learn of their infertility only after years of trying in vain to conceive. Others choose not to conceive, not out of a lack of desire for biological children, but because to do so would risk passing down genetic complications that they don't want to confer on future generations. Some only find a mate with whom they would be willing to become a parent late enough in life that pregnancy is dangerous or impossible. Some know that they are unable to bear children long before they ever consider doing so and grieve that inability for decades. Highlighting this experience, then, can exacerbate a pain that too many women already endure. Feminists rightly hesitate to reduplicate the anguish that torments many who long for a child.

Fourth, pregnancy raises polarizing political questions about abortion and gender identity that elicit discomfort and undermine political unity.²⁶ These topics are often avoided in polite conversation, as they induce forceful convictions and spark contentious disagreements. Humans tend to avoid conflict in order to keep cooperation possible. Mere allusions to ongoing political strife regarding these questions can discomfit us, particularly when we are in the company of those with whom we know we do not disagree. An in-depth examination of such issues is all the more difficult to accomplish, even or perhaps especially in the academy, given its complicated institutional mechanics. Feminists may fairly hesitate to focus on pregnancy, for fear of introducing these hot-button issues, either because of the unease it can produce, or because it risks disintegrating a powerful political constituency, or both.

Other difficulties remain, including another to be addressed in a separate section below.

Nevertheless, I am troubled that such concerns have motivated feminist theory to consign pregnancy to the margins, even as almost nine out of ten women (87 percent) will bear children

²⁶ Further, as many anti-abortion advocates have pointed out, there is no singular women's view on abortion.

at some point in their lives.²⁷ The number of women who have been *pregnant* is likely much higher than the number of women who have become mothers, too, given the number of women whose pregnancies have terminated, either voluntarily or involuntarily. A majority of mothers, furthermore, will undergo pregnancy multiple times. In 2018, the average number of children among mothers ages 40-44 was 2.42 pregnancies. That's just shy of two full years of their lives spent carrying, not to speak of nursing, another human being.²⁸ While the risks of essentializing, excluding, subordinating, and discomfiting women by foregrounding pregnancy merit our careful attention, we would be mistaken to allow these concerns to prompt us to overlook the needs of those who are or have been pregnant. Such people deserve our appreciation and care: this alone would be a sufficient motivation for this project. Furthermore, however, attending more closely to pregnancy will give feminists a crucial opportunity to influence conversations and norms about pregnancy and motherhood. "Feminists may be made queasy," writes Bordo,

by the idea of emphasizing the experiential significance of pregnancy and birth, out of a fear of the conceptual proximity of such notions to constructions of mothering as the one true destiny for women. I believe, however, that we stand a better chance of successfully contesting such ideology if we engage in the construction of a public, feminist discourse on pregnancy and birth rather than leaving it in the hands of the "pro-lifers."²⁹

For both prudential and moral reasons, we must be more willing to consider and appreciate the work that those who are, will be, or have been pregnant do. While we certainly ought to be vigilant about the dangers of essentialisms and exclusions, there are ways to be cognizant of these—with careful, conscientious thinking and writing—that do not preclude the important work of centering pregnancy. Indeed, as I will discuss at length in the dissertation, justice

²⁷ In 1976, 90 percent of women between 40 and 44—that is, those at the end of their childbearing years—had had children; that number dipped to 80 percent by 2006. Today it is at 87 percent. See Miller, "Fertility Rate Is Down, Yet More U.S. Women Are Becoming Mothers."

²⁸ Livingston, "They're Waiting Longer, but U.S. Women Today More Likely to Have Children Than a Decade Ago."

²⁹ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 95.

requires that we do so. To continue to obscure pregnancy in our academic and political work would be to fail to fulfill the obligations of piety.³⁰

A note on language

A fifth difficulty merits its own separate section in this introduction. The harms that our language conscripts us into are manifold and severe, and this is perhaps especially the case when it comes to language about sex and gender. It must be said that whole libraries could be—and indeed have been—written on the relation between language and gender- and sex-based injustice.³¹ While my project does not engage the extensive literature in philosophy of language and gender theory, it would be irresponsible for me to fail to name the reasons for which I use and forego certain language in what follows. In a context in which words like “women” and “men”, “female” and “male”, and indeed “sex” and “gender” serve as ammunition almost as often as they serve as descriptors, I hesitate to reduplicate these harmful and unjust uses. Not all those identified as male at birth are men, nor are all those identified as female at birth women. Even categories like “males” and “females” are not so simply delineated. Nor are those the only categories to which persons can belong. One need not be affirming of trans identities to acknowledge these crucial facts (though, as I discuss in a later chapter, there are good reasons to do so). Anne Fausto-Sterling’s pathbreaking research, for example, manifests the severe physical and psychic harms done to intersex persons out of a desire to draw a neat distinction between males and females.³² We must do better—especially those of us that claim to be pro-life.

³⁰ For a further elaboration on what piety consists in, see chapter six.

³¹ Consider, for example, Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place*; Miller and Swift, *Words and Women*; Cameron, *On Language and Sexual Politics*; Christie, *Gender and Language*.

³² These harms include genital mutilation, gender dysphoria, and a high prevalence of suicidal ideation. See Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes”; Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*. Nor is it the case that sex identification is only done by means of genital identification; for a criticism of Fausto-Sterling on this point, see Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed*. For a Biblical interpretation of the realities that Fausto-Sterling identifies, see Hartke, *Transforming*. As Hartke discusses, the identification of “male” and “female” in Genesis 1:26 are a merism—a trope in Hebrew that

Language that obscures or neglects those who do not fit tidily into the categories that predominate is unjustly exclusionary, and often to tragic consequences. My own fear of contributing to these same harms has given me pause repeatedly throughout the development of this project.

Yet our language is given to us, as are our bodies, and while both are malleable, both are also limited and imperfect. While we must undertake to amend the misguided and harmful ways that language can be employed, because of our human condition, we can only do so within the limitations of that language. Given that fact, I use the term “women” advisedly in what follows.³³ For the purposes of this project, I use the term “women” to identify those persons who, for all we know, are capable of gestating offspring. I do so in large part because that is what many of the theorists I draw upon—and likely many of my readers—have in mind when they use the term. To be clear, I do not believe that all those persons capable of gestating offspring *must* be identified as women, or that all women *must* have such reproductive capacities.³⁴ Aside from unjustly discounting trans women and trans men, such an approach would also exclude the infertile and the post-menopausal. However, because humans’ divergent reproductive capacities are at the heart of this project, and because the term “women” has been used so often to identify those capable of gestating offspring, I will use the word “women” to identify such persons. As will be made clear, I wish that we had other language available to us. In fact, in the fourth

identifies the outer bounds of a spectrum, not two exhaustive categories. Just as we read that God made day and night, and can infer that God also made dawn and dusk, and just as we read that God made the land and the waters, we can also assume that God made marshes. “In the same way we call God the Alpha and the Omega, implying all things from first to last and in between,” Hartke writes, “the author of Genesis 1 is merely using the same dualistic poetic device to corral the infinite diversity of creation into categories we can easily understand.” Hartke, 51.

³³ In fact, not only in what follows, but already in this short introduction thus far I have used the term “women” numerous times to identify those who menstruate, gestate, and breastfeed. Many of you, my readers, have not batted an eye at such language use. Yet, there are many who menstruate, gestate, and/or breastfeed and don’t identify as women, and there are many who don’t or can’t do these things and *do* identify as women.

³⁴ That is also not how language works. When we say “mosquitos carry West Nile virus,” we do not mean that every single mosquito carries West Nile virus: just that some do. For more on recent work on such linguistic structures, called “generics,” see Leslie, “Generics and the Structure of the Mind”; Leslie, “The Original Sin of Cognition.”

chapter of this dissertation, I will propose an alternative terminology for identifying that category of persons who, for all we know, are capable of gestating offspring.³⁵ As it stands, however, we do not have access to language devoid of heteropatriarchal baggage. Until a day in which we do, I mourn with those who mourn those wounds that have come through harmful uses of the word “women,” and pray: “maranatha, come, Lord Jesus, come!”

A note on method

Many book-length projects in Christian Ethics locate their inquiry in a text, a thinker, or a period. This dissertation does not do so. It explores a phenomenon, and experiences of that phenomenon. The “text” that this dissertation “reads” is the maternal body, interpreted loosely. This includes the body that may very well be pregnant someday, or soon, the body that nurses children, and the body that bears the signs and scars of pregnancy and childbirth. In foregrounding pregnancy, this project has the virtue of focusing on a crucial human experience, with an archive that extends beyond the white male canon whence much work in Christian ethics comes. It does, however, read differently. The material it draws on comes not from celebrated philosophers and theologians, but from women describing phenomenologically their pregnant experiences. This may feel jarring for some readers, especially those who do not feel like they have any personal purchase on the material. The hope here is to offer readers in such a position the opportunity to fuse their horizons, in a Gadamerian idiom, with those who often feel precisely that sensation when they read contemporary Western social theory.³⁶ That the theory that pervades our syllabi is not nearly as universal as it purports to be is no new insight.³⁷ No

³⁵ As a very brief precis: I suggest that we coin the term “hysterics” to identify such a class of people, in a linguistic reclamation of the term, analogically to the use of the word “queer” in contemporary critical theory and activism.

³⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

³⁷ Gadamer focuses on this point in *Truth and Method*, but Young makes the case more pointedly: “Too often those in structurally superior positions take their experience, preferences, and opinions to be general, uncontroversial, ordinary.” Young, “Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication,” 403.

standpoint or experience is universal—and yet some viewpoints are dreadfully overrepresented in religious ethics. This dissertation is an effort to correct that disparity.

This is not at all to suggest that readers who have not undergone the experience (or even the mere potentiality) of pregnancy have no access *whatsoever* to what it is to be pregnant. Here we might follow Gadamer again: there is no horizonless view whence one might engage in “objective” reasoning, but neither are there worlds that are fundamentally inaccessible, horizons beyond the possibility of fusion. There is merely the demand to understand: to subject ourselves to the text’s claim on us.³⁸ In this dissertation, therefore, I present the figurative text of the maternal body, and the many literal texts that those who have been pregnant have circulated in an effort to invite understanding. I submit myself to the claims of these texts, and invite my readers to do so as well.

For a restatement of the same point, we might turn to the poignant work of Iris Marion Young on the role of narrative in political theory. Young responds to a certain ideal of deliberative democracy in which citizens consider together the needs of their polity and have their views transformed by that deliberation. Many deliberativists, however, have very high bars for the kinds of personal experience that is admissible in such discussions. A Rawlsian view, for example, would consider virtually all first-personal experience inadmissible for consideration in democratic deliberation. Young calls this into question with a relatively straightforward example. Democratic communities, she says, will have no access to the reasons for which handicapped ramps are necessary for equal citizenship *unless they make it possible for those who need them to describe what it is to be in a wheelchair*.³⁹ That is not to say that, once their stories are told, the audiences of such stories wholly understand what it is like to be confined to a wheelchair. “On

³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 322.

³⁹ Young, “Communication and the Other,” 131–32.

the contrary,” Young writes, “the storytelling provides enough understanding of the situation of the wheelchair-bound by those who can walk for them to understand that they cannot share the experience.”⁴⁰ The point is not for different parties to attempt to occupy the same exact perspectival space, but merely to accomplish that Gadamerian understanding enough for democratic citizens to meet the demands of justice. In this dissertation, therefore, I present autoethnographic and first-personal narratives of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood in an effort to elicit understanding, so that we democratic citizens can cooperate to meet the demands of justice.⁴¹

Ironically, Gadamer’s insights notwithstanding, multiple writers have pointed to the unique universality of pregnancy. “All human life on the planet is born of woman,” writes Adrienne Rich. “The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman’s body.”⁴² This is one of the strengths of this project, as I see it. The phenomenon of motherhood is *both* particular and universal: only some people ever undertake the role of mother. Yet, it is not an uncommon undertaking, as almost nine out of every ten women will bear a child—and even more will become mothers by other means. And there is, of course, a sense in which the work of mothers is universal, insofar as everyone living today was borne by another human being. While none of us will ever be able to personally remember our own birth experiences, each of us has played a starring role in someone else’s. For this reason, I argue that pregnancy generative resources for thinking about human equality. After all, other than death, that we all were born after being carried for more

⁴⁰ Young, 131. For more on the epistemic privilege that pregnant mothers have, see Woollard, “Mother Knows Best.”

⁴¹ Whether those readers who have not been—and, in particular, those that never will be—pregnant have some access to the experience of pregnancy as it is presented in these pages is, in truth, up to them.

⁴² Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 11.

than half a year within the confines of another human being is perhaps the only universal human experience.

That said, of course, no two pregnancies are the same. While there are common threads that unite many mothers' experiences, there are wide divergencies between each mother—and between any one mother's multiple pregnancies. Pregnancy and childbirth proliferate difference. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, our "[e]xamination of motherhood and mother-as-subject from multiple perspectives should uncover rich textures of difference. Shifting the center to accommodate this diversity promises to recontextualize motherhood and point us towards feminist theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality."⁴³ This difference can appear most starkly across lines of racial difference, as those to which Collins rightly draws our attention. In the United States, maternal mortality among black women is nearly three times as high as that of white women.⁴⁴ But other differences—which themselves can fall along racial lines—divide women's experiences: differences between having a complicated or complication-free pregnancy, differences between vaginal birth and c-section, and differences between breastfeeding, formula feeding, and exclusively pumping.⁴⁵ While I do present some unifying themes in this project, that presentation should not be taken as offering a singular, unitary account of the experience of pregnancy.

In addition to drawing on these multifarious first personal accounts, this dissertation also integrates multiple disciplines in its inquiry. It draws on fields as varied as game theory, evolutionary biology, Biblical exegesis, and gender and queer theory to support the arguments it

⁴³ Collins, "Shifting the Center," 62.

⁴⁴ Hoyert, "Maternal Mortality Rates in the United States, 2020." It should be noted, too, that the average maternal mortality rate in the United States is five times the average in other developed nations.

⁴⁵ Yet these are differences that women are eager to discuss. If you put a dozen women in a room and indicate the most trivial willingness to discuss pregnancy and childbirth stories, you should be prepared to spend a few hours in said room. Those who have been pregnant are often eager to share their experiences, particularly with those who might grant an attentive ear—in a severe contrast with the many who are uninterested in talk of such things.

develops about pregnancy and the social constitution of human agency. This cross-pollination accomplishes three tasks: it opens entrees for interdisciplinary partnerships, it corroborates insights revealed in women's experiences, and it helps Christian ethicists think about pressing problems anew.

Finally, a brief note on the scope of the project is in order. Volumes regarding the complexity of the concept of "motherhood" abound, and while this project is informed by that literature, I do not discuss at length various approaches to that concept. For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus on those stages of motherhood that involve their child's total dependency, including pregnancy and that phase of early motherhood in which mothers nurse and feed their children and sleep very, very little.⁴⁶

Chapter overview

Especially because the readership of this project is likely to include an overwhelming number of people who have not been pregnant,⁴⁷ the first chapter will provide detailed, first-personal portrayals of what it is like to be pregnant. Its title, "What Is It Like to be a New Mother?" plays on the classic Nagel paper on consciousness and subjectivity. In it, I focus on several unique things about the experience of pregnancy and motherhood. These include: the strange metaphysics of a pregnant body; the burdensome expectations levelled at mothers; the stark limits of maternal control; the transformativity of being pregnant; the demands of a child's total dependency; and the pangs of childbirth. These insights will serve as a sort of "literature review," so to speak, of the text of the pregnant body.

⁴⁶ Very, very, very, very, very little.

⁴⁷ Fewer than one half of all humans are able to gestate offspring. That minority is vastly overrepresented in the academy. Furthermore, the share of women academics that have children is considerably lower than the corresponding national percentage. Whereas about 86% of women in the nation are mothers, only about 55% percent of tenured women faculty have children. Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden, *Do Babies Matter?*, 80.

The second chapter, entitled “Expecting: Reciprocity, collective action, and social norms” begins by situating individual agents within architectures of choice that motivate their actions. It shows how social norms develop when individual agents need to coordinate their agency, in order to mutually benefit, and to hold one another mutually accountable. This chapter includes a brief primer on game theory, a framework which makes it significantly easier to plot a middle path between raw individualism and abstract systems thinking.

Chapter three, entitled “Public and Private Parts: Paul’s corporeal ethic as a corrective for liberal and republican approaches,” tries to refigure the relationship between individuals and their communities. It first portrays the views of political liberals and republicans, highlighting discrepancies in their respective views regarding individuals’ rights and responsibilities within their communities. To concretize the discussion, it introduces cases of Carrie Buck, a woman who was involuntarily sterilized, and Freddie Gray, who was, as a child, vulnerable to the structural causes of poverty. This chapter then presents a view, based on language in many Pauline epistles, which marries the best of both the liberal and the republican approaches. It closes by proposing an approach to reproductive rights, informed by these Pauline principles, that closely resembles the Reproductive Justice framework, which was developed by black activists in the 1990s in response to a feminism that centered white women’s concerns.

Chapter four may be the most provocative of the chapters in the dissertation. This chapter, entitled “Hysterics: Gender and the diachronicity of life” discusses recent proposals concerning what has been called “gender abolitionism.” It develops a defense of the maintenance of gender, based on the divergent embodiments into which humans are born, and on the need to redistribute more equitably the burdens of childbearing and childrearing. It offers a modest proposal for a linguistic classification to supplant the current category of “women”: *hysterics*. The term is a

reclamatory term, analogical to the use of the terms “queer” and “crip” in contemporary critical theory and activism.

Chapter five focuses on those nearby partners that make motherhood possible. Its title, “The Village: The coefficient goods of autonomy and social formation,” elicits the age-old proverb that reminds us that childrearing cannot be achieved singlehandedly. It introduces recent work in evolutionary biology on the development of prehistoric human sociality—which, many biologists hypothesize, emerged owing to “alloparenting,” the uniquely communal childrearing done by early humans. It also discusses the revolutionary contributions of Patricia Hill Collins on the practice of “othermothering,” the work that family members and friends play in childrearing in the lion’s share of Black communities. It leverages these insights in conversation with feminist political theorists on the concept of “relational autonomy,” which identifies the degree to which human autonomy only emerges in the context of abiding and dependable relationships.

The final chapter, “Critical Piety: Our urgent need to recover an ancient virtue,” asks what is owed to mothers in general, and explores questions regarding those mothers, both real and figurative. First, I show that piety is not merely retrospective, but demands our proper acknowledgment of the sources of our continued and presumptive existence in future times. Second, I specify that piety almost always entails two features: both symbolic *and* material appreciation for the object of one’s piety. Third, and finally, I argue that piety ought not always to arouse positive feelings in us. Rather, when the people and social arrangements that shape us are not virtuous, this demands what I call “critical piety.”

This framing notwithstanding, these chapters each illuminate one of five aspects of human agency—its diachronicity, discreteness, embodiment, relationality, and indebtedness—and need

not necessarily be read in a particular order to be legible.⁴⁸ Those more interested in gender theory, for example, may want to jump straight to the fifth chapter on sex and gender. Those eager to consider more political-theoretical aspects may want to focus on chapter three, on how St. Paul strikes a *via media* between political liberals and republicans and threads a needle essential to achieving reproductive justice. Where there are substantive connections across chapters, these will be noted for the reader.

⁴⁸ This is, in part, meant to make the text more accessible to those whose lives are punctuated by babies' cries and other dependencies.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A NEW MOTHER?: PORTRAYALS OF PREGNANCY, CHILDBIRTH, AND EARLY MOTHERHOOD

We should not be surprised to learn that discourse on pregnancy omits subjectivity, for the specific experience of women has been absent from most of our culture's discourse about human experience and history. ... [P]regnancy and childbirth entail a unique body subjectivity which is difficult to empathize with unless one is or has been pregnant.

—IRIS MARION YOUNG¹

The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected.

—ADRIENNE RICH²

When one of these essays, about pregnancy, appeared in the Guardian magazine there was a ferocious response on the letters page. Who does she think she is? and Why should we be obliged to read about her insides? ... my only excuse is that I think it is important. I wanted to say what it was like.

—ANNE ENRIGHT³

In 1974, Thomas Nagel published a classic paper entitled “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” He wanted to encourage his readers to try to consider what it would be like to have a bat's consciousness, with their insect-filled diet, their ability to fly, and their dependence upon echolocation for navigating the world. Even with these careful considerations, Nagel argues, we cannot *fully* know what it would be like to have a bat's consciousness: we can only know what it is like to *imagine* being a bat.⁴ None of us have been born into bat bodies or raised by bats. The experience of having a bat's consciousness is simply inaccessible to us. Nagel's point was to add force to a critique of physicalism—the view that the world is composed of physical stuff, and nothing more than physical stuff. He wanted to underline the fact that there are things about

¹ Young, “Pregnant Embodiment,” 45.

² Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 55.

³ Enright, *Making Babies*, 11–14.

⁴ Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”

experience that exceed the domain of observable facts.⁵ Rather, there exist such things known to philosophers as “qualia,” or something like “raw feels”—sensations which precede and exceed any sort of objective description. We humans fortunately have a high degree of empathetic capacity, and so we have a great deal of access to the experiences another person might undergo. The force of Nagel’s argument, however, is that there is a limit to the access any one of us might have to the conscious experience of another.

This chapter does not make any theoretical overtures supporting Nagel’s—or his critics’—views. Rather, it draws on Nagel’s idea that there are unique perspectival experiences that may be difficult or impossible to convey to another who has not undergone them. New mothers, as I describe in this chapter, experience considerable, lifechanging sensations during and in the immediate stages following pregnancy.⁶ This includes, among other things: a certain fragmentation of the self, a confrontation with one’s loss of control, the anticipation and suffering of indescribable pain. These and other sensations will be the central focal points of this chapter.

It deserves acknowledgment, at this point, why this chapter’s discussion of these difficult-to-describe sensations is especially necessary in this volume on what pregnancy and early motherhood can teach us about human agency. As discussed in the introduction, the lion’s share of this project’s readers will have never themselves become pregnant. Because of the overrepresentation of cisgender men in the academy, most will never have even contemplated whether they would like to become pregnant, given their inability to do so. Even among those readers who are women academics, however, many have not and/or will not have children. Whereas nearly nine out of ten women approaching menopause in the United States have birthed

⁵ Frank Jackson’s thought experiment regarding “Mary’s room” supported a similar view. See Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia”; Jackson, “What Mary Didn’t Know.”

⁶ The reader is encouraged to remember that by “pregnancy,” I don’t merely mean to identify the roughly nine months of gestation, but also the periods adjacent to and contingent upon it, including family planning and nursing.

children, less than six out of ten women academics have children.⁷ As such, the readership of this volume is very likely to be composed of people who will not have ever themselves undergone, or even considered what it would be like to undergo, a pregnancy. Given that so much about pregnancy is personally transformative, composed of these almost indescribable feelings, it is important for this author to do her best to present to her readers a number of facets about the experience of pregnancy and early motherhood.

At least two important consequences arise from various women's experiences of the unique challenges of pregnancy. First, the relative marginalization of such first-personal accounts exacerbates the isolation that pregnant women and young mothers feel.⁸ Not only the family but also these family-making moments and experiences have been fundamentally privatized. (Imagine the disgust or shock that might be produced if a woman were to share anything about the bodily intricacies of pregnancy and birth in mixed company.) Second, and relatedly, it is incredibly common for women who have undergone pregnancy to delight in any opportunity to share stories about their pregnancy or birth with others—and *especially* with others who have also themselves undergone pregnancy and birth.⁹

This second effect of the marginalization of pregnancy—the “absenting of mothers,” as I called it in the introduction—may be a central reason for the emergence over the past decade or so of what has been called “mom lit.”¹⁰ Whereas so much about the experience of pregnancy and early motherhood has been consigned to the shadows, recent generations of women have rejected

⁷ Livingston, “They’re Waiting Longer, but U.S. Women Today More Likely to Have Children Than a Decade Ago”; Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden, *Do Babies Matter?*, 80.

⁸ The novelist Rachel Cusk explains at the outset of her book that “a book about motherhood is of no real interest to anyone except other mothers.” Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 3.

⁹ One of the delights I enjoyed while being pregnant was the induction I experienced into the club of women-who-have-been-pregnant, and the way my public pregnancy offered others an opportunity to share with me very vulnerable, personal stories. On one occasion, fully eight and a half months pregnant, I found myself in a room of about fifteen women; my physical presence authorized those present to divulge their pregnancy-related tales and to proffer solutions to chapped nipples and diaper blowouts.

¹⁰ I have also seen this marginalization called “epistemological matricide.”

this marginalization and instead publicly conveyed their maternal experience in writing. The earliest women's rights activists were troubled by the opposition that was presented to them between personal or professional fulfilment, on the one hand, and motherhood and family life, on the other.¹¹ Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* famously foregrounded the ways that expectations of childbearing and childrearing constrained women's freedom and agency. Sylvia Plath's piercing poetry gave artistic weight to Friedan's journalism: as a new mother, Plath finds herself "cow-heavy" for her "ruby" of a baby. Shulamith Firestone's fiery *The Dialectic of Sex* proposed that biological maternity was the source of all women's oppression—Firestone went so far as to call pregnancy "barbaric."¹² Adrienne Rich, a contemporary of Firestone's, pushed in a different direction, hoping to find in pregnancy and early motherhood a resource for wresting women from the grip of patriarchy. It was in this context that a new genre of writing on motherhood emerged, which offered unapologetic, raw depictions of what it is to be a mother—or simply to be a woman contemplating motherhood. Dozens of major publications have done so in the last few decades.¹³

In the remainder of this chapter, I will draw on a number of these volumes, in addition to the work of prior generations of writers, to present a collection of six recurrent themes in writing on

¹¹ See, for example, Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper."

¹² Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 198.

¹³ For a condensed list, consider these texts from the last decade: Angela Garbes' *Like A Mother* (2018), Kim Brooks' *Small Animals* (2018), Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers* (2018), Emma Brockes' *An Excellent Choice: Panic And Joy On My Solo Path To Motherhood* (2018), Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018), Jessie Greengrass's *Sight* (2018), Meaghan O'Connell's *And Now We Have Everything: On Motherhood Before I Was Ready* (2018), Laura Jean Baker's *The Motherhood Affidavits* (2018), Liz Berry's *The Republic of Motherhood* (2018), Anna Prushinskaya's *A Woman Is A Woman Until She Is A Mother* (2017), Jessi Klein's *You'll Grow Out of It* (2017), Jessica Friedmann's *Things That Helped* (2017), Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017), Holly McNish's *Nobody Told Me* (2016), Rivka Galchen's *Little Labors* (2016), Pamela Erens' *Eleven Hours* (2016), Nadja Spiegelman's *I'm Supposed To Protect You From All This* (2016), Chitra Ramaswamy's *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy* (2016), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015), Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (2015), Heidi Julavits's *The Folded Clock* (2015), Meghan Daum's collection *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids* (2015), Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), Eula Biss's *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (2014), Rachel Bowlby's *A Child of One's Own* (2013), Anne Enright's *Making Babies* (2012), Paula Bomar's *Nine Months* (2012), Jessica Valenti's *Why Have Kids?* (2012). Inspiring this wave of writings are the following classics in the genre: Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* (2001), and Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions* (1993).

pregnancy and early motherhood. These include: the porosity of the pregnant body, the newborn's radical dependence, the loss of self, the loss of control, the pains of childbirth, and the oddity of being pregnant in public. This effort serves two purposes. First, it informs a broader public about what it is like to be pregnant when there is a paucity of knowledge among Americans today about what that experience entails and demands. This is an intrinsically valuable task. It also serves an instrumental purpose, though, of enabling the reader to better understand the value of the later chapters of this dissertation. Confronting the loss of control that both the woman trying-to-conceive and the pregnant woman awaiting labor experience can make us better grasp the limits on prevailing understandings of autonomy, as I discuss in chapter five. And acknowledging the challenges of providing for a completely dependent being—both *in utero* and during a child's first days alive—can underscore the importance of recuperating the virtue of piety, as I discuss in chapter six.

One limitation must be noted here: the vast majority of the texts to be drawn on here portray the experience of pregnancy as described by largely white, Western, upper-middle class women in recent decades. The emergent genre of “mom lit” has already received fair criticisms on that front. Parul Sehgal, writing for the *New York Times*, bemoaned that too many of these works “seem wary of, if not outright disinterested in, more deeply engaging with how race and class inflect the experience of motherhood.”¹⁴ For this and other reasons, the following review of recurrent themes cannot claim to describe a universal description of the experience of pregnancy and early motherhood, and can only be said to describe a particular constituency at a particular time. It must be said: too many communities go unrepresented here. The task is still worth undertaking, however, because pregnant women's experiences of pregnancy have gone neglected

¹⁴ Sehgal, “In a Raft of New Books, Motherhood From (Almost) Every Angle.” See also Garbes, “Why Are We Only Talking About ‘Mom Books’ by White Women?”

for far too long. These first perspectival snapshots give broader audiences access to what must be uncovered, and for that reason I focus on them here, even if they might present a narrower segment of experiences.

Finally, it must be said here that, even though each of the themes presented in this chapter identify particular burdens that pregnant women bear, there are distinct joys and pleasures to which pregnancy and early motherhood give rise. Some of these are raw bodily feelings: during childbirth, pregnant women are saturated with the hormone oxytocin, nicknamed the “love drug,” which binds mother and baby together in relationship. (Recent studies show, though, that co-parents also experience upticks in oxytocin levels after first holding their newborns.¹⁵) Many parents, and especially mothers, who narrate experiencing an indescribable kind of love at the birth of their child, may have been under the influence of oxytocin at the time. Other joys punctuate pregnancy and early motherhood. Pregnant women often express joy at the flutters they feel at their baby’s quickening, and throughout later stages of pregnancy, for example. I do not mean to neglect these important pleasures. Given their overrepresentation in popular portrayals of pregnancy, it is important to highlight the contours of pregnancy’s burdens here.

As such, despite the limitations, it is to these six recurrent themes that I now turn.

Contemplating porosity, aliens, and pregnant metaphysics

The first and perhaps most prevalent motif in literature about pregnancy and early motherhood is the degree to which this phase of life undermines our understanding of what is internal to the pregnant person, and what is external. As the political philosopher Iris Marion Young wrote in 1984, “[i]n pregnancy, I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins.” There is a fundamental unboundedness to pregnancy and early

¹⁵ Gettler et al., “Fathers’ Oxytocin Responses to First Holding Their Newborns.”

motherhood, where the body's boundaries are not so neatly drawn. "My pregnancy, like every pregnancy," writes Eula Biss, "had primed me for the understanding that my body was not mine alone and that its boundaries were more porous than I had ever been led to believe."¹⁶ The Jewish ethicist Mara Benjamin similarly writes that in motherhood, "the boundaries between 'external' and 'internal' ... are not so clear. Not only bearing a child, but also loving and caring for one, breaks down these formal categories."¹⁷

Quill Kukla puts it more graphically. They open their book on pregnancy, entitled *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers' Bodies*, by observing that

pregnant and newly maternal bodies leak, drip, squirt, expand, contract, crave, divide, sag, dilate, and expel. It's not hard to see why such bodies have long seemed to have dubious, hard to fix, permeable boundaries. And to the extent that the integrity and boundaries of the body as integrally intertwined with the integrity and boundaries of the self—and we have done so, at least throughout the history of Western culture and probably beyond—these dubious boundaries have been a source of various species of intellectual and visceral anxiety. The maternal body has long been seen as posing a troubling counterpoint to the mythical well-bounded, fully unified, seamless masculine body.¹⁸

Kukla identifies a fundamental porosity to the pregnant body that challenges the norm of ordered, defined self. They underscore the way that social structures marginalize female and pregnant bodies, out of a disgust and anxiety about their porosity. But what Kukla does not address as forthrightly is the way that this social aversion is also instilled in those persons who become pregnant, such that pregnant individuals *themselves* experience a taxing shift in their orientation to their own bodies. Having long aspired to the normative, clearly-defined, self-determined body, the leaking, dripping, squirting and other phenomena that Kukla catalogues can be distressing. "We are all liquid, all deliquescence; the unbounded unidentified matrix out of which new life comes endlessly creeping," Naomi Wolf realizes in her second trimester.¹⁹

¹⁶ Biss, *On Immunity*, 81.

¹⁷ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, xx.

¹⁸ Kukla, *Mass Hysteria*, 3. This echoes how Kristeva describes the "abject": that which "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules." See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 232.

¹⁹ Wolf, *Misconceptions*, 65. I love the use of the word "matrix" in this citation!

Yet pregnant women do not just describe experiences of fundamental bodily *porosity* but also bodily *invasion*, at least of a certain sort. There is something fundamentally *other* about the beings that pregnant persons bear. Anne Enright endorses a common observation offered by those who have been pregnant when she explains in her *Making Babies*: “What is it like being pregnant? ‘It is like having an alien inside you,’ a woman said to me, many years ago. ‘No really, it is.’”²⁰ Others have compared pregnancy to being occupied by a parasite: “It’s taking over me,” says Sonia, the protagonist of Paula Bomer’s *Nine Months*. “It’s taking over my body and soul, for God’s sake, like some parasite, like some alien virus.”²¹ Rachel Cusk says her child “appears to be some sort of colony.”²²

Jacqueline Rose articulates the same point, albeit with less disgust: “[t]o be a mother, to give birth,” she writes, “is to welcome a foreigner.”²³ Rose’s language makes space for both positive and negative valences, as does the citation from Julia Kristeva that Rose includes in her own writing. Being a mother, as Rose translates Kristeva, is “the most intense form of contact with the strangeness of the one close to us and of ourselves.”²⁴ Again, there is no clearly defined boundary between self and other in the experience of pregnancy—for better or worse. Instead, there is an inexorable mingling of self and other. Maggie Nelson describes it as “[r]adical intimacy, radical difference.”²⁵ Perhaps Adrienne Rich’s poetic language describes the power of this intimate otherness most beautifully:

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are there for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.²⁶

²⁰ Enright, *Making Babies*, 21.

²¹ Bomer, *Nine Months*, 129.

²² Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 95.

²³ Rose, *Mothers*, 139.

²⁴ Rose, 139.

²⁵ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 87.

²⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 227.

Both potentialities are offered in the pregnant body: the “deepest mutuality” and the “most painful estrangement.” After all, there is no closer than another human can be than *inside* of you. Yet it is precisely that internality of the other that most challenges pregnant persons. In fact, some of the more dangerous conditions that pregnant persons face, like Rh disease and pre-eclampsia, can derive from the maternal body’s immune rejection of the fetus she carries.

Whether the feeling of hosting another human within oneself takes on a more positive or negative valence may depend on the moment—on which bodily effects the fetus produces for her mother. In her celebrated *Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson writes about her discovery that “babies have a will of their own, which becomes visible the first time mine sticks out a limb and makes a tent of my belly. During the night he gets into weird positions, forcing me to plead, Move along, little baby! Get your foot off my lungs.”²⁷ At other times, though, the pregnant woman’s firsthand experience of her baby’s movement can be a source of enjoyment and connection. The difference arises when the baby’s movement interrupts her mother’s life projects and goals, by undermining her sleep, or prompting her to use the bathroom by using her bladder as a trampoline.

I recently arrived at an illustration that I thought might be helpful to describe one of the feelings pregnant persons sometimes experience when I was on an airplane. Sitting in the cabin seat, I felt a child’s foot occasionally press into the back of my chair. It was not a source of severe pain, but there was a basic discomfort that I could not ease unless the child relented. This, I thought, *this* is what it is like to be pregnant! In the later phases of pregnancy, this is precisely the sometimes strange, sometimes exciting, sometimes bothersome feeling one experiences—except the pressure is emerging from *within one’s own stomach*. You can’t control it. And yet,

²⁷ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 91.

that pressure is the first contact you can have with a person with whom you are likely to have a lifelong relationship.

Somehow—somehow—the gestating fetus, pressing from within one’s stomach, is both “me” and “not me” at the exact same time. This puzzle has led, in fact, to the establishment of a grant-funded project in metaphysics at King’s College London called “Better Understanding the Metaphysics of Pregnancy” (BUMP), run by Elselijn Kingma. The fundamental questions that motivates the BUMP project include: are fetuses a “part” of their mothers? How many organisms exist within the pregnant body—one or two? What happens when we imagine that pregnant persons are vessels, or containers, for the fetus they carry, as opposed to considering the fetus a part of her mother? While Kingma carefully defends one specific view—that a fetus is a part of her mother—the philosophical debate rages on.²⁸ And the academic disagreements have their corollaries in the ruminations of pregnant women, at least captured in the newly published mom lit. Cusk, for example, writes of her first moments with her baby: “as I take her I experience a moment of utter, almost visionary, clarity. In this moment I realise that a person now exists who is me, but who is not confined to my body.”²⁹

Not only the bodily occupation, but also the sheer *existence* of the baby can confound mothers, especially in the moments following birth. “How weird he wasn’t anything before she made him,” Ari, the protagonist of Elisa Albert’s *After Birth* reflects. “Where was he? Somewhere? Nowhere? Now he’s here and he has this name and he’s a person. Weird.”³⁰ Mara Benjamin offers similar observations. “In the very moment of becoming a parent,” Benjamin writes, “my child’s ‘otherness’ asserts itself immediately and repeatedly, first and foremost in the fact of her bodily existence. The materiality of a newborn child seems to violate the law of the

²⁸ Kingma, “Were You a Part of Your Mother?”

²⁹ Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 95.

³⁰ Albert, *After Birth*, 74.

conservation of matter: suddenly there is something where nothing was before.”³¹ These words echo a line from Sylvia Plath’s classic poem, “Nick and the Candlestick”: “O love, how did you get here?”³² Parents often marvel at the experience of entering a hospital before childbirth as two, and leaving as three. Not only is there “something where nothing was before,” as per Benjamin’s observation, but that something is a person, with a name, a collection of legal rights, a body to be cared for.

Facing radical dependence

That third, confounding person is not just a human subject, but also a person in need—profound, extensive, expressive need. This is what the recently pregnant person learns on the birth of her child. The newly arrived child is an astonishingly fragile bundle of needs. The radical extent of newborns’ dependency can overwhelm new mothers. Indeed, mothers throughout literature report their bewilderment about the magnitude of their newborns’ dependency. “He’s way too soft and scary and what if I accidentally kill him?,” Elisa Albert’s protagonist Ari says of her newborn son. “It’s totally possible to accidentally kill these things.”³³ In a later passage, Ari grapples with the radicality of her child’s dependence. “He was always hungry. He needed to be held, he needed to nurse. He shat his diaper, he pissed his diaper. He cried, he needed to be held, he needed to nurse. Endless need. I did not understand how there could be no break. No rest. There was just no end to it. It went on and on and on. There was no end.”³⁴ Rachel Cusk likens her postpartum body to the function of a kidney, playing an utterly indispensable role in her child’s life. “My daughter’s pure and pearly being requires considerable maintenance. At first my relation to it is that of a kidney. I process its waste. Every three hours I pour milk into

³¹ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 80.

³² Plath and Hughes, *Ariel*, 47.

³³ Albert, *After Birth*, 74.

³⁴ Albert, 49.

her mouth. It goes around a series of tubes and then comes out again. I dispose of it.”³⁵ The Jewish ethicist Mara Benjamin puts it even more succinctly. “Her body,” Benjamin writes of her daughter, “demanded compliance.”³⁶

The neonatal dependency new mothers are confronted with, however, often centers on babies’ dependency for nutrition. A newborn baby needs to eat at least every two to three hours, *around the clock*. (Newborn babies’ stomachs are about the size of a cherry, and so must be repeatedly filled up.) Often, that continual responsibility of keeping nutritional vigil falls to mothers. This is no coincidence. The same hormones and processes that hasten birth also bring about lactation, and so it is on the heels of the earth-shattering experience of childbirth that many mothers attempt to feed their children with their bodies. Those who choose not to, or are ultimately unable to for any other reason, must both contend with their leaking, dripping chests *and* find other ways to satisfy their baby’s seemingly insatiable hunger. This is one reason that, as discussed in the introduction, I argue for a more capacious understanding of what “pregnancy” identifies. It is not just gestation, but also the lactation that gestation hastens, that imposes responsibilities on mothers. In fact, I have discovered (anecdotally) through conversations with many mothers that nursing is often much more demanding than pregnancy. Yet, without significant and protracted medical intervention, it is only through the biological process of pregnancy that mothers are able to provide lifegiving sustenance to their children.³⁷ As such, the term “pregnancy”—and not “gestation”—can better elicit these other contingent aspects of childbearing and childrearing.

³⁵ Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 134.

³⁶ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 7.

³⁷ It is possible to induce lactation without enduring gestation, but it can a significant amount of medical intervention to do so. Some adoptive mothers and female non-birthing partners choose to pursue this option, to have the opportunity to bond with children. It is also an option for cis men and trans women. See Reisman and Goldstein, “Case Report: Induced Lactation in a Transgender Woman”; Trautner, McCool-Myers, and Joyner, “Knowledge and Practice of Induction of Lactation in Trans Women among Professionals Working in Trans Health.”

Whether they choose to nurse or to bottle feed, mothers quickly become aware of the demand that their newborns will place upon their lives. Of course, the difference between these two approaches—as many early parents know very well—is that those babies who nurse can only receive their nutrition from one, rather than two or more, caregivers. This puts an outsized degree of responsibility upon the very same persons that spent the prior nine months nourishing and carrying the child—to say nothing of *birthing* it. Even facing the *choice* about whether or not to take on the task of breastfeeding is a major responsibility of its own. Birthing women face tremendous pressure to breastfeed their children—consistently confronted with the slogan that “breast is best”—and those who choose not to breastfeed often suffer social shame. The pressure is so great that, in 2015, the physician Christie del Castillo-Hegyi established a non-profit called “Fed is Best” to counteract this pressure, after her own son suffered brain injuries from the dehydration he suffered when his mother was reluctant to feed him formula.³⁸

It deserves saying that the “breast is best” campaign is not without merit. It is, in fact, true that children who are breastfed enjoy a number of health and social benefits that those who are fed with formula do not receive. Breastfed babies are less likely to have upper respiratory infections, ear infections, and die from SIDS.³⁹ Some of the benefits associated with breastfeeding seem to verge on miraculous. Not only do the antibodies in breastmilk help to fight infection, but in breastfeeding, child and mother establish a synergistic immunological relationship. In the process of nursing, a vacuum is formed between the baby and the breast that delivers some of the baby’s saliva to her mother’s mammary glands. The glands, in turn, produce

³⁸ Arnold, “Do ‘Baby-Friendly’ Hospitals Work for All Moms?”

³⁹ Wilson and Wilson, “Is the ‘Breast Is Best’ Mantra an Oversimplification?”

breastmilk that is tailored with appropriate antibodies for treating the child's illness.⁴⁰ So it must be said that some of the pressure to provide these benefits to children is not unjustifiable.

It's for this reason, though, that facing the choice about whether or not to breastfeed imposes such weight on new mothers. It is new mothers, after all, that often feel the most intense desire to provide the best for their children, and when breastfeeding is difficult or impossible, mothers often feel that they have "failed."⁴¹ The force of this sort of feeling is exacerbated by the loneliness of being the only individual capable of the task. A birthing woman's partner is not, after all, able to take up the task without having taken on considerable and protracted medical interventions before birth.⁴² When this author's first child was unable to breastfeed, it was up to me to choose to pump—an exhausting enterprise, taking about 15-20 minutes every 3-6 hours around the clock—or to turn to formula to feed our child. The decision remained with me, a nearly unbearable responsibility. I decided to take the harder path, though it is important to note that I was only able to do so because of the additional responsibilities my partner took on in feeding my son through the night.⁴³

It is also worth noting that the work of breastfeeding and pumping is not simply grueling; it's also painful. While the pain almost always recedes after the first few weeks of nursing, those first few weeks can be agonizing. Hundreds of products promise to ease these pains, and often it is only time that can ultimately do so. Furthermore, new pains can always emerge throughout the breastfeeding journey. Teething brings its own difficulties, as babies learn to breastfeed without

⁴⁰ Al-Shehri et al., "Breastmilk-Saliva Interactions Boost Innate Immunity by Regulating the Oral Microbiome in Early Infancy."

⁴¹ A friend, in fact, once told me that she felt like a "monster," for wanting to have the baby she birthed but not having the ceaseless energy it might take to succeed in breastfeeding her.

⁴² See note 37.

⁴³ I was grateful that I had chosen the more arduous approach when, five months after his birth, we learned of our son's milk protein allergy, which would have meant that he would not have been able to take most formulas. The formulas that don't contain cow's milk are extremely expensive; feeding our son non-dairy formula would have easily cost us five to ten thousand dollars in just his first year.

biting their mothers. Additionally, mothers who nurse sometimes experience infection or inflammation in the breast, called mastitis. One friend had consistent bouts of mastitis so severe that she had to have them surgically drained nine times.⁴⁴

The tedium and the incessance and the isolation of nourishing a newborn certainly contribute to the discomfort of the task. Further exacerbating the strain for some mothers, however, is the very asymmetry of the relationship. In brief: in maternity, mothers possess extreme, even disturbing degrees of power. Thus Mara Benjamin—whose newborn, the reader may remember, “demanded compliance”—writes that “I felt the terror of my power, of my vast and direct responsibility for this baby’s well-being. I was weighted down by the sheer inescapability of her.”⁴⁵ Drawing on the theorist Sara Ruddick, Benjamin claims that the confrontation with one’s own extreme power is a “*sine qua non* of parental experience.”⁴⁶ Recall Albert’s protagonist grappling with her capacity to “accidentally kill these things.”⁴⁷ With fear and trembling, a parent can come to realize that not just her child’s preferences, but her child’s very *life* is in her hands. Benjamin later implores feminist theorists of power to contend with this integral asymmetry of power between mother and child, in which mutuality and equality simply cannot obtain.⁴⁸ While it is true that the best of parents use this power to encourage their children’s maturation and autonomy development, this is only done “within a broader framework in which parents ultimately set and enforce boundaries.”⁴⁹ According to Benjamin, grappling with the necessity and potential virtue of this kind of asymmetrical relationship provides fodder for

⁴⁴ One such outbreak occurred the night before her job talk at an interview. Despite the searing pain, she delivered the talk—and got the job! A true virtuosa.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 7.

⁴⁶ Benjamin 41. See Ruddick.

⁴⁷ See note 33.

⁴⁸ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 44.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, 45.

important theological reflection.⁵⁰ In *Motherhood: A Confession*, Natalie Carnes similarly depicts her baby's radical dependence on her body during her pregnancy in theological language.

Writing to her daughter, Carnes discloses,

I was—as my body swelled and I lumbered ungracefully around the house—like a god to you. Or, more modestly, I was your first image of divinity. My body was your cosmos, the source that filled your needs and sustained your life. From your dark and watery perspective, I was your creator. In the beginning, I gave you a universe that was formless and void, and darkness covered your face. You knew me as a voice, a breath that vibrated over the waters of my womb.⁵¹

A theologian at Baylor, Carnes certainly knows that the phrase “like a god to you” evokes the second commandment, which forbids idolatry. Yet the comparison is not unwarranted: a fetus' dependence upon her mother is total. Confronting this extreme dependence, both during pregnancy and postpartum, can be deeply jarring for new mothers—especially, Benjamin notes, for those many women who are unaccustomed to having such power.⁵²

Losing one's self

We might think that the conferral of power to new mothers grants them some sort of integration of self, as we tend to associate power and agency in our western, liberal milieu. Yet, for new mothers, their newfound power often coincides with a profound fragmentation. The totalizing demand of another, conflicting with the new mother's allegiance to her own needs, can rend her “self” in two. This begins in pregnancy, when a new mother begins to notice the havoc that her changing body wreaks on her life in order to provide for the life she is creating. “From week to week I felt my body shift into different cycles,” Enright reflects, “like some slow-motion, flesh-based washing machine.”⁵³ Nelson describes it as “falling forever ... going to

⁵⁰ Benjamin, 49–53.

⁵¹ Carnes, *Motherhood*, 13.

⁵² Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 41.

⁵³ Enright, *Making Babies*, 30.

pieces.”⁵⁴ This unceasing revision undermines the pregnant person’s sense of continuity over time, as her body continuously remakes itself.

Furthermore, the strange metaphysics of pregnancy, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, already threatens to split the pregnant self in half, inasmuch as it is unclear whether the pregnant body is one or two. Indeed, in some sense the pregnant body is somehow both one *and* two. At birth, however, that which may have been one becomes two, and the fragmentation of the pregnant self intensifies. “Birth is not merely that which divides women from men,” Cusk writes; it also

divides women from themselves, so that a woman’s understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. ... To discover this is to feel that your life has become irretrievably mired in conflict, or caught in some mythic snare in which you will perpetually, vainly struggle.⁵⁵

Similarly, Jessie Greengrass’ 2018 novel *Sight* ends with the cutting of the protagonist’s umbilical cord, forcing mother and baby to transition from being “nothing but a single surface, joined” to being fundamentally separated.⁵⁶ One critic interpreted the scene as an amputation.⁵⁷

The disintegration of the maternal self comes into sharpest focus, however, when a mother’s bodily needs and her newborn’s needs swell—and diverge. While it is true that there are symbioses in pregnancy and early motherhood—such as investments in a mother’s health redounding to the child she carries—there are also countless points of divergence between the needs of mother and baby. Especially in the first days and weeks after childbirth, mothers must recover from the considerable work of labor and delivery. But this is precisely the same time that newborns are acclimatizing to life beyond the womb, which requires extensive instruction and training. Again, Rachel Cusk’s prose is worth quoting at length:

⁵⁴ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 84.

⁵⁵ Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 7.

⁵⁶ Greengrass, *Sight*, 193.

⁵⁷ McAlpin, “‘Sight’ Is A Penetrating Vision Of Motherhood, Science And More.”

By having a baby I have created a rival consciousness, one towards which my bond of duty is such that it easily gains power over me and holds me in an enfeebling tithe. My daughter quickly comes to replace me as the primary object of my care. I become an undone task, a phone call I can't seem to make, a bill I don't get around to paying. My life has the seething atmosphere of an untended garden.⁵⁸

One of the most visible sites of such conflict is the divergent sleep needs of mother and child. “When you lose sleep, you lose your mind,” explains Ari in Albert’s *After Birth*.⁵⁹ “The nap is everything.”⁶⁰ Everything, indeed: Ari is positively possessed by her desire for sleep. The words “sleep” and “asleep” appear at least fifty times in the short novel. “He refused sleep,” Ari moans. “Sleep, why wouldn’t he sleep? When might he sleep? We needed to sleep. All of us, sleepless. Lie down now and sleep. Nothing made sense. Sleep. Sleep. Sleeeeeeep.”⁶¹ Miranda July describes her postpartum sleeplessness as a

form of brainwashing, a process by which my old self was being molded, slowly but with a steady force, into a new shape: a mother. It hurt. I tried to be conscious while it happened, like watching my own surgery. I hoped to retain a tiny corner of the old me, just enough to warn other women with. But I knew this was unlikely; when the process was complete I wouldn’t have anything left to complain with, it wouldn’t hurt anymore, I wouldn’t remember.⁶²

The fragmentation of the maternal self is not merely conceptual; it is profoundly corporeal. Sleeplessness splinters the maternal consciousness, such that mothers often find themselves disordered, aimless, lost, zombified. “Sleeeeeeep.”

Another divergence emerges, especially for mothers who are authors, artists, or other professional creators, regarding a mother’s life-projects. Where babies need recurrent feeding and care—with their teaspoon-sized stomachs—those mothers whose vocational contexts expect sustained attention often must revise their working routines. This shift is unmistakable in many of the iterations of “mom lit” that have been reviewed in the preceding sections. The prose itself is not sustained, but reads in spills and spurts. Nelson’s *Argonauts* is famously episodic.

⁵⁸ Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 133.

⁵⁹ Albert, *After Birth*, 181.

⁶⁰ Albert, 182.

⁶¹ Albert, 50.

⁶² July, *The First Bad Man*, 220.

Enright's *Making Babies* comes mostly in three- and four-page bursts. Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions* is a simple diary, with daily entries preceding and following the birth of her son. The MacArthur award-winning playwright Sarah Ruhl evinced the same trend in the very title of her 2015 reflection on motherhood, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*. On the one hand, the experience of becoming and being a mother motivates these sublime reflections. But "here's the catch," writes Maggie Nelson. "Literally, physically, I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write."⁶³ Speaking of *Argonauts*, she estimates that "about nine-tenths of the words in this book were written 'free,' and the other one tenth, hooked up to a hospital-grade breast pump."⁶⁴ Perhaps this is one of the reasons that, as Rivka Galchen puts it in *Little Labors*, "[l]iterature has more dogs than babies."⁶⁵ On Cusk's telling, "[a] day spent at home caring for a child could not be more different from a day spent working in an office. Whatever their relative merits, they are days spent on opposite sides of the world."⁶⁶ Why? The sheer intermittence of it all. One of Ruhl's best essays, called "On Interruptions," includes the following evocative passage:

... please forgive the shortness of these essays; do imagine the silences that came between—the bodily fluids, the tears, the various shades of—

In the middle of that sentence my son came in and sat at my elbow and said tenderly, "Mom, can I poop here?" I think of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and how it needs a practical addendum about locks and bolts and soundproofing.

But I digress. I could lie to you and say that I intended to write something totalizing, something grand. But I confess that I had a more humble ambition — to preserve for myself, in rare private moments, some liberty of thought. Perhaps that is equally 7

My son just typed 7 on my computer.⁶⁷

In the first line, Ruhl performs the truncated sentences that so often punctuate mothers' thought processes. In the second and third, her longing for space to produce words is interrupted by her

⁶³ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 45.

⁶⁴ Nelson, 124.

⁶⁵ Galchen, *Little Labors*, 34. She adds: "... and also more abortions."

⁶⁶ Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 5.

⁶⁷ Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children, and Theater*, 4.

children's bodily functions and unruly keyboard-pounding. Ruhl's "humble ambition" to "preserve ... some liberty of thought" is ... "7."

So the fragmentation that new mothers experience can take place on a bodily register, and also on a vocational one. Another notable rift appears through time, marking a fundamental fissure between the time before baby's arrival and the time that follows it. Mothers throughout the literature speak of a "former self"—as in Miranda July's "tiny corner of the old me"—and the "new self," which is mostly disciplined by the demands of a child. "There's before and there's after," Elisa Albert writes.⁶⁸ Reflecting on the experience of becoming a mother, she meditates. "Broke me. Killed off the old self pretty thoroughly. That other woman is gone. That girl."⁶⁹ Rachel Cusk describes her delight, during her baby's naps, when she is able to "liaise, as if it were a lover, with my former life. These liaisons, though always thrilling, are often frantic. I dash about the house unable to decide what to do: to read, to work, to telephone my friends."⁷⁰

In their depictions of the fault line between before and after birth, these authors, and many others discussed in this chapter, disclose a transformation that is extraordinarily difficult to articulate. They speak to what the philosopher L.A. Paul has called "transformative experiences": those experiences which fundamentally change your self-understanding or relation to the world. Importantly, for Paul, these experiences could not ever be rationally pursued, because one cannot know in advance what it will be like to undergo the experience, and therefore cannot determine whether it is desirable according to one's own ends. In transformative experiences, Paul says, "you cannot know what it is like to have that kind of experience until you've had it."⁷¹ In her monograph on the concept, Paul presents the fictional trope of becoming a vampire as an archetypal illustration of a transformative experience. Before one is bitten, one

⁶⁸ Albert, *After Birth*, 172.

⁶⁹ Albert, 125.

⁷⁰ Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 65.

⁷¹ Paul, *Transformative Experience*, 1.

does not know what it is like to be a vampire, and thus could not pursue vampirehood rationally. Becoming a parent, and particularly becoming pregnant, is a very real corollary.⁷²

It is hard to describe the profundity of the shift between “before” and “after.” Anne Enright says, simply, “[a] child came out of me. I cannot understand this, or try to explain it. Except to say that my past life has become foreign to me.”⁷³ There is simply nothing else to say—no way to put the transformation into words. Yet, as we have seen, Miranda July wants to do so, in order to “warn other women.” Elisa Albert, too, writes of her desire, when she encounters pregnant women, “to take them by their shoulders and shake. I mean shake. Are you ready? ... I mean are you ready!? Like spiritually, bitches. Spiritually.”⁷⁴ The point of Paul’s concept of the transformative experience, though, is to underscore the degree to which one simply cannot be “ready,” as Albert puts it—spiritually or otherwise.

Woollard, a philosopher in Kingma’s BUMP project, has recently illustrated the epistemic transformativity of pregnancy in order to support the view that philosophical reasoning about abortion must take into consideration the accounts of those who are or have been pregnant.⁷⁵ Woollard’s project depends on classic assumptions of standpoint epistemology—most notably, that there are things that others cannot know about being *x* unless they are, themselves, *x*—to defend her view. Yet her employment of these assumptions applies them to the constituency of pregnant persons, whereas many standpoint epistemological projects focus on gender, race, or other classifications. This may draw the ire of those who, for any number of reasons, are troubled by their exclusion from membership in the category of “pregnant persons.” This may be because they have chosen not to become pregnant, or because they would like to and are unable to become pregnant, or some other reason. Especially those who suffer from social sanctions for not

⁷² Paul, 97.

⁷³ Enright, *Making Babies*, 47.

⁷⁴ Albert, *After Birth*, 52.

⁷⁵ Woollard, “Mother Knows Best”; Woollard, “Your Mother Should Know.”

having become pregnant are fairly distressed by Woollard's indication that they are missing out on important knowledge about pregnancy.

Yet it simply is the case that there are things that one cannot know apart from undergoing the experience of pregnancy. Indeed, in a recent conversation following her delivery of her first child, my own midwife was asked if, after supervising the births of hundreds of babies, she learned anything new from having delivered her own baby.⁷⁶ She most certainly had; she especially marveled at the extent of the pain of birth. "Could it be true that one has to experience in order to understand?" Cusk reflects. "I have always denied this idea, and yet of motherhood, for me at least, it seems to be the case."⁷⁷

Lacking control

Very closely tied to the experience of loss of self is the maternal experience of loss of control. "Motherhood is not knowledge or control," Rose writes. "It may have to make non-stop decisions, but not according to some fatuous logic of mastery."⁷⁸ This certainly rings true before, during, and after pregnancy. On the front end: some who yearn for a baby are unable to have one—or wait seemingly interminable months before conceiving. In fact, one of the most reliable places to find religious language in Amazon product reviews is on product pages for pregnancy tests.⁷⁹ I cannot think of other product reviews, other than for religious books or musical recordings, that would ever be likely to include the affirmation "Glory be to God!" At the same time, half of all U.S. pregnancies are unplanned. Of these unplanned pregnancies, 40% are

⁷⁶ This seems to me like a variation on Frank Jackson's writings about Mary, her room, and the color red. See note 5.

⁷⁷ Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 122.

⁷⁸ Rose, *Mothers*, 138.

⁷⁹ From reviews for the Amazon product page for the "Clearblue Digital Pregnancy Test with Smart Countdown, 2 Count": "Glory be to God"; "God is so good"; "Main thing is to pray to God because with him all things are possible"; "Just have to leave it to God"; "remember that God has a plan for your family"; "Lots and lots of faith, hope, and praying to our Lord."

“unwanted,” and 60% are “wanted later.”⁸⁰ Despite U.S. Representative Todd Akin’s notorious 2012 claim—that “the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down” in the case of a “legitimate rape”—women are not able to end unwanted pregnancies without medical intervention. (At least as many of the mentions of “God” in the product reviews just mentioned include the phrase “thank God.”)

After conceiving a child, pregnant persons confront the limits to their control repeatedly throughout their pregnancy. In some cases, this is as simple as the realization, like Maggie Nelson’s described above, that the bulge protruding from one’s belly is not something one can exercise control over but the movement of another residing within one’s bodily limits. At other moments, one’s lack of control is more general. Nelson describes it with these words: “Powerlessness, finitude, endurance. You are making the baby, but not directly. You are responsible for his welfare, but unable to control the core elements. ... You can’t reverse an unfolding structural or chromosomal disturbance by ingesting the right organic tea.”⁸¹ The threat of miscarriage, which haunts in particular those women who have endured it, reminds women that they are not the ultimate arbiters of their child’s health and life. Of course, this does not keep pregnant women from working as hard as they might to exercise control over their pregnancies—and others from urging them to do so.⁸²

Births, too, are often beyond pregnant persons’ control—despite the many efforts expectant mothers make to develop “birth plans.” Of course, the date and circumstances surrounding a birth are largely, if not completely, out of mothers’ control. Despite a panoply of traditional recommendations for bringing on labor—which, in order of efficacy from least to greatest,

⁸⁰ Unintended pregnancies accounted for 45% of all pregnancies in 2011, though less than half (18% of the total number) of those were “unwanted” pregnancies, rather than “wanted later” (27% of the total number). Furthermore, many (60%) of those unintended pregnancies are nevertheless carried to term. See “Unintended Pregnancy in the United States.”

⁸¹ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 91–92.

⁸² See the below section on the experience of being pregnant in public.

includes drinking castor oil, walking, eating dates, and having sex—birthing women are unable to decide when to birth their child. Over a third of births in the U.S. are accomplished through caesarian section, and many of these are undesired, emergency c-sections. A considerable number of pregnant women experience trauma during birth—a review of studies suggests the number is between nine and forty-four percent—and three percent will develop post-traumatic stress disorder after childbirth.⁸³ Many women describe a traumatic relation to the loss of autonomy they experience in birth, and amid the present hypermedicalization of pregnancy, there remain ways to grant birthing parents as much agency as possible. For this reason, some hospitals have instituted programs that integrate doulas and midwives in hospital environments, with the aim of enriching the advocacy and support granted to pregnant persons.⁸⁴ That said, there are always limits to the control that anyone can exercise over the event of childbirth. When faced with a baby’s decelerating heart rate, or maternal loss of blood pressure, medical professionals have little choice but to intervene medically in the process in ways that may indeed devastate the birthing mother.

Of course, the theme repeats in the period following birth. As many parents observe, it is always the baby, and not her parents, who calls the shots. One cannot ask a newborn to withhold her crying for a more opportune moment; one can only submit to her baby’s demands. “In the early days and months of first having a baby,” Mara Benjamin discloses, “the raw, immediate assault on my freedom—a freedom I had not even known I had previously enjoyed—struck me with overwhelming force.”⁸⁵ Elisa Albert’s phrasing is more severe; hers is “an awesome baby, a swell little guy. Still a baby, though, of which even the best are oppressive fascist bastard

⁸³ de Graaff et al., “Preventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Following Childbirth and Traumatic Birth Experiences.”

⁸⁴ Beets, “The Emergence of U.S. Hospital-Based Doula Programs.”

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 7.

dictator narcissists.”⁸⁶ Thus, while mothers do wield significant power over their children, as discussed above, they also are subject, in a sense, to the demands of their “dictator” children.

Moreover, not only are newborn babies uncontrollable, but they somehow also render their environs uncontrollable, too. Rachel Cusk writes with disgust about the state of her kitchen, where “unidentifiable matter describes paths, like the trail of a snail, over walls and surfaces. ... mess spreads like a force of nature, unstoppable. My clothes are limed with it; I find gobbets in my hair, on my shoes ... entropy appears to govern this overheated little space and chaos is forever imminent.”⁸⁷ Even as venerable an organizer as Marie Kondo chose to surrender to the chaos in the aftermath of the birth of her children.⁸⁸

There is also a certain lack of control that a new mother experiences regarding her own body parts. In the days and weeks following birth, a mother is likely to experience an involuntary bodily response to her newborn’s cry, called a “let-down” or “letting-down,” in which her breasts leak (or squirt) breastmilk. For this reason, one of the essential items women must buy to prepare for childbirth are disposable or reusable breastpads, which will prevent the milk that is involuntarily ejected from dampening. She may need to wear these for several months. Quill Kukla’s reminder that pregnant and recently pregnant bodies are unruly is worth revisiting here, especially insofar as this unruliness can be frustrating for new mothers themselves. I have known many women who had to get creative to cover leaks on their shirt creatively while at work or on campus.

It must be said, though, that this confrontation with and bewilderment at one’s lack of control in childbearing and childrearing may say more about *us* than it says about the babies. “People who spend years as adults already operating on the presumption (or perhaps illusion) of their

⁸⁶ Albert, *After Birth*, 13.

⁸⁷ Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 138.

⁸⁸ Koncius, “Marie Kondo’s Life Is Messier Now — and She’s Fine with It.”

own autonomy,” Benjamin writes, “are likely to be particularly surprised and troubled when confronted with the demands on the self that a small child imposes.”⁸⁹ In her book on motherhood, Judith Warner laments the way in which U.S. mothers, confronting their lack of control, seek to expand it. Warner calls us “control freaks,” who take on “a kind of magical thinking in which compulsive, trivial acts will bring all the unruliness of life under control.”⁹⁰ Formed and informed by the women’s rights movements of the sixties and seventies, she says, we fetishize choice, foregoing the kind of public policy that might enable women to be mothers *and* maintain a professional life. But this would require bringing women’s familial roles into public view in ways that contravene the privatization—and control—of family life.

Warner prescribes mothers to consider foregoing their aspirations at control and, admittedly, some of the recent “mom lit” advocates the same approach. Cusk, for example, acknowledges that motherhood does “constitute a sort of serfdom, a slavery, in that I am not free to go,” and that “[t]he harness of motherhood chafes my skin.”⁹¹ Yet she finds in motherhood a “freedom of a different sort”—the freedom from the pressure to be an author of one’s days. Interpreting a Coleridge poem, Cusk observes the transformation in which “[c]onfinement becomes freedom, ugliness beauty: parenthood is redemptive, transformative, creative. It is the means by which the self’s limits are broken open and entrance found to a greater landscape.”⁹² Mara Benjamin also explains that choosing to become a parent—to the degree that parenthood is chosen today—is “to choose both subjection and fulfillment. It is to willingly forfeit some element of ‘autonomy’ and ‘freedom’ for the sake of a different kind of fulfillment.”⁹³

⁸⁹ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 10.

⁹⁰ Warner, *Perfect Madness*, 44, 41.

⁹¹ Cusk, *A Life’s Work*, 135.

⁹² Cusk, 141.

⁹³ Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 10.

Perhaps these disclosures ought to induce us, then, to rethink what the contours might be of what we might reasonably expect to be under our control. It isn't the case that, in light of Warner's entreaty to forsake our "control-freakishness," we ought to maintain or expand many hospitals' rampant abrogation of birthing persons' autonomy. Yet it would likely be advantageous for new mothers especially to be allowed to cede the domestic control that is more or less illusory in the first place.

Breaking one's body

Any discussion of pregnancy and early motherhood that were to omit the visceral experiences that childbearers and childbirthers endure would be severely deficient. Central to any experience of pregnancy are the embodied challenges that those who carry and birth children undergo. The aforementioned embodied challenges that new mothers face include: mastitis, breastfeeding teething infants, sleeplessness, incontinence, and the discomfort of uncontrollable bodily movements. Yet this does not even begin to identify some of the most noteworthy, embodied difficulties of pregnancy: the chronic illness and nausea, the literal load that pregnant women must carry, and, of course, the pain of birth.

Morning sickness is one of the most recognizable symptoms of early pregnancy. Many Hollywood portrayals of pregnancy use morning sickness as the first indication of a character's pregnancy. The morning sickness that is portrayed in films and television is little more than show business. In most renderings, the hapless, recently knocked-up woman finds herself too-cutely vomiting into a toilet or trash can—and always in the morning. Contrary to these misrepresentations, morning sickness is not always confined to mornings; it is not always alleviated by vomiting; and it may linger throughout the pregnancy for some women who endure a condition called hyperemesis gravidarum. One friend with hyperemesis, for example, threw up

every single day of her pregnancy. Fortunately, this kind of extreme illness only affects about 1-2% of pregnant women—which is, it must be said, still a significant number, given that there are about three million pregnant persons in the country at any given time.⁹⁴ Morning sickness, on the other hand, is not at all rare: as many as eighty percent of those who are pregnant experience nausea and vomiting.⁹⁵ It can also undermine pregnant persons' appetites, such that they have difficulty eating.

Though morning sickness tends to be worst in the early phases of pregnancy, during later phases this discomfort is replaced with another, no less noteworthy one. Most women gain between 25 and 35 pounds by the time they reach the ninth month of pregnancy. This weight is not equally distributed, either, but protrudes distinctively from their abdomens. During my pregnancy, I likened the experience of carrying a growing child to having backpack with approximately 2-4 gallons of milk in it attached to one's frontside. The combined weight and protuberance can be a significant encumbrance for women. It can make otherwise ordinary activities, like walking, climbing stairs, and even standing, markedly more exhausting. It can also make navigating the world surprisingly complicated or different. Iris Marion Young describes the experience this way:

I move as if I could squeeze around chairs and through crowds as I could seven months before, only to find my way blocked by my own body sticking out in front of me, but yet not me, since I did not expect it to block my passage. As I lean over in my chair to tie my shoe, I am surprised by the graze of this hard belly on my thigh. I do not anticipate my body touching on itself, for my habits retain the old sense of my boundaries.⁹⁶

What's more, women who struggle with body issues can also find this growth both psychically challenging and physiologically dangerous.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ McCarthy, Lutomski, and Greene, "Hyperemesis Gravidarum." With an average of 3.7 million births and an average term of 38.5 weeks, that means that about 2.7 million women are pregnant at any time with a pregnancy they will carry to term. The number is likely significantly higher than that, given that between five hundred thousand and one million abortions are performed in the United States every year.

⁹⁵ McCarthy, Lutomski, and Greene.

⁹⁶ Young, "Pregnant Embodiment," 49–50.

⁹⁷ Ante et al., "Pregnancy Outcomes in Women with Anorexia Nervosa."

Of course, the most noteworthy physical challenge of pregnancy often comes at its end.⁹⁸ The first stage of this difficulty arises in the anticipation of what is to come. “When will it be,” Sylvia Plath writes, “the second when Time breaks / And eternity engulfs it, and I drown utterly?”⁹⁹ Writing of a communal realization shared by pregnant mothers in a prenatal class, Anne Enright puts it much less poetically: “all of us realised that there was a fundamental problem, here, of design. The hole just wasn’t big enough. And there was no escape now. I felt as though I had been watching a distant train for months and only now, when it was approaching, did I realise I was tied to the tracks.”¹⁰⁰ I remember undergoing a similar realization early in my seventh month of my first pregnancy. As I passed from each trimester to the next, I would think about all of the things that awaited me in the next phase of pregnancy. Early in my third trimester, however, I realized that there would not be a fourth. This phase was to end with a transition of grave proportions. It was only at that point—with an inescapable end in sight—that I began to develop a birthing plan and a stance on medical interventions like inductions, epidurals, and c-sections.

There is simply no way to describe the pain of childbirth.¹⁰¹ In *The Dialectic of Sex*, the second wave feminist Shulamith Firestone quotes a friend who explains childbirth is like “shitting a pumpkin,” and the characterization is not wholly wrong.¹⁰² The pain certainly does derive from the ejection of a sizeable (seven pound, on average) creature from within a pregnant person’s abdomen, through a not-so-broad birthing canal. But the agony of contractions afflict the entire body. “There is no miracle more cruel than this,” Sylvia Plath groans. “I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves. I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work. ... I am the center of an

⁹⁸ Back to the metaphysical questions with which this chapter opened: is childbirth *part* of pregnancy, or just its limit?

⁹⁹ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 179.

¹⁰⁰ Enright, *Making Babies*, 32.

¹⁰¹ The example, I think, fortifies Wittgenstein’s observation that there cannot be such a thing as a private language, though there most certainly can be private pain. There is simply no way to *mean* what it is to be in labor, though there are many (public) ways to approximate such meaning.

¹⁰² Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 198.

atrocities. What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering? Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life.”¹⁰³ The proximity of life and death in childbirth is a recurring theme in the literature. “It approached death,” Elisa Albert narrates. “And there’s no safe word. No, like, ‘stop this train, I want to get off.’ It was like being turned inside out. It was like my skin came off. My soul left my body. Ego firebomb. I thought I was exploding. ... And you’re alone in it. Your whole life, your whole self, just obliterated.”¹⁰⁴ I experienced the same grave threat. During the birth of my second child, with which I underwent no anesthetic, I asked my partner to let my first child know how much I loved him; I was certain I would not survive the birth.

Those that might assume that mothers who endure birth with the assistance of epidurals, or through caesarian section delivery, do not have to deal with the torment of contractions would be sorely mistaken. First, many mothers who undergo c-sections or receive epidurals only do so at the end of lengthy labor. Second, the recovery period from the process of childbirth can be particularly difficult to endure. In some cases, it can be *more* painful to recover from childbirth during which an epidural was administered, given that such labors can be longer and more likely to cause vaginal tearing. Caesarean sections can involve even more significant pain and recovery time. Though too few people recognize this, c-sections are major surgery, involving approximately five layers of stitches, and require up to six weeks for patients to recover. Of course, just as women who undergo c-sections are meant to be recovering, they also are welcoming a newborn and teaching it how to eat and sleep. Elisa Albert’s Ari undergoes a c-section, and describes the aftermath thus:

No, there would be no rest for me. There was no rest to be had. There was no escaping the brutal enormity of it: I had had a baby. I had been cut in half for no good reason, and no number of dissolving stitches was ever going to make me whole again. The hysterical imperative was to Feed Him from Myself continuously, no compromise. I had to be vigilant. Omnipresent. I had fallen victim to a commonplace violence, and now I had

¹⁰³ Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 179.

¹⁰⁴ Albert, *After Birth*, 109.

this baby and there was too much at stake. I had failed him out of the gate. Deprived him the vital, epic journey through the birth canal, my poor doped-up kitten. Poor helpless boy.¹⁰⁵

For those who are pregnant, there is “no escape,” as Enright puts it—indeed, childbirth is, as Enright later notes, “a theater of pain.”¹⁰⁶ Even as all the preceding dynamics unfold at the beginning of her child’s life, a birthing mother must also recover from the unimaginable, inarticulate pain that brought forth the child in the first place.

One of the most remarkable things about this task is that, just like the morning sickness, the weight of the pregnancy, and the birth itself: once you are pregnant, no one can face these challenges on your behalf.¹⁰⁷ As one midwife described labor to a writer for the New York Times: “[o]n one side there are all the women who have not given birth, and on the other there are all the mothers welcoming you with love and open arms. And in the middle is a long dark path, that *you and only you must walk alone*.”¹⁰⁸

Being pregnant in public

As if all these forces—the foreignness and dependence and sleeplessness and uncontrollability and pain—were not formidable enough, there is at least one other major force that pregnant women must contend with: the public. Even if certain new mothers are inclined to resist that impulse to recoup control, their social world is likely to pressure them to exercise unbearable degrees of responsibility for their child. In *Mass Hysteria*, for example, Quill Kukla painstakingly shows how pregnant women have for too long been directed to subject their every decision to careful consideration about what would best serve the fetus they carry. As they consider their meal choices, for example, pregnant women are told to “make every bite count,”

¹⁰⁵ Albert, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Enright, *Making Babies*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Of course, it must be said that many women do consider surrogacy in part for this reason.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, “Facing the Wind.” Emphasis added.

as per a passage of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* that Kukla cites. The passage continues:

You've got only nine months of meals and snacks with which to give your baby the best possible start in life. Make every one of them count. Before you close your mouth on a forkful of food, consider, 'Is this the best bite I can give my baby?' If it will benefit your baby, chew away. If it'll only benefit your sweet tooth or appease your appetite, put your fork down.¹⁰⁹

Failing to take the “dangers” of sweets and other temptations seriously constitutes what the authors of *What to Expect* call “Playing Baby Roulette.” One might object that this is only private advice, given individually to mothers. Kukla, however, illustrates how this kind of admonishment typifies a pervasive attitude that subordinates the needs and wishes of a pregnant woman to the welfare of the fetus she carries.

Pregnant women today are warned to avoid alcohol and smoking and to limit their caffeine intake. They are to refrain from consuming certain fish, soft cheeses, and unpasteurized milk products, as well as any foods that might contain listeria, including raw vegetables and cold meats. They are to avoid certain plastics, and withgo X-rays. At the same time, they must remember to drink plenty of water, to consume enough protein, to take their vitamins—but also to scrupulously ensure those vitamins contain enough iron and folic acid—to exercise regularly, and, somehow, to keep their stress levels low all the while. Foregoing any of these responsibilities equates to spinning the “Baby Roulette” wheel. While this particular regimen is new, the subjugation of women to a stringent curriculum of do's and don'ts during pregnancy is longstanding, as Kukla makes clear. *What to Expect* merely instantiates a prevailing public code about the constraints that pregnant women must—are publicly forced to—assume. Because of this public health consideration, Deborah Lupton explains, “the pregnant woman has become a

¹⁰⁹ As described in Kukla, *Mass Hysteria*, 129. A 2009 Atlantic article notes that Joan Wolf responded to this passage by writing, “any self-respecting pregnant woman should respond: ‘I am carrying 35 extra pounds and my ankles have swelled to the size of a life raft, and now I would like to eat some coconut-cream pie. So you know what you can do with this damned fork.’” Rosin, “The Case Against Breast-Feeding.”

public figure. Her body is on display for others to comment upon, and even to touch, in ways not considered appropriate of any other adult body. Pregnant women find themselves subject in public to a critical and censorious gaze which judges them on their choices.”¹¹⁰ Enright affirms Lupton’s analysis. “A pregnant woman is public property,” she writes. “I began to feel like a bus with ‘Mammy’ on the front — and the whole world was clambering on. Four women in a restaurant cheered when I ordered dessert. A friend went into a prolonged rage with me, for no reason at all. Everyone’s unconscious was very close to their mouth.”¹¹¹

What justifies this degree of intrusion into women’s private spaces and choices? A disturbing collectivism is at work, which discounts the personhood of the pregnant woman, with all its attendant rights and privileges, for the sake of the welfare of the future citizen. As Kukla portrays the problem,

...the fetus cannot become an inhabitant of civic space without serious repercussions for the maternal body in which it is housed. Insofar as the fetus is a public citizen whose rights and well-being are a matter of civic concern, the pregnant body, whose behavior can form and deform this fetus, becomes itself a civic space appropriately subject to social regulation and surveillance, like a school or a hospital. Likewise, pregnancy becomes a public project shaped by civic duties and responsibilities ... the quest for [newborn] excellence, which cannot be executed through direct control of mother’s bodies, is identified with the surveillance of the inside of these bodies—the making-public of this inner space.¹¹²

Berlant sharpens this analysis in their “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus.” On Berlant’s reading, it is not just that American women are told that they ought to be mothers, but also that they should concentrate only on their maternal responsibilities. A reproducing woman’s “capacity for other kinds of creative agency has become an obstacle to national reproduction.”¹¹³ We must not allow anything to distract us from the task before us—the task *within* us.

The collective interest in the wellbeing of the future citizens that pregnant women carry, though, does not necessarily translate into support for the work that pregnant women and new

¹¹⁰ Lupton, “‘Precious Cargo’: Foetal Subjects, Risk and Reproductive Citizenship,” 332.

¹¹¹ Enright, *Making Babies*, 19.

¹¹² Kukla, “Pregnant Bodies as Public Spaces,” 294–95.

¹¹³ Berlant, “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus,” 153.

mothers do. Elisa Albert's protagonist is asked by a colleague if breastfeeding is painful. "No," she responds. "The comments are painful. The stares of disgust kind of hurt."¹¹⁴ Once, when pumping beneath a modest cover in a public restaurant, I was asked to go somewhere else to do—and this word was articulated with disgust—"that." Shortly thereafter, I excused myself, dumbfounded by the brazenness of the demand. Weary-eyed, and needing to feed my son, I found a private space where I would not be so subject to the judgmental gaze of the public.

Lest we academics begin to imagine that we are innocent of this social coercion, we ought to be reminded that more progressive corners of our social world also, somehow, exhibit a shamelessness in expressing their opinions about women's reproductive choices. Elisa Albert's Ari, a doctoral student, describes her disclosure to her academic adviser about her pregnancy. "When I broke the news to Marianne that I was pregnant," Albert narrates, "she gazed out her office window, took a drag off a cigarette, angled a long, graceful exhale. *Well. If that's. What you think. You want.*"¹¹⁵ Once a fellow doctoral student told me that, upon becoming visibly pregnant, a student asked if she had obtained permission from her doctoral adviser before conceiving. She was astonished by the suggestion that one's adviser would have any prerogative to shape one's reproductive choices.

Of course, it also must be said that, to some extent, this kind of disrespect is not only applied to *pregnant* women, but to women more generally. Elisa Albert's narration is valuable again, here, and worth quoting at length:

Before I had a baby it was all about are you going to have a baby? How many more years left until you can't have a baby? What happens if time runs out and you've failed to have a baby? Will you have a baby? Will you, will you? What if you miss out and don't have a baby? Tick tock, tick tock! (By the way, psssst! Don't you want a baby? Does it matter?? Have one!) ... High-five, you did it! Well done. Now: are you going to have another one? Don't you want another one? And another? Are you going to have another? Are you? Are you?? Having the one, it turned out, wasn't enough to get the world, or the world inside your body, off your back.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Albert, *After Birth*, 118.

¹¹⁵ Albert, 164.

¹¹⁶ Albert, 121.

This kind of pressure is unbearable, and yet it does not abate, on Albert's telling—even after one has discharged her maternal duties.

What some of us know—and what we all must know

Whether more like the inaccessibility of the bat's consciousness, or more like the metamorphosis of a vampire's bite victim into a vampire, pregnancy and early motherhood involve the subjection to feelings, circumstances, and experiences that are difficult to articulate. There is a degree to which these experiences cannot be fully known apart from the firsthand experience of pregnancy itself.

Yet there is a sense in which it is, as per Enright's epigraph to this chapter, it is "important" for others to know what it is like to be pregnant. For, as I discuss in later chapters of this dissertation, pregnancy (and early motherhood) produces a social good. Appropriately distributing the burdens of that social good must be a major priority of *any* society, but especially a free and just society. It may be difficult, however, to know how exactly that distribution ought to proceed, when the disclosures of those who do this socially necessary work is so often overlooked.

To be fair, it is understandable that so many should divert their attention away from new mothers. There is so much that that she must face: her body's foreignness, her baby's radical dependence, her loss of self and control, her pain, and her subjection to public scrutiny. These discomforts may be difficult to assume, even if only hypothetically. Indeed, if Young is right that the bodily subjectivity of a pregnant person is "decentered"—in other words, "myself in the mode of not being myself"—that adds to the barriers that frustrate others' access to what it is like to be a new mother.¹¹⁷ The multiple texts that have served as the focal point of this chapter,

¹¹⁷ Young, "Pregnant Embodiment," 48.

however, each attempt, in various ways, to integrate the fragmented, porous, sleepless, painful experience of early motherhood such that these considerations can enter public discourses about how to redistribute the demanding responsibilities of childrearing.

It is my hope that the foregoing review of six major themes in these texts may, among other things, enable readers not themselves familiar with the experience of pregnancy to understand the way that pregnancy and early motherhood may help us to untangle enduring challenges in Christian ethics about human agency and social obligation.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPECTING: RECIPROCITY, COLLECTIVE ACTION, AND SOCIAL NORMS

Freedom will ... have some agreed upon but always debatable and revisable set of expectations that we make of one another as we become radically dependent on one another.

RUTH WILSON GILMORE¹

On the third September of 1967 at five in the morning, the entire nation of Sweden switched the side of the road its motorists were to drive on. Up until that day, Swedes had been driving on the left side of the road. But, because ninety percent of the cars in the country were imports with the driver's side on the right side, and because neighboring Norway and Finland both required driving on the left, Sweden's left-side-driving policy was unsafe. In 1963, the Swedish parliament decided to prepare over the next four years for a major switch, which would take place on "H-Day" (the "H" stands for "Höger," the word for right in Swedish).

As one might guess, the change required a great deal of money and effort. Eight thousand buses were modified. Over 360,000 traffic signs were prepared for the big switch and covered with plastic and tape until their unveiling on H-Day. On-ramps were made to become off-ramps, and vice versa. A Swedish television station even held a contest to prompt musicians to compose songs about the change. The winning entry was The Telstars' "Håll dej till höger, Svensson" ("Keep to the right, Svensson"), which played on a double entendre; in Swedish, "keeping to the right" means remaining faithful to one's spouse, while "going left" is shorthand for cheating. The total cost of the switch was estimated at 600 million Swedish Kronas, the equivalent of about 300 million US dollars today.

¹ Gilmore, "Abolition Geography."

One can imagine the momentousness of the change, and the need to invest such great sums in its preparation. What might otherwise be an insignificant difference—driving on one side of the road rather than the other—can be quite considerable when it involves eight million people coordinating their behavior in unison. Drivers cannot choose independently which side of the road they prefer to drive on, at least if they wish to remain alive; their choices are shaped by their expectations of how other motorists will proceed. The rules of the road would have to change for everyone all at once, and everyone would have to be assured that all others would know and obey the new arrangement.

The illustration is a bit idiosyncratic, but the H-Day episode clearly illuminates certain facts about human social life that often go unappreciated. First, social expectations facilitate human action, both cooperative and independent. When I get behind the wheel of a car, I have to know what side of the road locals drive on before I take off. That knowledge allows me to cooperate, insofar as it enables me and other motorists to avoid crashing into one another. But it also allows me to move freely on the road. Apart from my knowledge of and compliance with those social expectations, I would not be able to proceed. Second, those social expectations take time to develop or modify. Even in the case of H-Day, where the actual shift from left-side-driving to right-side-driving was coordinated in the ten minutes between 4:50 and 5:00 am on that Sunday morning, the change was only made possible by a protracted, twelve year-long effort to coordinate all Swedes' expectations.

These two points—the value of social expectations in facilitating social life, and the time it takes to form and modify social expectations—deserve the attention of social and political theorists. We are not particularly good at acknowledging the degree to which those human networks of social expectations, which we might even identify as a certain kind of matrices,

facilitate the kind of social cooperation that make our lives possible. In recent decades, we have improved our focus on the ways that spatial contexts like social environments shape our agency. We have situated justice spatially; we have, for example, paid attention to the micro- and macro-geographies of segregation, colonization, immigration, and climate change. But we have only just begun to situate justice *temporally*, as in the case of recent studies of the duty to provide reparations for collective wrongs. We have a long way to go yet in understanding the degree to which our choices are shaped by our enduring expectations about how we expect others to cooperate (or not), and what that means for ethics. We plan, individually and collectively, and it is in the context of those plans that we proceed through our days. We exert at least some control over how to spend our money, where we might go to school, what job we might take, and—of course—what kind of family we create. All of those determinations depend on our expectations of others' behavior: market projections, academic programs, guaranteed wages and contracts, and the presence or absence of promised supports for parents.² Without moderately clear expectations of what the future might hold—next week, next month, or next year—we have a difficult time cooperating at all. It is difficult to plan a trip, establish a relationship, take a new job, or choose a new residence without any sense of what future circumstances we might face.

In fact, uncertainty about the future uniquely afflicts the most marginalized in contemporary American society. Those who don't know how they will make next month's rent, or feed their families in the days to come—a number that is growing daily especially during the 2020 pandemic—are put in unbearable positions. It is hard to thrive at work or school when you face eviction, hunger, or both.³ Economic insecurity is not the only kind of uncertainty that those who

² For a poignant example of this point, see discussions of the importance of plans in trans scholar and activist Susan Stryker's "Institutionalizing Trans* Studies at the University of Arizona."

³ See, for example, recent revisions on Walter Mischel's famous 1972 "Marshmallow Test" that show that it is not *self-control* that lends to children's success in later years. Mischel drew a correlation between the ability of some young children to wait for a promised marshmallow and their later professional success. Psychologists at the

are marginalized face, however. As the most recent Supreme Court Justice was appointed, for example, many queer couples scrambled to move up their wedding ceremonies, to secure their marital status before it might be threatened in court.⁴ Meanwhile, many of those whose survival depends on medical treatment covered by insurance have begun to fear for their very lives.

In what follows, therefore, I turn our attention to the social expectations that make social life possible, including perhaps especially those of us who seek to gestate and birth children. It identifies in this network of expectations a kind of matrix apart from which none of us can develop or exercise agency. This may seem a bit of a departure from the focus of the prior literature review of “mom lit,” which concentrates forthrightly on the work and experience of pregnancy and early motherhood. Yet our dependency upon our expectations of others, which this chapter bids us better recognize, corresponds to and has bearing on the dependency of pregnancy, in ways that we will discover throughout the rest of this dissertation project.

This chapter thus focuses sharply on the interdependent nature of human action. It begins by reviewing the strides taken in the second half of the twentieth century in modeling that interdependent behavior with the help of game theory. It then focuses on what interdependent behavior looks like scaled up to the social level, involving “n-players,” as the game theorists call it, over repeated rounds of games. I then turn to the meta-normative systems that make up social grammars of responsibility by prescribing esteem and sanction for compliance and non-compliance with social norms, and thereafter show how these meta-normative systems, though valuable, can impede social change. Finally, I apply this discussion to a specific example: the failure to provide parental and especially maternity leave in the United States.

University of Rochester, however, have shown that the correlation Mischel identified relates to a deeper, more significant determinant: whether children *trusted* that a promised marshmallow would ever appear in the first place. See Kidd, Palmeri, and Aslin, “Rational Snacking.” Also see Desmond, *Evicted*.

⁴ Avery, “Gay Couples Race to Wed over Fears for Future of Same-Sex Marriage”; Swisher, “Amy Coney Barrett’s Rise Is a Threat to Families Like Mine.”

The principal claim of this chapter is that all too often, human beings fail to recognize the degree to which social expectations and norms make our lives possible. This holds true for many of those who enjoy various forms of privilege: without being explicitly intreated to do so, those living lives of privilege tend to be oblivious to the social norms that favor them. But it is not limited to such bearers of privilege. Even those who go uninsured or underinsured benefit from the Hippocratic oath—perhaps *especially* so, as those with means can afford to buy preferred care. Similarly, it is the most marginalized among us who stand to lose the most in the absence of environmental regulation, laws against unjust labor practices, and traffic rules. This chapter might be read, therefore, as a response to a trend which first emerged in queer theory, but which has since reached far beyond it, which condemns not only particular unjust normative systems, but normativity *as such*.⁵ In the following pages, I will entreat the reader to attend to the systems of social expectations that she depends upon, while nevertheless recognizing that some normative systems require reformation or elimination.

Interdependent decision theory

In many (or perhaps most) circumstances, the benefits or losses an agent stands to gain as a result of a choice they make also depends on the choices others make. Individuals therefore often select among several options available to them keeping in mind what others might do, and how

⁵ I have in mind here the work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, but this general posture is exemplified by some Afropessimists and postcolonial thinkers as well. The crucial point is that this literature is not only interested in critiquing *certain* systems of norms, but all exercise of norms as such. For an overview of the issue, see Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction”; Jagose, “The Trouble with Antinormativity.” These are both contributions to an issue of *differences* that Wiegman edited on “Queer Theory without Antinormativity.” It must be said that, people’s need to be able to make reasonable expectations about what the future might hold does not make it such that every expectation held is fair or just. Most men at the dawn of the twentieth century couldn’t have expected that women would be enfranchised within a few decades. Most segregationists—and probably a number of integrationists, too—expected that de jure segregation would continue indefinitely. The point that I want to underscore in the present chapter is that the activists that worked for women’s suffrage and racial integration were not looking to eliminate but to transform social expectations. It’s not the expecting as such that causes trouble, but the content of the expectations that demands revision. Suffragettes and civil rights activists did not merely want their opponents to stop expecting that they could limit the franchise; they wanted to ensure that women and people could expect to be able to vote, too.

others' choices will affect the consequences of their own action. In other words, individuals' choices are often *interdependent*. Consider the game of Rock, Paper, Scissors. Part of the game involves speculating about what one's opponent will do, because what one's opponent does determines the relative benefits or losses one stands to receive. Interdependent decision theory—better known as “game theory”—is a field of study developed in the mid-twentieth century to model and analyze the different varieties of interdependent decision structures that human agents find themselves in. Game theory shows us how each participants' expectations about others' actions can shape the terrain of human action. In this first section, I will present a brief primer on game theory to demonstrate its value for those who study ethics.

In its simplest form, game theory models decisions in a matrix, in which the various choices available to different actors (sometimes called “players”) are laid out in columns and rows.⁶ The consequences (sometimes called “payoffs”) available to each actor, given each combination of choices, are identified in each cell. For instance, drawing on the example that opened this chapter, we could model the relative consequences for two different actors as they choose what side of the road to drive on, while driving in opposite directions. In the table below, the first of the consequences pertains to Amani, and the second to Blake.

		Blake	
Amani:		Leftside	Rightside
	Leftside	Survive \ Survive	Crash \ Crash
	Rightside	Crash \ Crash	Survive \ Survive

It's apparent here that interests converge on the cells with consequences in bolded type. Amani and Blake are very likely going to decide to drive on the same side of the road, as it is in both of their interests to do so. Game theorists call this kind of arrangement a “pure coordination game.” One can simply stipulate which side of the road to drive on—left or right—and everyone is likely

⁶ That game theory is largely worked out through *matrices* is at least poetic in the context of this dissertation.

to comply because it is in everyone's individual interests to do so.⁷ Furthermore, game theorists refer to the kind of we see here as a “pure Nash equilibrium,” which names a situation in which each player is happy with the choice they made, given the choices that others made. (For sake of legibility, I have put the Nash equilibria in all of the matrices in this chapter in boldface.) In other words, neither Amani nor Blake have any regrets about their choices, as long as they both agree to drive on either the left or the right side of the road.

Not every decision humans face are win-win situations like those in pure coordination games. There are, for example, zero sum games, in which there are always winners and losers. Rock, Paper, Scissors is a great example of a zero-sum game. Here it is presented in a game theoretic matrix:

		Dani			
			Rock	Paper	Scissors
Cristian	Rock	Tie \ Tie	Lose \ Win	Win \ Lose	
	Paper	Win \ Lose	Tie \ Tie	Lose \ Win	
	Scissors	Lose \ Win	Win \ Lose	Tie \ Tie	

Usually, for the sake of simplicity, game theorists use numbers to identify the benefits and losses that each stands to earn:

		Dani			
			Rock	Paper	Scissors
Cristian	Rock	0 \ 0	-1 \ 1	1 \ -1	
	Paper	1 \ -1	0 \ 0	-1 \ 1	
	Scissors	-1 \ 1	1 \ -1	0 \ 0	

You can tell here that it is a zero-sum game, because the exact amount of gains one enjoys mirrors the exact amount of losses another suffers. Notice that, unlike in the coordination game above, there is no convergence here. Cristian and Dani don't end up converging on a combination of choices because there are no win-win possibilities. (Of course, that is a good

⁷ The phrase “Nash equilibrium” is only second to “supply and demand” in terms of the number of times it appears in economics textbooks.

thing in the case of Rock, Paper, Scissors —if there were predictable convergence, it would be a very boring game to play!)

The fact is, though, zero sum games are not nearly as common as we often take them to be. Some social psychologists call this “zero sum bias.”⁸ But even in non-zero-sum games, differing parties can have competing interests. In fact, I propose that many contexts we find ourselves in when we face decisions involve non-zero-sum games that nevertheless include conflicting interests. Consider the following variation on the pure coordination game, unhappily referred to as the “battle of the sexes.” In this game, Eun and Frankie are going to go on a date to see a movie this evening. They both would rather be together, but they disagree about which movie to see. Eun wants to see *Freaky*, the Kathryn Newton and Vince Vaughn horror flick; Frankie wants to see *Soul*. We might model their preferences as follows:

		Frankie	
Eun		<i>Freaky</i>	<i>Soul</i>
	<i>Freaky</i>	10 \ 5	0 \ 0
	<i>Soul</i>	0 \ 0	5 \ 10

It’s clearly the case that they ought to figure out, somehow, to make sure that they get to go to the same movie. But which one should do the sacrificing to ensure that they can go together? There is no convergence here. Their interests conflict *and yet* they would nevertheless be better off cooperating so that they can be together, which they both prefer to do.

At this point, we turn to one of the most well-known examples in game theory: the prisoner’s dilemma. The classic example involves two convicts facing imprisonment—hence the name—but a more common experience is worth drawing on to illustrate the game. Imagine that Gerry and Harper are roommates. Neither enjoys cleaning, and both have a bad habit of leaving their dishes in the sink. Each would prefer to relax and have the other do all the cleaning:

⁸ See, for example Meegan, “Zero-Sum Bias.”

	Harper		
Gerry		Clean	Don't clean
	Clean	5 \ 5	0 \ 8
	Don't clean	8 \ 0	3 \ 3

As the matrix shows, both would be better off if they worked together to clean, rather than living amid a pile of dishes. However, if either Gerry or Harper suspect that the other might cooperate and clean the dishes, they will be inclined to slack off and leave the cleaning to their roommate. The fact that either one could get away with slacking off if the other shows an inclination to clean—called “defecting” in the classic game theory literature—prevents the ideal arrangement, in which both clean, from being viable. Both end up leaving the cleaning to the other, and the dishes continue to pile up. The pure Nash equilibrium here is the combination in which both refrain from cleaning.

To solve this tragic arrangement, Gerry and Harper might try to reconfigure the incentive structure of the game, such that they suffer reputational or other losses if they slack off, or enjoy reputational or other gains if they cooperate together.⁹ By means of an agreement, perhaps even a contract, they can increase the appeal of the upper left-hand cell, or decrease the appeal of slacking off. They might thereby set up a new payoff matrix:

	Harper		
Gerry		Clean	Don't clean
	Clean	10 \ 10	0 \ 5
	Don't clean	5 \ 0	3 \ 3

As you can see, because of the benefits that their arrangement has added to the upper left-hand cell, Gerry and Harper might very well be inclined to clean together. This modification introduces a new pure Nash equilibrium, so that there are now two Nash equilibria: both cleaning or both slacking off. Notice, however, that even as there is a new possibility that both Gerry and Harper will cooperate and clean together, the old Nash equilibrium of not cleaning remains. If

⁹ I should also recognize here that it's not as if all cooperation is good: humans also cooperate to accomplish evil.

either suspects that the other might fail to cooperate with the cleaning efforts, that player will also refrain from cleaning. Game theorists call this kind of decision structure an “assurance game.”

The purpose of presenting these first few varieties of “games” or decision structures—pure coordination games, zero-sum games, prisoners dilemmas, and assurance games—is to show how interdependent choice structures can take several different forms. They can incentivize cooperation or competition, or even some combination of both. In each case, however, each deciding agent will base her decision largely on what she expects her partner to do. Whether or not there is a potential for mutual gain, if the consequences each deciding agent faces are influenced by others’ choices, agents will base their choices on what they expect others to do. Game theory helps to see how those expectations and incentive structures can shape human action.

Scaled up games and social norms

In the foregoing introduction to game theory, the games I have presented have involved only two players and only one iteration of choosing. The same analysis can be applied, however, to much more complicated social arrangements. We can model repeated choices in what game theorists call “iterated games,” and we can allow players to retain information about other players’ past choosing habits, such that agents can develop reputations for behaving in certain ways.

This is exactly what the political theorist Robert Axelrod did in a remarkable experiment in the early eighties.¹⁰ With new access to an early computer, Axelrod decided to set up a tournament in which he would have different computer programs “play” prisoner’s dilemmas

¹⁰ See Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*.

with one another, to see which strategies would be the most successful over hundreds of rounds. He invited experts in game theory to develop strategies for the tournament, conveyed in lines of computer code, and ultimately had fourteen such programs participate in the competition. What Axelrod discovered was astounding. Some scholars had developed extensive schemes of code to try to fool other participants or predict their behavior in the tournament's rounds, but the most successful program had only three lines. The program, called "Tit-for-Tat," would always begin by cooperating in the first round of a prisoner's dilemma. Thereafter, it would merely reciprocate its partner's behavior, cooperating with other cooperators and punishing non-cooperators. This strategy won the tournament and, when Axelrod published his findings and invited submissions for a second, larger tournament, Tit-for-Tat won a second time. When social expectations and reputations enter the picture, Axelrod used his tournament to show, even in competitive circumstances, "cooperation can emerge among egoists without central authority."¹¹

Axelrod gleaned four lessons from the success of the Tit-for-Tat strategy and others similar to it. The most successful strategies have four common characteristics, according to his analysis. They are: "nice," insofar as they always begin by cooperating; retaliatory, in that they punish defectors; forgiving, unlike other strategies which permanently punish defectors; and clear, making it easy for other strategies to recognize that Tit-for-Tat is nice, retaliatory, and forgiving.¹² While the first three characteristics are instructive, it is the fourth that I propose deserves particularly stringent attention. It is not only the *behavior* of the successful strategy that makes it successful, but its *predictability*. As Axelrod points out: "[i]n the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma, you benefit from the other player's cooperation. The trick is to encourage that cooperation." The best way to do so is for a strategy to make clear to one's partners that she

¹¹ Axelrod, viii.

¹² Axelrod, 54.

herself will be a cooperator, and not take advantage of her partner's cooperation. Crucial to the success of Tit-for-Tat is its establishment of mutual expectations of cooperation—and expectations about the cost of defection.

Axelrod thus provides an account of how cooperation might emerge among “egoist” agents even in the absence of some central authority. It thereby challenges the classical Hobbesian picture of a nasty and brutish state of nature needing some ascendant Leviathan to coerce subjects into cooperation. This analysis has been leveraged to explain behavior in evolutionary biology at both the level of the cell and the organism.¹³ Bats and birds and even bacteria demonstrate the kind of behavior that Axelrod's tournament predicts, all without any centralized command, or even deliberate intent to cooperate. Yet Axelrod's analysis in no way precludes the possibility of an expansive normalization of the kinds of expectations that already begin to develop in Tit-for-Tat's interaction with other strategies. The benefits to be gained from both cooperating and making it clear that one intends to cooperate may be amplified by formalization by conscious agents like humans. In social contexts where there are many actors with a low likelihood of facing one another repeatedly, the societal formalization of expectations of cooperation may be especially appropriate.

Or so Hume writes, anticipating twenty-first century game theory in his eighteenth century writing in the third book of his celebrated *Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume famously describes two men rowing a boat together, not as a result of any explicit promise or contract, but simply out of a common purpose of getting to their destination.¹⁴ Importantly, for Hume, humans' unremitting need for social cooperation instills in them the expectation of future cooperation with others, such that certain social habits begin to emerge and then self-replicate, not unlike

¹³ Shackelford, “The Theory of Reciprocal Altruism.”

¹⁴ Hume, “A Treatise of Human Nature III.2,” 11.

Axelrod's Tit-for-Tat. Hume calls this *convention*, that is, "a sense of common interest; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility."¹⁵ It is out of convention that we hop in the boat and expect our partner to row along. The problem, of course, is that there are ample incentives for some rowers to choose not to row—especially, we might imagine, when the boat has gotten sufficiently big that any one rower's laziness wouldn't make much of a difference. If a sufficient number were to refrain from cooperating, that would upend the common enterprise altogether. Thus, Hume writes: "[w]hatever is advantageous to two or more persons, if all perform their part, but what loses all advantage, if only one perform, can arise from no other principle [than a convention]" to be sustained.¹⁶ In the *Treatise*, Hume offers another helpful illustration:

Two neighbours may agree to drain a meadow, which they possess in common: because it is easy for them to know each other's mind; and each must perceive, that the immediate consequence of his failing in his part, is the abandoning the whole project. But it is very difficult, and indeed impossible, that a thousand persons should agree in any such action; it being difficult for them to concert so complicated a design, and still more difficult for them to execute it; while each seeks a pretext to free himself of the trouble and expence [*sic*], and would lay the whole burden on others.¹⁷

To address this sort of scenario, humans introduce notions of justice and injustice to ensure one another's compliance with mutually beneficial conventions.¹⁸ Justice, according to Hume, derives from humans' observation "that it is impossible to live in society without restraining

¹⁵ This definition comes from Appendix III of Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 95. Compare to the definition he offers in his *Treatise*, where convention is "a general sense of common interest; which sense all the members of society express to one another, and which induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules," in Hume, "A Treatise of Human Nature III.2," 11.

¹⁶ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 95.

¹⁷ Hume, "A Treatise of Human Nature III.2," 50.

¹⁸ Hume's good friend Adam Smith wrote similarly that "[s]ociety ... cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another. The moment that injury begins, the moment that mutual resentment and animosity take place, all the bands of it are broke asunder, and the different members of which it consisted are, as it were, dissipated and scattered abroad by the violence and opposition of their discordant affections. If there is any society among robbers and murderers, they must at least, according to the trite observation, abstain from robbing and murdering one another. ... Justice, on the contrary, is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society ... must in a moment crumble into atoms." In Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 86.

themselves by certain rules.”¹⁹ The fact of the matter is, we don’t simply face the meadow problem once; we face it over and over and over again. For Hume, problems like the meadow scenario are iterative, like the iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma in Axelrod’s tournament.²⁰ Thus, Hume writes:

I learn to do a service to another, without bearing him any real kindness; because I foresee that he will return my service, in expectation of another of the same kind, and in order to maintain the same correspondence of good offices with me or with others. And accordingly, after I have served him, and he is in possession of the advantage arising from my action, he is induced to perform his part, as foreseeing the consequences of his refusal.²¹

So to this sense of justice is added a further sense of *morality*, which stems from humans’ enjoyment of “pleasure from the view of such actions as tend to the peace of society, and [their] uneasiness from such as are contrary to it.”²² Such pleasure and uneasiness is cultivated and habituated in people by means of public discourse and parents’ rearing of children.²³ We come to learn what behavior is required of us for the realization of society’s ends through these cooperative practices.²⁴

The kind of problem Hume describes in his meadow scenario has since been referred to as a *collective action problem*. A collective action problem is a situation in which individuals have an incentive to behave contrary to the interests of the group of which they are a member, given each individual’s conflicting private interests. Why help drain the meadow, that is, when the other nine hundred and ninety-nine people will probably do it for you? The problem, of course, is that the other nine hundred and ninety-nine are thinking the same thing! There are several species of

¹⁹ Hume, “A Treatise of Human Nature III.2,” 46. See discussion in Freeman, “Property as an Institutional Convention in Hume’s Account of Justice,” 33–34.

²⁰ As such, Hardin portrays Hume as a sort of proto-game theorist. See Hardin, *David Hume*, 56–80, 222–27. (Hardin is, among other things, a theorist of collective action problems.)

²¹ Hume, “A Treatise of Human Nature III.2,” 37.

²² Hume, 46.

²³ Hume, 46–47.

²⁴ Thus Hume writes that each convention, such as the respect of others’ property, “arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing it ... this experience assures us still more, that the sense of interest has become common to all our fellows, and gives us a confidence of the future regularity of their conduct; and it is only on the expectation of this, that our moderation and abstinence are founded.” Hume, 11.

collective action problems, including prisoner's dilemmas, tragedies of the commons, and assurance games. Mancur Olson's 1965 *The Logic of Collective Action* is an influential contemporary analysis of this sort of problem.²⁵ On Olson's description, in a collective action problem, "unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests."²⁶

Some have suggested, like Hume did, that many social norms serve as the "other special device" to solve collective action problems.²⁷ After all, norms are more efficient and less costly than formal enforcement techniques.²⁸ Lawrence Lessig makes the case this way. Given a collective action problem—in his account, he uses the example of hypothetical villagers' contribution to a communal wine festival—a community has several options. First, they could hire an inspector or monitor to ensure compliance with the cooperative undertaking; this, however, could be quite costly. Alternately, they could install shock devices in each member of the community, to discourage members from failing to comply and aggravating the collective action problem. A much more effective technique, however, would be to instill members with *affective* "shock" devices—to make them *feel* unpleasantly when they did not comply with the communal effort.²⁹ (Recall here Hume's definition of convention as that "sense of common interest; which *sense each man feels in his own breast*, which he remarks in his fellows, and

²⁵ As is clear already, Olson was not the first to discuss collective action problems. (In fact, he never used the term.) The same underlying logic is discussed in Plato's *Republic* and motivates the inhabitants of Hobbes' state of nature to inaugurate a sovereign. Indeed, not only did Hume but also Hamilton and Madison and Mill discuss what could be called collective action problems. However, Olson's work served to integrate the insights of these prior works, and revive them in twentieth and twenty-first century political economy. For discussion, see Dougherty, "Public Goods Theory from Eighteenth Century Political Philosophy to Twentieth Century Economics."

²⁶ Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 2.

²⁷ See Lewis, *Convention*; Ullmann-Margalit, *The Emergence of Norms*; Elster, *The Cement of Society*.

²⁸ Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom shows that norms, especially in face-to-face communication, can be significantly more effective than formal systems of monitoring and sanctioning. See Ostrom, "Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms."

²⁹ Lessig, "The Regulation of Social Meaning," 994–97.

which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility.”³⁰) This, according to Lessig, explains the provenance of many social norms and their attendant “social meanings.” Social norms serve to influence individuals’ behavior such that it might better concord with the group’s collective purpose, particularly in cases where individuals have an incentive to defect.

Cristina Bicchieri similarly proposes that social norms often emerge in exactly this way.³¹ Echoing Hume, she writes, “in all those situations in which there is conflict of interest but also a potential for joint gain ... [w]e need social norms.”³² Social norms help us to expect that others will coordinate with us to achieve our common purpose. Without an expectation of cooperation on the part of those around us—if we were, say, to doubt our partners’ commitments to rowing or draining the meadow—we would have no incentive to comply ourselves. Social norms give each of us personal reasons for choosing to comply. By facilitating cooperation toward a common goal, social norms “induce pro-social behavior and maintain social order at low cost.”³³ In her theory of social norms, Bicchieri helpfully provides a distinction between empirical expectations—my expectation of what others will *do*—and normative expectations—my

³⁰ This definition comes from Appendix III of Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 95. Compare to the definition he offers in his *Treatise*, where convention is “a general sense of common interest; which sense all the members of society express to one another, and which induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules,” in Hume, “A Treatise of Human Nature III.2,” 11.

³¹ Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 113.

³² Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*, 3.

³³ Bicchieri, 7. That said, according to Bicchieri, some social norms develop from what Bicchieri calls conventions, which, as distinct from Hume’s use of the term, names social rules that “coordinate our expectations and often act as signals that facilitate interaction and communication.” Bicchieri, 34. She cites traffic rules as an archetypal example of a convention: we are induced to follow them because others are doing the same. Failing to comply with traffic rules comes with its own cost—no internalization of the norm is necessary, no instilling with guilt is necessary to motivate compliance. Drivers simply comply because it is clearly in their self-interest to do so. At times, however, these conventions transform into social norms, which, on Bicchieri’s account, are the kind of norms that bear normative weight. As Brennan et al similarly put the point, at times “a particular kind of intrinsically meaningless behaviour [*sic*]—passing port to the left, wearing black at funerals, or whatever—acquires normative significance in people’s mind through familiarity and habituation.” Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*, 102.

expectation of how others will *morally evaluate* my behavior. Social norms, in Bicchieri's model, involve *both* empirical and normative expectations.³⁴

Here it may be important to notice a correspondence between the affective shock device that Lessig conjures and the panopticon that Foucault theorizes in *Discipline and Punish*.³⁵ There, Foucault writes that in Bentham's efficient prison design, there is an internalization of the disciplinary force of the upper classes: "the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary."³⁶ Social norms that obtain in a contemporary society of bodies made docile by the bourgeois class do not even need to be enforced by the costly efforts of ruling classes; they are merely assumed by those who are subject to the norms. Given what has been shown in the preceding discussion, however, we ought to recognize that it is not the internalization of social norms and the minimization of enforcement costs *as such* that make certain social norms unjust, but their content and incontestability. Social norms play a vital role in the facilitation of social cooperation. Without them, we would be hardly able to enjoy many things available to us today—penicillin, rapid transportation, electricity—much less the kind of self-determination that most contemporary theorists, including many Foucauldians, are after.

The birth of responsibility

If Hume, Lessig, and Bicchieri are right, then social norms often emerge as a solution to collective action problems, like the collective undertaking of meadow draining Hume describes, or the distribution of common goods that Lessig discusses. In addressing these collective action problems, social norms demand particular behaviors or commitments of a collective's members. Social norms thus have particular content: be ready to contribute to the barn raising, say, when it

³⁴ Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 35.

³⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

³⁶ Foucault, 201.

is required, or wear a mask to protect others from the spread of COVID. Social norms can induce us to do particular things that are, at least to some degree, socially beneficial, when we might be inclined to do otherwise.

We might, however, also speak of “second-order norms”: norms about the way that those “first-order” social norms like barn raising and mask wearing are to be promulgated and enforced. We develop a sort of social grammar that identifies the consequences of norm compliance and non-compliance. This way, we reinforce our expectations of cooperative behavior from prospective partners with meta-expectations of endorsement and sanction. So goes Jay Wallace’s account of moral responsibility: our practices of holding one another accountable for our actions always presume the maintenance of certain expectations about how others will and ought to behave. His view builds on Strawson’s account tracing moral responsibility to humans’ “reactive attitudes” such as praise and blame, but Wallace further elaborates that the reactive attitudes of resentment, indignation, and guilt all appear when “some expectation has been breached.”³⁷ Philip Pettit’s approach to moral responsibility differs from Wallace’s in that it is less Strawsonian—that is, focused on the function of reactive attitudes—and centers instead on an agent’s ability to do otherwise. Yet Pettit, too, centers the function of social expectations. In his 2020 *Birth of Ethics*, Pettit writes that humans mutually become “subject to a reputational discipline in which, as a matter of common awareness, we expect one another to be suitably reliable ... The existence of this background pressure is bound to increase the prospects for our regulative success in holding one another responsible for telling the truth and for conforming in other ways to the moral standards that we take for granted.”³⁸ We come not only to expect that one another will be cooperative in the barn raising or mask wearing efforts, but also that those

³⁷ Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, 33.

³⁸ Pettit, *The Birth of Ethics*, 213–14.

who fail to comply with those expectations will face some sort of penalty for their non-compliance, generally speaking. The kind and extent of penalty a norm violator faces depends on criteria that are embedded in the system of normative expectations, but what is important is that the framework for holding individuals responsible for conforming to expectations is itself made up of systems of expectations.

Thus, we might speak of moral responsibility as a sort of grammar, with regulations that cooperating actors hold in common.³⁹ I understand your meaning when you tell me that, say, “the professor teaches students” not only because I understand what the nouns and verbs in that sentence point to, but also because I have certain expectations about word order and case in the English language, that might be otherwise if we were speaking a different language. Note that I am not here defending moral relativism. In fact, the comparison of moral responsibility to grammar has been used in conjunction with Chomsky’s linguistics to speculate about a minimalist universal moral theory!⁴⁰ Rather, I am pointing out that the social practices that elicit moral behavior on all of our parts depend on systems of expectations, functioning like grammar in linguistic communication.⁴¹ Apart from such systems of normative expectations, we would be unable to hold one another accountable, and without being able to hold one another accountable, our ability to expect mutual cooperation amid collective action problems would be severely constrained.⁴²

Pettit’s new work on the emergence of ethics, and his forthcoming work, *Minds that Speak*, both focus on the way that cooperative systems of responsibility holding might have developed.

³⁹ Adam Smith makes such a comparison; see Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 175. (III.6.11.)

⁴⁰ Roedder and Harman, “Linguistics and Moral Theory.”

⁴¹ Like Wallace, I both affirm moral facts about moral responsibility *and* want to insist that our access to those facts are mediated by our social practices of holding responsible. See Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, 89.

⁴² We also may see in these accountability systems a certain expression of our shared commitments. Jean Hampton eloquently lays out such a view in Hampton, “Correction Harms versus Righting Wrongs.”

Interestingly, however, Pettit does not at all discuss the role that religious practices and communities may have played in the development of normative expectations and responsibility holding. Recent scholarship has suggested, however, that ancient religious communities played a central role in facilitating large-scale cooperation by holding individuals accountable for their compliance or non-compliance with socially beneficial norms. In their highly-cited 2008 paper, “The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality,” Ara Norenzayan and Azim Shariff provide evidence for their claim that religious belief and practice correlate with prosocial behavior.⁴³ They describe social experiments they performed in which subjects were primed with religious (or non-religious, in the control group) language, and then invited to play a prisoner’s dilemma type game. Those who are primed with religious language tend to be more cooperative than those who are not. (This study has been repeated numerous times, in widely divergent cross-cultural settings, confirming Norenzayan and Shariff’s findings.⁴⁴) This preliminary research led Norenzayan to develop his findings into a book, *Big Gods*, which argues that “[p]rosocial religions, with their Big Gods who watch, intervene, and demand hard-to-fake loyalty displays, facilitated the rise of cooperation in large groups of anonymous strangers.”⁴⁵

It’s worth noting here that, as Norenzayan himself acknowledges, there is much more to be uncovered about the dark side of the cooperation that is developed among religious groups: religious prosociality may wane when prospective cooperative partners include members of religious outgroups.⁴⁶ Interestingly enough, early studies suggest that in experimental settings, religious people cooperate more with other religious people—even of other faiths—than with non-religious people. Whatever the case may be, what is crucial to this chapter is that religious

⁴³ Norenzayan and Shariff, “The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality.”

⁴⁴ Ahmed and Salas, “Religious Context and Prosociality”; Benjamin, Choi, and Fisher, “Religious Identity and Economic Behavior”; Rand et al., “Religious Motivations for Cooperation.”

⁴⁵ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 8.

⁴⁶ Norenzayan, 161–62.

communities have played an important role in regulating empirical and normative expectations, such that community members can expect cooperation from others. We may be all too familiar with the many normative expectations that religious communities uphold to the detriment of individuals, including religious practitioners' historic defense of slavery and segregation, and prohibition on interracial marriage and same-sex relationships. Again, these are particular detrimental normative systems. It would be wrongheaded to overlook the powerful contributions religious beliefs and practices make to the maintenance of social cooperation.

A final and related note concerns the upshots of Norenzayan's work. Some may interpret the claims in *Big Gods* as suggesting that religion merely serves the instrumental function of facilitating large-scale social cooperation.⁴⁷ This is not a necessary conclusion for a reader of Norenzayan to reach. It is perfectly possible that religions could be both true *and* socially advantageous. In fact, a Christian may want to point out that her Bible attests that humans are endowed with a natural, universal sociality—just as the social psychologists argue—but in her case as a theological truth. If, as she confesses as an article of faith, God made humans social (Gen. 2:18), it would make all the sense in the world for God's self-revelation to demand and organize solutions to collective action problems.

Norm change

Above, I discussed Lawrence Lessig's account of a community solving a collective action problem by instilling in each of its members a motivation to cooperate. This helps to modify the prisoner's dilemma of a collective action problem into an assurance game, encouraging cooperation. In the same text, however, Lessig points out a major shortcoming with the use of social norms to facilitate cooperation. While social norms can help overcome collective action

⁴⁷ Indeed, in Norenzayan's own words, "societies with atheist majorities—some of the most cooperative, peaceful, and prosperous in the world—climbed religion's ladder, and then kicked it away." Norenzayan, 9.

problems, he points out, they can also *themselves beget further collective action problems*. As Lessig puts it, social norms, which are “designed to *solve* collective action problems, do themselves *present* collective action problems in their own construction.”⁴⁸ Because the configuration of the social norm puts pressure on individuals to conform, there is little incentive to challenge the norm in the process of modifying it. Indeed, as the very purpose of norms is to compel individuals to comply, those social “entrepreneurs” who are daring enough to resist the norm will have to shoulder significant social costs in order to do so. Tragically, deleterious social norms are often maintained by precisely those individuals negatively affected by the norm. Consider Bicchieri’s observations regarding child marriage:

Even if one is convinced that sending the girl to school and delaying marriage would be the best course of action, one is in the grip of a *collective action problem*: it may be collectively beneficial to change behavior, but it is individually more convenient and less risky to embrace the status quo, provided one expects others to embrace it too. We conform to an inefficient or maladaptive norm because we expect others to conform as well. Mutual expectations are thus another factor that help or hinder change, because what we expect others to do influences our own choice. ... To escape the collective action trap, we need to develop new social expectations and trust that change is coming.⁴⁹

Accordingly, scholars interested in devising norm change—concerning damaging norms like female genital mutilation and open defecation—devote significant resources to figuring out how to induce individuals to coordinate their actions to overcome the norm to be changed. Gerry Mackie, for example, shows how the creation of “pledge associations” helped to eliminate the practice of footbinding in China.⁵⁰ These groups facilitated norm change by ensuring that individuals would not have to bear the cost of noncompliance alone, overcoming the collective action problem that the norm of footbinding brought about. This sort of accomplishment is harder than Mackie makes it seem, however. As Brennan et al write, “[u]nfortunately, the fact that norms often are spread within big groups means that it can be impossibly hard to change the

⁴⁸ Lessig, “The Regulation of Social Meaning,” 997. Italics in the original.

⁴⁹ Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 109. Italics in the original.

⁵⁰ Mackie, “Ending Footbinding and Infibulation.” Mackie explicitly draws on Schelling and Lewis, two mid-century theorists who suggested that norms solve coordination problems.

views of every potential sanctioner simultaneously. And any attempt to initiate change among a smaller group and then hoping it will spread ... is likely to be costly in the short term, since the remainder of society is still disposed to sanction the violations on the part of norm reformers.”⁵¹

As we have seen, norms may prove necessary to facilitate the accomplishment of a common purpose in a society. They are often developed in order to provide solutions to collective action problems. Trouble can arise, for example, when the circumstances that led to the institution of a particular social norm changes, but the social norms themselves don't keep up with the change. Or, in some cases, a social norm arises not with the purpose of solving a collective action problem, but just as a product of a common practice. Whatever their originating purpose, social norms can generate further collective problems, and, by virtue of the nature of the social norm, make it extremely difficult to surmount these further problems.

Take the example of patriarchal beauty standards. Women who comply with patriarchal beauty standards—wearing lipstick, high heels, and well-coiffed hair—are rewarded socially and professionally, and those who do not are sanctioned. As a woman, if I were to repudiate such standards amid, say, an academic presentation, I might risk not being taken seriously by my audience. (Other research shows more serious risks: those who comply with patriarchal standards of beauty are more likely to be hired, more likely to receive higher earnings, and, in courtrooms, more likely to receive shorter prison sentences.⁵²) There are sanctions for non-compliance with the social norm, and so I dare not fail to don lipstick and curl my hair.

There is a new prisoner's-dilemma-like collective action problem emerging here. I—and every other woman subject to unfair beauty standards—would benefit from the rejection of norms that require women to spend precious time on their appearance, subject their bodies to

⁵¹ Brennan et al., *Explaining Norms*, 182.

⁵² Swanson, “The Real Reason That so Many Women Have to Spend so Much Time Getting Ready.”

pain, and maintain the predominance of the male gaze. However, apart from some expectation that other women would do the same, I am loathe to reject such standards singlehandedly, because I will suffer sanctions for doing so. However, unlike the collective action problems discussed above—like the mutually beneficial enterprise of draining a meadow, or efforts to wear masks to limit the spread of COVID—there is a preexisting social norm that impedes the coordination of women to collectively commit to reject patriarchal standards of beauty. This same dynamic obtains in the cases of all sorts of harmful social norms.

There are several, albeit limited, strategies for overcoming this difficulty. The first involves the second-order norms that make up our grammar of moral responsibility. It may be beneficial to maintain space for dissenters of social norms, particularly when such dissenters demonstrate their dissent is principled in nature. In the United States, for example, we make accommodations for conscientious objectors, who effectively function as non-cooperators in a collective action problem, but do so for some principled reason. Second, it may be worthwhile to develop social practices that encourage independent thinking and norm dissent when appropriate. Many American writers like Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey, for example, were committed to the idea that democracies required people who were willing to risk social sanction to accomplish norm change necessary for justice. Third, Bicchieri points out that certain individuals are better positioned than others to be norm-change pioneers. According to Bicchieri's account, women who have already achieved a great deal of professional credibility have the ability to flout social norms—though they are unlikely to do so, as those who enjoy a better social positionality may be more invested in the maintenance of social norms. Bicchieri thus recognizes the importance of

those in the middle, so to speak: not too marginalized to have minimal resources for pioneering, but not too socially invested to be disincentivized from that pioneering.⁵³

Finally, but certainly not least, law can play a crucial role in modifying detrimental social norms. However, law is an unreliable tool for achieving norm change and must be employed judiciously.⁵⁴ While law *can* shape public behavior, it is not always guaranteed that it will effectively do so. Lessig, for example, discusses what he calls “the Orwell effect,” which names the way the public tends to resist the governmental regulation of social meanings and social norms.⁵⁵ In order to avoid the Orwell Effect, legislation regarding norm change should appear to be nothing more than the formal support of popular effort, rather than a top-down intervention. As Bicchieri points out, such laws can convey to the public that there is not widespread support for an action, given that individuals would have to be coerced to comply.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, with demonstrated public support, laws can serve an expressive and transformative function regarding social norms. Law can, for example, require vaccination of public employees and, by galvanizing citizens to receive vaccinations, normalize the experience of vaccination for all. Law could also be useful in modifying expectations and attendant material conditions regarding maternity and parental leave—an example to which we now turn.

Leave: A lot to be desired

There are only a handful of countries in the world that don’t guarantee women paid maternity leave, most small nations in the Pacific Islands.⁵⁷ Among this infamous group, however, is the United States. Here, the only federal law that facilitates women’s leave after the birth of a child is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which simply ensures that those who do choose

⁵³ Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 165–71.

⁵⁴ See discussion in Bicchieri, 143–47.

⁵⁵ Lessig, “The Regulation of Social Meaning,” 1017.

⁵⁶ Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 146.

⁵⁷ Meanwhile, 85% of the globe’s nations offer *at least twelve weeks* of paid leave.

to take up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave cannot lose their job for doing so. Further, only just over half of the U.S. workforce is eligible to avail themselves of this benefit—and that’s for *unpaid* leave. Perhaps that’s one reason why, according to a Department of Health and Human Services report, in recent years almost one-third of pregnant working women *did not take any maternity leave at all*.⁵⁸

The effects of the absence of such a policy go far beyond the three months that doctors recommend women stay at home with their children. Paid maternity leave is tied to an increase in childhood vaccination rates,⁵⁹ a rise in breastfeeding (and all of the benefits that follow from breastfeeding, including the fortification of infants’ immune systems, and a lower risk of diabetes, heart attacks, and breast cancer),⁶⁰ and improved cognition and educational achievement.⁶¹ Paid leave also decreases mothers’ risk of postpartum depression, and there’s even evidence that paid paternal leave might lower divorce rates.⁶² Paid leave would also boost the economy, insofar as it has been shown to keep women in the workforce. The New York Times claims that the nation’s GDP would have been eleven percent lower in 2012 if women’s labor force participation had remained the same since the seventies.⁶³ At the same time, paid leave would reduce mothers’ need for public assistance. According to a Rutgers study, women who return to work after paid leave are forty percent less likely to receive food stamps.⁶⁴ Further, the institution of paid maternity leave policy would most likely increase the national fertility rate, which has collapsed in recent years and stands at a thirty-year low. This is not simply because women would prefer not to have children. In fact, the gap between the number of children

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Women’s Health USA 2011,” 54.

⁵⁹ Daku, Raub, and Heymann, “Maternal Leave Policies and Vaccination Coverage.”

⁶⁰ Chatterji and Markowitz, “Family Leave after Childbirth and the Mental Health of New Mothers”; Appelbaum and Milkman, “Leaves That Pay,” 25–26.

⁶¹ Huerta et al., “Fathers’ Leave, Fathers’ Involvement and Child Development,” 34–37.

⁶² There’s even evidence that paternal leave might lower divorce rates. See Huerta et al., 8.

⁶³ Covert, “Working Women Peaked Two Decades Ago.”

⁶⁴ Houser and Vartanian, “Pay Matters,” 2.

women report wanting to have and the number they actually have is the highest now that it's been in forty years.⁶⁵ Why? The leading reason that women are choosing not to get pregnant is out of concern for their economic stability.⁶⁶ A paid leave policy would help to assuage these valid concerns. Most importantly, perhaps, the absence of a paid maternity leave policy in the United States contributes substantially to the gender pay gap. Whereas women just out of college make ninety percent of what their male counterparts make, by age forty-five that gap grows, such that women make only *fifty-five* cents on a man's dollar. Reports suggest that most of this gap emerges as a result of women's leave from work following the birth of a child, and that paid maternity leave would do much to change this trend.⁶⁷ Paid maternity leave would significantly improve all these areas of American life, and particularly American women's lives. Yet, for some reason, this remains one of the most overlooked issues of our time.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, it must be said that the mere institution of a paid leave policy will not, of itself, fix the gender pay gap. Norms relating to parenthood and work, too, need to change.⁶⁹ For example, a 2016 Deloitte survey revealed that, even if offered paid parental leave, 36% of men would not take it, for fear of appearing insufficiently committed to their career.⁷⁰ Indeed, in countries like Austria, the Czech Republic, and Poland, where parental leave is transferable such

⁶⁵ Stone, "Decline in Fertility, Below Even What Young Women Say They Want."

⁶⁶ Miller, "A Baby Bust, Rooted in Economic Insecurity." According to the survey, those who reported they did not intend to have as many children as they would like for the following reasons: 64% reported child care being too expensive as a factor; 49% reported worry about the economy; 44% said they could not afford more children; 39% explicitly said it was because there was not enough paid family leave; and 38% said it was because they had no paid family leave.

⁶⁷ Miller, "Motherhood Has Role In the Gender Pay Gap."

⁶⁸ Much ado, for example, was made about what then-Supreme-Court-nominee Neil Gorsuch's position on abortion might be during his confirmation hearing. Hardly any attention was given, however, to his flippant remarks about the prevalence of women "manipulating" companies by taking advantage of maternity benefits and then quitting. See Barnes, O'Keefe, and Sullivan, "Gorsuch Faces Partisan Divide as Hearing Opens."

⁶⁹ I should note that throughout this chapter I take for granted the preponderance of opposite-sex couples in families. By no means do I want to contribute to the normalization of heterosexual couples; I simply recognize that that is the most commonplace arrangement in the United States today. Less than a third of a percent of America's seventy million children live with two parents of the same sex. See Gates, "Marriage and Family." Three quarters live with two parents of the opposite sex.

⁷⁰ Deloitte, "Parental Leave Survey."

that either parent could take time off, only three percent of fathers ever make use of it.⁷¹ Men who take time off are often jeered for their presumed lack of dedication to their work, or their being out of place by choosing to stay home with their newborn. “What’s a man going to do with a baby,” joked an employer about paternity leave on a recent sitcom, “*hold it?*”⁷² Of course not: that’s women’s work.

Where existing social norms induce women to shoulder motherly labor, they no longer square with the present-day reality of dual income parenthood. Prevailing social norms—which have been reflected in federal and several states’ laws—both disproportionately consign women to the work of parenthood, and then punish women for serving that role. Women who do have children are almost always expected to serve as their primary caretaker.⁷³ Women who choose not to have children, on the other hand, are dogged with questions and even regularly dissuaded or even medically thwarted from making that choice by medical professionals.⁷⁴

The trouble, however, is that these timeworn norms are not compatible with today’s state of affairs. Circumstances have changed. Indeed, women’s participation in the labor force nearly doubled from thirty-two percent in the postwar period to sixty percent in the late nineties (though that number has since dropped to fifty-seven percent in 2017).⁷⁵ Women have taken to the workforce, and the nation’s economy has benefited. Data gathered at the Federal Reserve show that women’s increased participation in the labor force contributed about half a percentage point per year to the national gross domestic product.⁷⁶ At the same time, the number of dual income

⁷¹ “A Father’s Place.”

⁷² The “Manternity” episode from the third season of *Black-ish* discusses the stigma of taking paternity leave.

⁷³ Wang, Parker, and Taylor, “Breadwinner Moms.”

⁷⁴ Weissman, “Doctors Fail Women Who Don’t Want Children.” According to reports, some doctors will refuse to give women the medical treatments to eliminate fertility that they desire.

⁷⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Women in the Labor Force: A Databook” Table 2. And whereas, in 1975, only 47 percent of mothers with children under eighteen at home participated in the labor force, that number has since jumped to 71 percent.

⁷⁶ Yellen, “So We All Can Succeed.”

households has skyrocketed. Half a century ago, only one in four married couples with children lived off two incomes, but today, in over two-thirds of households, mothers serve as breadwinners or co-breadwinners.⁷⁷ The stay-at-home-mom is no longer the norm.

Yet prevailing social norms have not caught up with this change. Women are expected to spend time at home with their kids. Whether voluntarily or no, mothers certainly do bear a disproportionate share of the work of parenthood. A Pew study shows that, while almost half of all dual-income families claim to share the responsibilities of caring for the children when they're sick, in another forty-seven percent of families, the mother does the lion's share of that work.⁷⁸ When it comes to handling children's activities more generally, mothers take on the primary responsibilities in fifty-four percent of families, as opposed to the thirty-nine percent of families that share the work more equitably.⁷⁹ As such, mothers are regularly penalized in terms of hiring salaries, raises, and promotions—a phenomenon which some sociologists have started to refer to as “the motherhood penalty.”⁸⁰

Motherhood has become even more of an onus than it already is. As a result, significantly fewer women are choosing to be mothers, such that experts have begun to speak of a “baby bust.”⁸¹ Those who do choose to be mothers, on the other hand, are leaving the labor force, as additional wages barely cover the costs of childcare, and many workplace policies do not offer the kind of flexibility that primary caretakers tend to need.⁸² Both of these trends yield negative outcomes for the nation. The fact is that U.S. society cannot enjoy the benefits of having more

⁷⁷ Glynn, “Breadwinning Mothers Are Increasingly the U.S. Norm.”

⁷⁸ Pew Research Center, “Raising Kids and Running a Household,” 3.

⁷⁹ Pew Research Center, 3.

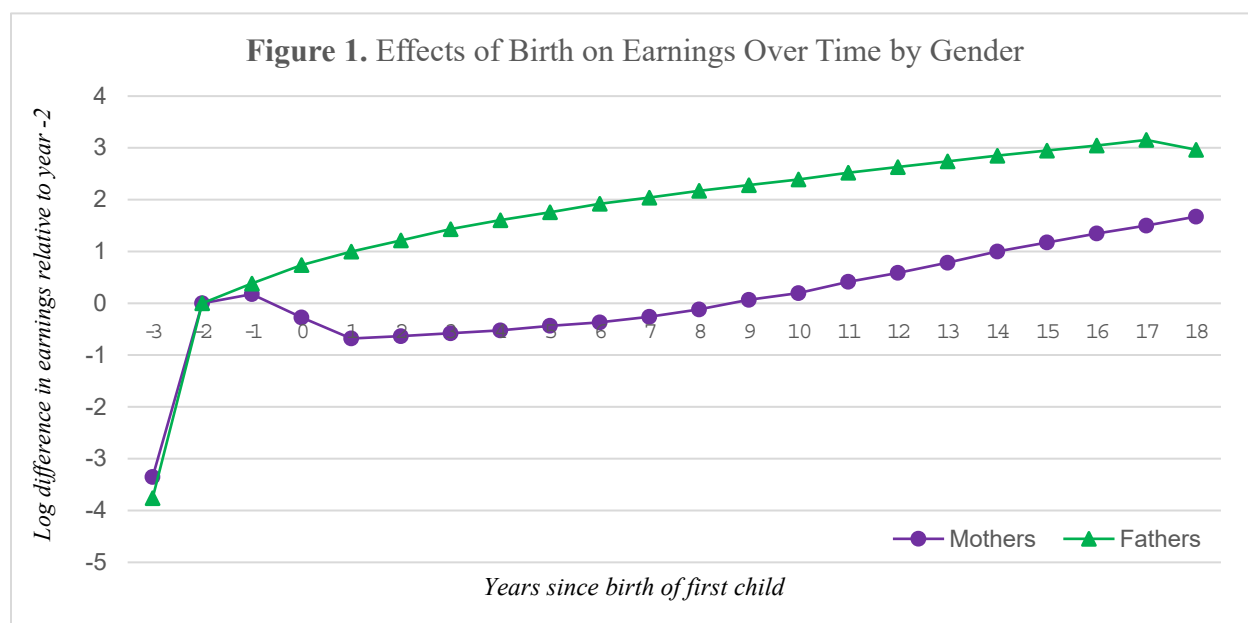
⁸⁰ Budig, “The Fatherhood Bonus and the Motherhood Penalty.” Low-income earners are particularly impacted by this trend.

⁸¹ Miller, “A Baby Bust, Rooted in Economic Insecurity.”

⁸² Blau and Kahn, “Female Labor Supply.” According to the Center for American Progress, in not a single state in the country is the average childcare cost *for one child* under the federal definition of “affordable”—at seven percent of median household income. Instead, in twelve states, the cost of childcare *for one child* is three times that. See Workman and Jessen-Howard, “Understanding the True Cost of Child Care for Infants and Toddlers.”

women participate in the labor force, boost birthrates, and maintain social norms that demand mothers do the bulk of the family’s caregiving all at the same time. If we want to pull off the first two, norms about motherhood must change.

One of the major impediments to norm change in this case, however, has to do with the way that norms concerning motherhood, like all norms, tend to be self-reinforcing and even self-justifying. After all, it makes sense for families considering having one parent stay home with the children to choose to have the one who earns less to do so. Given that women’s salaries are likely to decline after having children, as per Figure 1^{Error! Reference source not found.} below, it’s only logical for mothers to be the one to do so.⁸³



With childcare costs exceeding the costs of college tuition in most parts of the United States, that decision is becoming more and more common.⁸⁴ This further reinforces the stereotype of the stay-at-home-mom and contributes to the drop in women’s participation in the labor force and in women’s wages. “That reinforces the pay gap in the labor market,” says economist Sari Kerr,

⁸³ Chung et al., “The Parental Gender Earnings Gap in the United States.” Cited in Miller, “The 10-Year Baby Window That Is the Key to the Women’s Pay Gap.”

⁸⁴ Quart, “Crushed by the Cost of Child Care.” That’s per child, so those with multiple kids face exorbitant childcare costs.

“and we’re trapped in this self-reinforcing cycle.”⁸⁵ What’s noteworthy here is that, because of the prevailing norm, it becomes perfectly rational for women to choose to exit the workforce, even if, all things considered, doing so is detrimental to both themselves and society in the long run. In the United States, barring her confidence that things will be otherwise, it is often sensible for new mothers to choose to stay home and leave the breadwinning to fathers.

A similar dynamic ensnares men who would otherwise prefer to concentrate on their families, and, say, take paternity leave. Not only might a decision to do so be desirable for some fathers, but it could also contribute to curbing the gender pay gap. Studies show that women might not face the discriminatory hiring practices revealed by Correll’s study mentioned above, if men were expected to be just as likely as women to take time away from their jobs in the months following the birth of a child. Yet, men are not inclined to take parental leave, given the impacts such actions might have on their professional life. As discussed above, over a third of men surveyed by Deloitte in 2016 said that, even if they were to have access to paid paternity leave, they wouldn’t take it for fear of jeopardizing their job. Those fears are not unfounded; a series of studies in 2013 has illuminated the reality of the penalties men face upon taking family leave.⁸⁶ And, in many countries where paid paternity leave is available, men don’t take it—precisely for that reason. Again, men’s hesitance regarding being publicly more involved with their family is *perfectly rational* for both fathers and mothers. The negative sanctions that might arise as a result of fathers’ resistance to the norm that men be committed to their work would be detrimental to both members of the family. It’s clear that men are constrained by social norms regarding parenthood, too. For this reason, Anne-Marie Slaughter, the author of the famed

⁸⁵ Miller, “Motherhood Has Role In the Gender Pay Gap.”

⁸⁶ Coltrane et al., “Fathers and the Flexibility Stigma”; Vandello et al., “When Equal Isn’t Really Equal”; Rudman and Mescher, “Penalizing Men Who Request a Family Leave.” Discussed in Williams, “The Daddy Dilemma.”

Atlantic piece, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” has since insisted that men, too, suffer from the negative effects of social norms about parenthood.⁸⁷

Public figures have thus begun to start advocating for legislation regarding family-friendly policies like parental leave, most notably in the currently ongoing discussion surrounding the Democrats’ 2021 reconciliation bill. As discussed above, however, there are significant limits to the contributions law can make in facilitating norm change. Furthermore, law is not always very effective in bringing about behavioral change. Again, in the case of paternity leave, in many countries where as many as fifty-two weeks are offered to men following the birth of a child, very few men avail themselves of that benefit.⁸⁸ Law may provide for benefits like paid paternity leave, but it’s not likely to be successful in changing norms concerning parenthood if it *forces* men to take such leave.⁸⁹ (Contrast this with the possibility of *employers* mandating that men take paternity leave after the birth of a child—an approach that has already gained traction.⁹⁰)

Yet there are ways that public policy could “nudge” men to take paternity leave. In Sweden, for example, a parental leave “bonus,” in which both parents get additional access to paid leave only if the father takes paternity leave, has been offered to incentivize men to stay home with their children. Today, more than eighty-five percent of Swedish fathers take paternity leave. The norm has reversed: whereas, before Sweden instituted its progressive paternity leave policies, the six percent of fathers that took paternity leave were jeered as “velvet dads,” today it is those who

⁸⁷ The problem, according to Slaughter, is not just that women are confined by stereotypes about motherhood—though they are—but also that caregiving in general is underappreciated in our country. Slaughter is, however, careful to note that the degrees and kinds of constraint men and women face with regard to social norms about parenthood are not equivalent. Slaughter, *Unfinished Business*, 40, 129.

⁸⁸ Japan offers a year, and yet no more than three percent of men have ever taken any of that leave, as per Miyajima and Yamaguchi, “I Want to but I Won’t.” Similar numbers are reported throughout Europe, according to “A Father’s Place.”

⁸⁹ See, similarly, Lessig’s discussing of the outlawing of dueling in Lessig, “The Regulation of Social Meaning,” 968–72. Perhaps this is what one leading activist for parental leave and gender pay equity has in mind when she declares that “[w]ell-intentioned policies backfire 98 percent of the time ... We are thinking about policy when we should be thinking about the workplace.” Kliff, “The Truth about the Gender Wage Gap.”

⁹⁰ Lipman, “Want Equality? Make New Dads Stay Home.”

choose *not* to take leave that are frowned upon.⁹¹ This shift illustrates an important point that Bicchieri makes about norm change. As mentioned above, in her conceptual framework, Bicchieri shows that social norms are always supported by two sets of expectations individuals have about those around them: empirical expectations (that is, one's expectations about what others will *do*) and normative expectations (one's expectations about what others *believe all ought to do*).⁹² According to Bicchieri, norms tend to emerge when normative expectations are established and begin to shape behavior, which in turn generates empirical expectations. Yet, in patterns of norm change, the opposite happens. When behavior is modified, such that individuals' empirical expectations change, a change in normative expectations follows.⁹³ Return to the Swedish case. By sheer force of their growth in numbers, Swedish paternity leave takers transform from "velvet dads" to upstanding fathers, making it easier for all fathers to decide to take paternity leave. Legal measures that nudge behavior, like Sweden's "bonus" parental leave policy, may thus help to change practices just enough to cause a transformation in social norms about what makes a "good" mother or father.

We might also say that legislation regarding parental leave, and especially maternity leave, would not only be prudent but also an imperative of justice. As scholars have noted, the law also serves an expressive function.⁹⁴ Accordingly, it would be worthwhile for our society to signal its recognition of the contributions parents, and especially women, make to the gestating and rearing of the nation's future generations. It is, after all, undeniable that women bear an unequal burden in the work of reproduction; the measures whereby men become fathers are much less

⁹¹ Bennhold, "Paternity Leave Law Helps to Redefine Masculinity in Sweden."

⁹² Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 70.

⁹³ Bicchieri, 111.

⁹⁴ Bicchieri observes that the law serves a signaling function in Bicchieri, 143. Lessig argues that law has a role in the construction of social meanings in Lessig, "The Regulation of Social Meaning," 948. For a comprehensive and valuable discussion of claims about the expressive function of the law, see McAdams, *The Expressive Powers of Law*.

demanding than those whereby women become mothers. As Sally Haslanger, a philosopher at MIT, puts it, “pregnancy, I think, is a burden. It’s also a joy for many people. But it’s a physical burden and places physical constraints on the body that are different than what ejaculation does ... a just society must recognize that difference.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, Haslanger notes, while women bear the cost of the burden of gestating and nursing children, the benefits of their work accrue to the entire society.⁹⁶ The nation ought to make its financial and social support of mothers a priority, and formalize that support in law. This would in turn reinforce social norms that value mothers and motherhood.

The literature is clear: the law is no silver bullet when it comes to norm change. However, such a policy could very well facilitate behavioral shifts that would help to ease the kind of collective action problems discussed here.

Expecting

When it comes to public dialogue about women’s rights, debates about abortion are much more likely to come to mind than debates about parental, and especially maternity, leave policies. Yet the impact of implementing paid parental leave in the United States would have more positive impacts on more women and American citizens more broadly. After all, only one in four women will ever get an abortion in their lifetime; seven out of eight women will have a child in their lifetime.⁹⁷ Ironically, perhaps one reason that the abortion debates tend to take center stage is that they focus on individuals’ private choices—a common motif in American politics and in the study of ethics. The need for maternity leave, on the other hand, requires

⁹⁵ Haslanger, *Understanding Womanhood*.

⁹⁶ See further discussion in chapter four, especially at page 156. See also discussion throughout Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*.

⁹⁷ Cha, “U.S. Abortion Rate Fell 25 Percent from 2008 to 2014; One in Four Women Have an Abortion”; Miller, “Fertility Rate Is Down, Yet More U.S. Women Are Becoming Mothers.”

paying attention to collective action problems and social expectations, which is an insufficiently covered theme in American discourse.

The demands of collective life, however, oblige us to pay attention to the ways that the aggregation of individual choices may not yield a desirable outcome for our society as a whole. As one editorial writer put it recently: “[m]y version of feminism isn’t about being left to my own devices to make a choice that will affect my entire family and then pick up the pieces if and when it doesn’t work out. I’d much rather be a truly equal partner in making a mutually agreed upon plan.”⁹⁸ This chapter has entreated its readers to begin to take more seriously those forms of cooperation—like paid maternity leave—that enable each of us to proceed through life in ways that are both equitable and gratifying.

⁹⁸ Friedman, “The Real Lesson of the ‘Opt-Out Generation.’”

CHAPTER THREE

PUBLIC & PRIVATE PARTS: PAUL'S CORPOREAL ETHIC AS A CORRECTIVE FOR LIBERAL AND REPUBLICAN APPROACHES

Your freedom is shackled in chains to mine. And until I am free, you are not free either.

FANNIE LOU HAMER¹

We are members of one another.

PAUL OF TARSUS²

At least since Carol Hanisch's essay of the same name was published in 1970, the phrase "the personal is political" has had great purchase for feminist thinkers and activists.³ The conceit that the phrase communicates is rather simple: those things that we assume belong to the private sphere may be only socially constructed to be so. As a particularly egregious example, marital rape was legal in all fifty states until 1976 and was not completely outlawed in the United States until 1993.⁴ Up until that period, married men could not be criminally charged with the rape of their wives. It was simply posited that what happened within the bounds of a marriage was beyond the purview of the state. It was in the midst of this kind of environment that Hanisch's slogan was so evocative. Not only did the idea call into question the private-public divide that severely disempowered women, it also identified the way that the private oppression of women was publicly constructed—and could be deconstructed.

In the decades since its emergence, the slogan has received some criticism. Some have used Arendt's concern about the boundaries of the public realm to insist that there must be a

¹ Hamer, *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 125. Also as quoted in Raboteau, *American Prophets*, 190. The sentiment has appeared elsewhere, perhaps earliest in Emma Lazarus' "Epistle to the Hebrews." See Lazarus, "An Epistle to the Hebrews," 136.

² Romans 12:5.

³ Hanisch, *Notes from the Second Year*. According a second-hand story, Steinem once said that asking who "invented" the slogan was like asking who coined the phrase "World War II."

⁴ This was in part based on common law writing from figures like Sir Matthew Hale—who is quoted in *Dobbs*. See Siegel, "The Marital Rape Exemption: Evolution to Extinction"; Ryan, "The Sex Right."

meaningful distinction between the personal and the political.⁵ Others have pointed out that the slogan's focus on women's oppression in the home exacerbated the concentration on the kinds of oppression white women experience. The feminism fashioned after Betty Friedan's complaint in *The Feminist Mystique* can be rather alien, after all, to those women for whom the home is less a source of oppression and more a solace from the racist, classist oppression of public society. Despite these modest criticisms, the slogan remains a rallying cry for feminist and womanist activists. It is lifted up in manifold foundational texts, including the Combahee River Collective Statement and more recently in Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, and often sighted on placards in women's marches.⁶ It has received renewed interest in 2022, amid amplified tensions over the June *Dobbs* decision. The idea that the personal is political endures particularly among those invested in women's freedom.

So much more must be said, however, than the slogan itself can say. To be sure, the private mistreatment of women, people of color, and other marginalized people merits public attention. So too, do the ways that social and political discourse constitutes the concept of what is personal in the first place require our attention. But aren't there also aspects of life that ought to be *protected* from the incursion of public interests? Surely those feminists that defend the idea that the personal is political would rather have the state be restrained from, rather than introduced to, any discussion or legislation about women's reproductive choices. Here, the personal remains political, but only insofar as it necessitates protection *from* state interventions, rather than the involvement of the state—as contrasted with marital rape, in which case the latter, rather than the former, is required.

⁵ Benhabib, "The Personal Is Not the Political."

⁶ The Combahee River Statement includes this affirmation: "Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy." Smith, Smith, and Frazier, "A Black Feminist Statement: Combahee River Collective," 212.

This chapter seeks to provide some texture to this feminist slogan's appreciation of the relationship between the personal and the political. It explores what is "political" about women's personal experiences, particularly in the context of women's personal experiences of pregnancy and other reproductive-related embodied experiences. In doing so, it plots out the relationship between an individual and her community, which is informed by attention to the matrices that make us who we are. Importantly, I want to identify the non-zero sum nature of this relationship. Too many political theoretical models offer a view that pits individual against community, or vice versa, in an either-or, competitive relationship. Against these views, I want to foreground, following the idea that the personal is political, the symbiotic relationship between the recognition of individuals' inviolable—dare we say *sacred*—rights and the flourishing of the community in which she lives.

To do this, in this chapter I first provide an exegesis of two models in political theory that come closest to threading this needle: the liberalism of John Rawls and the republicanism of Philip Pettit. Both identify the mutual dependence of individuals and communities: Rawls acknowledges individuals' need for a just basic structure and Pettit shows that individuals' liberty can only be secured by governments that prevent the subjection of any person to another's arbitrary will. In this way, they moderate the more radical models present in contemporary political theory. Rawls shows Nozickian libertarians the importance of social structures in securing justice, and Pettit helps communitarians to tend to the value of individual rights.

Yet, as I argue, the enduring difference between Rawls (and other political liberals) and Pettit (and other neo-republicans) is one of heuristic priority. Rawls grants individuals' mutual dependence, but nevertheless develops a theory that concentrates on how individuals might coalesce into a just polity while maximally respecting the entitlements of each. Pettit, on the

other hand, builds into his very definition of individual liberty the freedom from another's arbitrary will, and so demands a certain sort of social arrangement at the very inception of his theory, whereby individual liberty can be secured. The principles and the concrete proposals of both Rawls and Pettit are markedly similar; the difference is that Rawls grants heuristic priority to individual agents, while Pettit grants heuristic priority to social arrangements. As such, I call Rawls' approach a "rights-bearer" approach and Pettit's a "civic" approach. Significantly, both approaches tend to generate the same commitments. Both are committed to, for example, the equal worth of citizens; the rule of law; and the need for social provision of certain goods.

Even as they share many common commitments, however, Rawls' and Pettit's varying approaches may contribute to political miscalculations that are not insignificant. The next task of this chapter, then, is to introduce a third voice, whose foundational principles resemble (and perhaps, unconsciously, inform) those of Rawls and Pettit.⁷ This third voice is that of Saint Paul, particularly as evinced in his epistolary discussions in Romans, Ephesians, and 1 Corinthians of what he calls "the Body of Christ" (σῶμα χριστοῦ). The third section illuminates his approach. For Paul, the mutual dependence of an individual's and her community's flourishing is best understood in terms of a bodily metaphor. What is noteworthy in Paul's writing is that neither element is granted priority. On the one hand, Paul makes it clear that no part of the body can dispense with any other. "The eye cannot say to the hand: I have no need of you," writes Paul in 1 Corinthians. On the other hand, Paul is also explicit about the dangers of giving any sort of primacy to the whole over its parts. Paul's description of the body of Christ insists that each member deserves unique respect as an indispensable member of the greater concern with the body. Simply put: a body simply cannot be what it is without its parts, according to a certain

⁷ Rawls wrote his senior thesis at Princeton on theological concepts. See Gregory, "Before the Original Position." Pettit had once considered becoming a priest, but pursued philosophy instead, per a personal conversation with the author.

organic arrangement; neither can a body part be what it is apart from the body to which it belongs. Paul's discussion of the body of Christ thus underscores some of the structural agreements between Rawls and Pettit, while overcoming the remaining disagreement over methodology by denying heuristic (or any other) priority to either individuals or the communities in which they live.

In a final, brief section, I demonstrate what Paul's analysis suggests about reproductive justice in the United States today. Paul's denial of the priority of either individuals or polities repudiates the emphasis, prevalent in mainstream feminist organizing, on individuals as bearers of rights. On the other hand, though, Paul requires of each member of a social body profound identification with every other, in ways that are absent in contemporary American society—both across lines of sexual difference, and between persons of different racial identities. This identification would likely prescribe a policy regarding reproductive rights and responsibilities that resembles the reproductive justice framework, promoted most notably by MacArthur Fellow Loretta Ross.

Two approaches to justice

John Rawls' liberal justice: the rights-bearer approach

Few discussions of twentieth century political philosophy neglect the colossal contribution of John Rawls to the field. Most surveys of scholars of political theory converge on a consensus that he was the most influential political theorist of his time.⁸ Rawls artfully integrated Kantian moral philosophy, Lockean social contract theory, and Rousseauvian and Hegelian emphases on human sociality in what has been called a “magisterial” work of scholarship: his 1971 *A Theory*

⁸ Gewertz, “John Rawls, Influential Political Philosopher, Dead at 81.”

of Justice.⁹ There, Rawls provides an account of the institution of political society that he thinks respects individuals' inviolable rights, while making the cooperation that is indispensable to human life possible.

The centerpiece of Rawls' theory is an arrangement of three principles that he assumes all individuals, insulated from possible identitarian interests, would accept. These are, in what Rawls calls their "lexical order," meaning the order in which these principles apply, as follows. First, each individual is entitled to as much liberty as possible to be accorded them by a system that grants an equal degree of liberty to all others. This has been called the "priority of liberty."¹⁰ Second, opportunities for social and economic advancement must be available to all equally, such that one or another constituency in the polity does not enjoy a particular preference for social and economic advancement. Third, and finally, any social or economic inequalities that do obtain must benefit those who are least well off in society. This final principle, often called the "Difference Principle," affirms that only those inequalities that yield something that benefits the least well off—like the invention of penicillin, say—are acceptable.

Famously, Rawls develops these principles in his formidable tome by way of a thought experiment he develops, which Rawls calls the "original position."¹¹ In this imaginary space, persons would interface with one another to converge on principles of justice that all might reasonably expect. This interfacing would take place behind what he calls a "veil of ignorance"—by which Rawls means individuals' ignorance, within the original position, about the particular needs or social positions they might in fact occupy.¹² Rawls' theory thus requires a certain bracketing of persons' particular experiences, viewpoints, and motives. It is only from

⁹ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.

¹⁰ Rawls, 220; Taylor, "Rawls' Defense of the Priority of Liberty."

¹¹ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 102–68.

¹² One might think of the realm in the recent Pixar film "Soul" of the pre-born.

within such a location that those three principles of justice as fairness, which Rawls says might organize a just society, can be developed.

To be clear, Rawls is under no apprehension about humans' sociality. He insists that the discursive work that individuals might engage in (hypothetically) within the original position is fully informed about the dependence of all humans on their social worlds. He is sensitive to what he calls "the profoundly social nature of human relationships," to the fact that humans are political animals, those who cannot flourish apart from their participation in a society.¹³ It merits our attention that the purpose of the thought experiment of the original position is to figure out how to fairly adjudicate the benefits and burdens of our common life. Our mutual interdependence is what makes striving for justice so important. Rawls thus writes that "justice as fairness assigns a certain primacy to the social."¹⁴

Contrast this account with that of Robert Nozick, a libertarian theorist to the right of Rawls, whose disagreements with Rawls were detailed in his 1974 for *Anarchy, State, Utopia*. That book begins with Nozick's declaration that "[i]ndividuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them."¹⁵ These rights can be interpreted as what Nozick calls "side-constraints"—constraints on action that prohibit others from doing whatever might violate individual rights. Side constraints, according to Nozick, "express the inviolability of other persons."¹⁶ They helpfully identify the boundedness of each individual, marking limits that others cannot cross. These side-constraints constitute a fundamental element of Nozick's theory. Already at the inception of Nozick's work, social collectivity is merely a necessary evil, and thus only to be entertained only in the most necessary contexts. It should not surprise the reader, then, that Nozick insists that only the thinnest of states can be justified.

¹³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 259.

¹⁴ Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 339.

¹⁵ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, ix.

¹⁶ Nozick, 32.

Rawls' *Theory of Justice* has a much more robust—and accurate—understanding of humans' essential sociality. He foregrounds humans' existence as social animals, not beings-unto-themselves. In fact, Rawls says, “[w]e have no prior identity before being in society.”¹⁷ The question, for Rawls, is never “will we coalesce into a social organization?” but “into what kind of social organization ought we coalesce?” Even behind the veil of ignorance, where participants in collective reflection about justice do not know what color of skin they will have or what kind of wealth they might inherit, all are aware that humans are deeply interdependent. They know that we are, as Plato put it, political animals. Unlike the story that Nozick presents, in which society is a *strictly* instrumental, necessary evil, Rawls acknowledges that humans cannot be who they are without the social world in which they are situated.

Yet despite his insistence on his interest in—and justice's dependence on—the social, Rawls is ultimately concerned with the gathering of individuals into a social structure that best accommodates the infrangible rights of those individuals. Rawls' celebrated thought experiment involves an assembly of discrete individuals, reflecting together, but always as occupants of discrete bodies. Lest I be misunderstood here, I should clarify that Rawls is *very* specific that the portrayal, offered by contractarians like Hobbes and Locke, of individuals' transition from state of nature to integrated polity is absurd. These accounts seem to posit, impossibly, that the narratives they construct are also in fact historically accurate. Rawls, on the other hand, imagines his original position to be no more than a heuristic device. He is not under the impression that society has emerged in this sort of way—in fact, he is explicit that it hasn't.¹⁸ Rather, Rawls claims that the best guiding principles for a just society might be derived by conceiving such a situation, in which reasonable people might contemplate the principles of justice, divorced from

¹⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 41.

¹⁸ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 120.

their personal interests.¹⁹ Yet it deserves note that even if Rawls' original position is not meant to be historically descriptive, his thought experiment is *narratively* constructed around the kinds of principles to which individuals *qua* individuals would assent.

The central mechanism in Rawls' work in both *Theory of Justice* and his later *Political Liberalism*, then, is to assess how individuals might develop a system of governance that is maximally fairly respectful of each individual's rights. As Rawls has it, his view of social structures is not as baldly instrumentalist as is Hobbes' or Kant's—or, for that matter, Nozick's—where the role of the polity is simply to make individuals' moral lives possible.²⁰ But it seems it remains *moderately* instrumentalist: government is charged with achieving a world governed by those aforementioned three principles of justice, which administer the distribution of individuals' primary goods. Each principle pertains to individuals, and while it makes it possible for individuals to be integrated into a social body, Rawls posits individuals as the preexisting constituents—albeit heuristically, not chronologically.

For Rawls, then, individuals are the elemental constituents of any political theory. While the social aspect of all human living is not to be occluded, Rawls insists on the discreteness of human living, too. Despite our social nature, we exist in the world as individuals, and deserve respect as such. Rawls' commitment to the discreteness of persons brings is exactly the kind of consideration that was woefully overlooked in the appalling case of Carrie Buck, to which we'll now turn.

In 1927, the Supreme Court of the United States decided in *Buck v. Bell* to authorize a Virginia statute that legislated the compulsory sterilization of the so-called unfit, for the “welfare

¹⁹ Rawls, 121.

²⁰ Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 339.

of society.”²¹ The plaintiff was Carrie Buck, a woman who had been raised by foster parents after her mother was committed to the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded following accusations of immorality and prostitution.²² When, after being raped by her cousin at the age of seventeen, Carrie herself became pregnant, her foster parents had her committed to the same Virginia institution. Shortly after the Virginia law was passed, the institution’s superintendent planned to have Carrie surgically sterilized. Though she contested the effort legally, every court that considered the case upheld the state statute, all the way up to the Supreme Court.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wrote for the 8-1 majority in the decision, wrote that “[i]t is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes.”²³ At this point in the ruling, Holmes added a line that especially stings today’s readers. “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” On October 19, 1927, Carrie Buck became the first of at least seven thousand “unfit” people that were forcibly sterilized in Virginia over five decades, until the statute was repealed in 1974. Many weren’t even told they were being sterilized but given another reason for the operation—including Carrie’s younger sister, Doris Figgins, who did not find out until decades after the procedure what the surgeons had done to her body. It deserves note, lest readers imagine otherwise, that such forced sterilization is not merely a relic of the past: at least 1,400 such sterilizations were performed in California prisons between 1997 and 2013.²⁴ More recently, in 2017, a Tennessee

²¹ 274 U.S. at 204.

²² Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles*.

²³ 274 U.S. at 207.

²⁴ *Belly of the Beast*. According to one victim, a doctor had insisted on sterilization, because it’s “cheaper than welfare.”

judge offered to reduce jail time to inmates who voluntarily underwent sterilization—as he put it, to end the “vicious cycle” of drug offenders reproducing children.²⁵

Part of the poignancy of Buck’s (and Figgins’) story has to do with the singular nature of the bodies that the state imposed upon: those were her *only* fallopian tubes, her only chance at having children. In her sixties, Carrie’s sister Doris, who had been sterilized without her knowledge, told a local paper, “I wanted babies bad. Me and him tried and tried to have ‘em. I just don’t know why they done it to me,” as her husband Matthew held her hand, tears running down his cheek.²⁶ This, I think, is core to the heuristic priority Rawls grants to individuals, drawing on his own Kantian commitments. His critique of utilitarianism, for example, is premised on the fact that individual human beings cannot be completely incorporated into one singular body; as he puts it, that view “does not take seriously the distinction between persons.”²⁷ Even as we are mutually interdependent, we are also bounded by our embodiments in important ways: my fallopian tubes are not yours. Similarly, as discussed in chapter one, birthing mothers know intimately that no one can birth another’s baby on their behalf. That pain and suffering can be borne by the birthing mother alone. As Rawls might put it: the Virginia statute’s violation of Carrie Buck’s bodily integrity and her lifeplan demonstrated inexcusable disrespect for Carrie Buck as a person.

Of course, Rawls would also rightly identify that Carrie Buck was entitled to a number of goods that were not offered her as a young person, including protection from abusive family members and an adequate education. But in her notorious encounter with the highest court in the

²⁵ Hawkins, “Judge to Inmates.” Similarly, in 2008, a Louisiana state representative proposed offering \$1,000 to welfare recipients who agreed to have their tubes tied. He said he conceived of the idea after watching the state evacuate and care for residents in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav, which prompted him to consider reviving David Duke’s similar proposals from the early nineties. Waller, “LaBruzzo Considering Plan to Pay Poor Women \$1,000 to Have Tubes Tied.”

²⁶ “‘I Wanted Babies Bad’ Woman Told of Her Sterilization.”

²⁷ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 24.

land, what went mournfully underappreciated was Carrie Buck's individual freedom as a human being from state incursion in her reproductive choices. All three of Rawls' principles are violated in a case like Carrie Buck's. She does not enjoy a sufficient *nor* an equal degree of freedom compared with others. She does not enjoy equality of opportunity with regard to socially and economically privileged positions in society. Perhaps most lamentably, the unequal treatment that she endures is *particularly* harmful to those who are already the worst off in society. Notice, though, that these principles assess the privileges (or mistreatments) that individuals enjoy (or endure). As with Rawls' theory more broadly, the basic unit of analysis is the individual.

Despite our social nature, we exist in the world as individuals, and deserve respect as such. For Rawls, the refrain that the personal is political might be cashed out to mean that there are private experiences that persons undergo that require political attention. This attention, however, ought to be used to safeguard individuals' entitlement to a certain suite of goods, including autonomy as a foremost good. We might imagine that those who publicly proclaim the catchphrase: "my body, my choice!" are channeling a Rawlsian, liberal, rights-bearer approach. They are, like Rawls, concentrating on the entitlement that every individual has to the greatest amount of autonomy possibly afforded equally to all.

Philip Pettit's republican freedom: the civic approach

Much that Rawls defends in his repertoire would be agreeable to Philip Pettit, the foremost advocate of republicanism, or neo-republicanism, as some call it. Many of the institutional and even policy prescriptions Rawls offers resemble those that Pettit presents in his own work, including his magisterial 1997 *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Yet the initial points of departure of Rawls (and other liberals) and Pettit (and other republicans) are noteworthily dissimilar. For, though Rawls does recognize the profound sociality of all human

beings, his theory is centered on the coalescing of individual agents. In contrast with such liberal approaches, republican models begin with a focus on communities, not individuals.²⁸ That is, republican models are principally concerned with the *res publica*—translated woodenly as the “public thing,” or, more elegantly, the commonwealth.

To be sure, this is not because republicans like Pettit are not interested in individuals’ rights. In fact, Pettit is perhaps most well-known for his redescription of individuals’ liberty, upon which most of his theory is built. Pettit differs from his liberal counterparts insofar as he identifies liberty as more than non-interference; he claims that true liberty also means not being subjected to another’s arbitrary will.²⁹ A favorite and oft-invoked example of Pettit’s comes from Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.³⁰ In that play, the protagonist Nora enjoys the indulgence of her imposing husband, Torvald. She is able to do essentially anything she pleases. Yet, for Pettit, Nora is fundamentally unfree—because her ability to do as she pleases depends on the ongoing indulgence of her husband. If Torvald chose, suddenly, to take a more domineering stance relative to his wife, she would have no alternative but to obey his authority. For Pettit, freedom requires never being in such a position.

What follows is that Pettit’s definition of freedom, the cornerstone of his theory, is relational from the very outset. For Pettit, to be free, one must exist in a relation of non-domination to others. As such, Pettit’s framework does not just *grant* the sociality of humans. It builds from the premise that any exercise of human freedom is *itself* a social arrangement.³¹ We might call this a “negative relational condition”: a state of affairs in which the relations that obtain are *not* relations of domination. While Pettit is committed to thinking about the entitlements of all

²⁸ Skinner, “The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty,” 300; Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 23.

²⁹ Pettit, *Republicanism*, 31–32.

³⁰ Pettit, 60.

³¹ Rawls affirms the following: “[w]hether men are free is determined by the rights and duties established by the major institutions of society. Liberty is a certain pattern of social forms.” As quoted in Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 55–56.

individuals to freedom, his is a freedom that cannot exist without the protection of the state. Human freedom, in Pettit's theory, becomes the common good *par excellence* that the state is tasked with protecting. Like those other common goods that liberals agree must be protected by the state—a national defense, perhaps, or a police force, or public education or a power grid—this good cannot be secured without the work of government. But, as Pettit says, freedom is a “gateway good”: it is eminent among goods, and also a contributor to the securing of those other goods.³²

It is worth noting here, however, that Pettit's commendation of the good of freedom does not, on his account, amount to what Berlin called a “positive liberty.”³³ Berlin contrasted his concept of a “positive liberty” to the kinds of “negative liberty” that he associated with the kind of tradition to which Rawls squarely belongs. Negative liberties are in a word, freedoms *from*: freedom from government intervention, or freedom from restraint, for example. Positive liberties, on the other hand, are freedoms *to*; they involve being granted certain resources that, as Berlin has it, enable an agent's “self-mastery.” Pettit insists that his definition of freedom is a third kind: it is not merely about restraint, but neither is it about granting the kinds of resources that lead an individual toward one or another idea of what the right way is to be. Instead, Pettit concentrates on his definition of freedom as the freedom from subjection to another's arbitrary will.³⁴

Building in his identification of freedom as a common good, secured only by the state, allows Pettit to resist a troublesome puzzle that liberal thinkers—including Rawls—must face. If freedom is fundamentally about non-interference, as Pettit suggests his liberal opponents interpret the meaning of freedom, then any act of government that constrains individuals'

³² Pettit, *Just Freedom*, 189.

³³ Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty.”

³⁴ Pettit's *tour de force* opens with a chapter called “Before Negative and Positive Liberty,” and his innovation appears early on in a section called “A third conception: liberty as non-domination.” See Pettit, *Republicanism*, 17.

freedom must always be actively justified. Liberals engage multifarious different approaches in order to justify the work of the state. Locke, for example, posited that the state was a product of individuals' establishment of a social contract, and thus state authority was justified by individuals' personal assent to said contract. Rawls himself acknowledged this need for the justification of the state's coercive power.³⁵ In fact, much of Rawls' work can be understood as developing precisely that kind of justification, at least for the democratic state that he theorizes.

For republicans like Pettit, however, law and liberty do not exist in such a competitive relationship. Rather, for Pettit, liberty simply cannot be secured in the absence of law—because without law, all would be subject to the arbitrary will of any other wielding sufficient force or influence. As such, it is not only that law and liberty are in a non-competitive relationship, but rather that liberty fully depends on the enactment and execution of law that secures the liberty of all. Pettit has no need, therefore, to develop a justification for the state's exercise of coercive power, so long as the state's exercise of power ensures that citizens are not subject to the arbitrary will of any other—including state actors. Thus, republicans are well known for their advocacy for both the rule of law and the separation of powers.

To be clear, none of this makes Pettit any less committed than Rawls to the importance of individuals' entitlement to freedom. Both are primarily concerned with the ways in which individuals are able to navigate their social worlds, and with the liberty persons ought to enjoy as they do so. Indeed, one of the ways that Pettit suggests to his readers that the democratic nature of a state might be proven is with what he calls the “eyeball test.” In a just society, Pettit says, citizens would be

adequately resourced and protected in the exercise of their basic liberties to the extent that, absent excessive timidity or the like, they are enabled by the most demanding local standards to look one another in the eye without reason for fear or deference. They are able to walk tall, as we put it, enjoying a communal form of

³⁵ This is the “problem of political legitimacy.” For further discussion, see Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 40.

recognition that they are each more or less proof against the interference of others; in that sense, they command the respect of all.³⁶

The proof, Pettit says, is in the individual's ability to participate in her social world. The individual is not at all lost in Pettit's scheme. Indeed, this is one of the ways that Pettit moderates a view held by those often branded as "communitarians," who sometimes seem to have too little to say about the dangers of the state's arbitrary incursions into individual affairs.³⁷ Pettit's difference with Rawls, again, is primarily heuristic: his entire scheme begins with the presumption that any individual's liberty is a negative relational condition, and can only be secured by means of the state. This is why we might rightly call Pettit's approach a "civic" approach. Democratic citizens do not, that is, *endure* social arrangements; they are *products* of those social arrangements. To better understand this, we might consider the case of Freddie Gray.

On April 12, 2015, a 25-year-old African American man named Freddie Gray was arrested in Baltimore, Maryland for possession of an unlawful knife. (In fact, according to reports, he merely fled upon noticing police, was taken into custody for fleeing, and thereafter was charged with possession of a switch blade knife, which, according to a state's attorney, was legal under Maryland law.³⁸) While he was transported in a police van from the site of the arrest, he suffered spinal injuries that led to his death a week later, which provoked street demonstrations and protests throughout Baltimore. The injustice that Gray suffered, however, preceded the officers' use of unnecessary force and negligence in April of 2015.

In 2008, he and his siblings filed a suit against a former landlord citing their exposure to lead-based paint. A sample taken from Gray when he was just 22 months old showed an amount

³⁶ Pettit, *Just Freedom*, 99–100.

³⁷ This usually includes thinkers like Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre, though none of these authors identify as such.

³⁸ Gray v. Maryland; Blinder and Pérez-Peña, "6 Baltimore Police Officers Charged in Freddie Gray Death."

of lead in his blood nearly eight times the level that begins to cause severe brain damage.³⁹ When told about the sample by a reporter for the Washington Post, a professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins and lead expert named Dan Levy responded in exasperation. “Jesus,” Levy replied. “The fact that Mr. Gray had these high levels of lead in all likelihood affected his ability to think and to self-regulate and profoundly affected his cognitive ability to process information.”⁴⁰ The potential damage from the presence of lead is so severe that some public health experts believe that efforts to reduce lead exposure may be creditable for as much as 90% of the drop in the crime rate over the last two decades.⁴¹ That exposure may, therefore, have been a major factor in Gray’s own difficulty in school, truancy, and later arrests.

But the social exploitation of Freddie Gray and his siblings did not end at his illegal exposure to the deadly substance. When Gray won the suit against his landlord, he was persuaded by a company called Access Funding to cede his rights to the \$146,000 settlement that would be paid out in monthly payments over decades in order to receive a lump sum of about \$18,000.⁴² Access Funding made at least one hundred such deals, according to an investigation conducted by the Maryland Attorney General’s office, securing the firm millions of dollars. The vast majority were with young victims of lead poisoning.⁴³ “It was just an outrageous abuse of these young adults,” the Attorney General, Brian Frosh, told the Washington Post.⁴⁴ It is worth noting that both of these mistreatments of Gray—exposing him to lead in the first place, and manipulating him out of the settlement he was owed, in the second place—were publicly, *legally* recognized as wrong.

³⁹ McCoy, “Freddie Gray’s Life a Study on the Effects of Lead Paint on Poor Blacks.”

⁴⁰ Ross, “Why You Should Know What Happened in Freddie Gray’s Life — Long before His Death.”

⁴¹ Vedantam, “Research Links Lead Exposure, Criminal Activity.”

⁴² McCoy, “How Companies Make Millions off Lead-Poisoned, Poor Blacks.”

⁴³ Chason, “They Sought ‘Lead Paint Virgins’ and Bought Their Settlements. It Will Be Hard for Those Victims to Get Their Money Back.”

⁴⁴ Chason.

Surely, none of us could hold twenty-two-month-old Freddie Gray personally responsible for his residing in a home with peeling lead paint. (In fact, it's difficult to hold his family so responsible, either—between 2006 and 2015, as many as 38% of children in Gray's childhood neighborhood, Sandtown-Winchester, demonstrated lead levels above safe limits in blood tests.⁴⁵) Up to and including the time of his arrest and death, Gray was shaped and misshaped by the world in which he lived. These personal experiences of Gray's—with exploitative landlords, exploitative businesses like Access Funding, and legal systems that enable both—are most certainly political. It is only with the involvement of the state that Gray could have been protected from such malicious enterprises. Gray could never have been a *free* person, in Pettit's sense, and that failure is to be ascribed to his local and federal political system. He was—not once or a few times, but incessantly—subject to the arbitrary whims of operations in his neighborhood that were never held accountable by his government. He was never able to walk tall, confident of the respect of others, as in Pettit's "eyeball test." In fact, his life was ended just as he was fleeing the police, fearful of their arbitrary treatment, hardly able to look them in the eye "without reason for fear or deference," in Pettit's words.

Paul's incorporated body

Thus far I have presented an all-too-brief overview of two representatives of some of the most widely championed schools of thought in political theory today: Rawls, as a representative of liberalism, and Pettit, as an advocate of republicanism. The degree to which these approaches can be synthesized is a matter of ongoing debate.⁴⁶ Some seem to suggest that the distance

⁴⁵ Pell and Schneyer, "Off the Charts: The Thousands of U.S. Locales Where Lead Poisoning Is Worse than in Flint."

⁴⁶ Sandel insists that "[a]t a certain level of generality, there is no necessary conflict" between the schools, but that this overlooks important differences between different flavors of liberalism and republicanism. Sandel, "Liberalism and Republicanism." Both Patten and Dagger suggest that the distinction is not substantial; see Patten, "The Republican Critique of Liberalism"; Dagger, *Civic Virtues*. Yet whether Patten, a liberal, and Dagger, who falls on

between Rawlsian liberals and Pettitian republicans is relatively narrow; others even suggest that there is no meaningful distance between the two schools at all.⁴⁷ Rawls, in fact, suggested that his program was amenable to the republican view.⁴⁸ Pettit, for his part, repeatedly casts republicanism as an alternative to liberalism, and insists that there are decisive differences between the two programs.

My view is that Pettit's characterization of these two schools as oppositional is an overstatement of their divergences. Their convergences, on the other hand, are manifold. I would like here to foreground two. Rawls insists—and Pettit would concede—that humans are discretely embodied, and so individual persons ought to be integral elements in political theory. Pettit insists—and Rawls would concede—individuals' freedom is secured only by virtue of social background conditions. Both of these insights are ones that members of both schools would freely assent. The most significant divergence I've noted in the preceding sections, on the other hand, is heuristic: where Rawls conceptually prioritizes individuals, Pettit conceptually prioritizes social arrangements. As far as I am concerned, both are mistaken insofar as they prioritize either.

In this section, I want to introduce a third voice to the conversation, that of a relatively overlooked social theorist: Saint Paul of Tarsus.⁴⁹ In his writings, as I'll show here, Paul affirms both points of convergence between Rawls and Pettit that I have foregrounded thus far: the

the republican side of the conversation, agree on other important questions is unclear; this throws into question whether or not liberals and republicans can agree as much as both suppose!

⁴⁷ According to one interpreter, "Rawls is as republican as one can be." De Francisco, "A Republican Interpretation of the Late Rawls," 287.

⁴⁸ Rawls insists that "[n]othing in classical republicanism, as characterized above, is incompatible with political liberalism as I have described it." As quoted in Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 205. To be fair, his "characterization" of classical republicanism focuses on its insistence on the cultivation of civic virtues; Rawls does not directly address Pettit's redescription of liberty as non-domination.

⁴⁹ Some feminists may be skeptical of my use of St. Paul's epistles for liberatory work. To be fair, Pauline language has frequently and historically been recruited for patriarchal ends. Yet much recent work in Biblical studies undermines this misuse of Paul's epistles. For helpful correctives, consider Peppiatt and McKnight, *Unveiling Paul's Women*; Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets*; Epp, *Junia*; Westfall, *Paul and Gender*; Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*.

discreteness of human embodiment and the social constitution of human agency. Strikingly, Paul does so without granting priority—heuristic or otherwise—to either individuals or communities. Rather, Paul shows how each is enriched by its relationship to the other, such that neither has priority, so to speak. For Paul, the empowerment and well-being of an individual need not be held in tension with the empowerment and well-being of the social body—in fact, it ought not. Rather, the two are mutually reinforcing. There is no body without its parts, and yet body parts cannot be what they are without a body.

To show how this is so for Paul, in what follows we will focus on his discussion of the metaphor of the “body of Christ” in his letters to the churches of the Ancient Mediterranean. Paul drew on this image throughout his epistles; while it is most thoroughly developed in 1 Corinthians, it also appears in Romans, Colossians, and Ephesians.⁵⁰ As will be discussed in further detail below, with his use of the bodily metaphor, Paul identified a mutual interdependence that entails not hierarchy but equity: no body part, no matter how significant or strong, can dismiss the rest. Each needs every other.

Before embarking on this task, let me briefly address concerns that some readers may have about this introduction. Unlike Rawls and Pettit, Saint Paul’s work is triply inflected with religious commitments: he writes in a distinctly theological register; his audiences are early Christian churches, many of whom founded by Paul himself; and his letters since their earliest circulation have taken on a hallowed status as canonical, divinely authoritative text.⁵¹ Furthermore, Paul clearly intended his audience to recognize what he calls the “body of Christ” as a unique assembly of religious practitioners and believers, inspired and united by the Holy Spirit. Some readers may, thus, bristle at the discourse I seek to establish here between two

⁵⁰ That said, as Paul Minear has insisted, “the phrase ‘the body of Christ’ is not a single expression with an unchanging meaning. Paul’s thought remains extremely flexible and elastic”; in Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 173. For discussion, see Daines, “Paul’s Use of the Analogy of the Body of Christ.”

⁵¹ That said, Rawls’ and Pettit’s works are treated by some as holy canon, too!

contemporary non-religious political theorists and one ancient evangelist. Indeed, this bristling may come from both non-religious readers, who have no interest in interfacing with confessional texts, and devout readers, who suspect the use of religious texts for social theory.

To the latter contingent, I want to insist that my work in what follows puts me in good company with many thinkers who have put religious texts to political uses, including people like John Milton, Algernon Sidney, and John Locke.⁵² I should add, also, that however theological Paul's anthropology is, it always remains an anthropology. His assessment of the way humans are, as contrasted with the way they ought to be, pertains to members of all human communities. Some may want to insist that, for Paul, that only spirit-filled communities are able to accomplish the ideal that he proposes. I grant that this may be true. Nevertheless, his analysis of human nature remains applicable across communities of all kinds.

To the former contingent, I want to suggest that maintaining disinterest in religious texts means foregoing a rich literature, including both the religious texts themselves *and* those works, like Milton's and Locke's, which draw extensively on religious texts. Furthermore, Paul's works are both prevalent *and* authoritative for many members of the American social body, and as such merit at least minimal consideration. Even those who do not consider Paul's works authoritative as a matter of faith may want to reflect on those texts, given that he has such authority in the view of so many millions of Americans.

Introducing the body

It deserves note at the outset that Paul does not invent the bodily metaphor out of whole cloth—and his readers would have known as much. In fact, most of Paul's audience would have recognized that in his portrayal of this image, Paul was referring to a famous allegory that had been used centuries prior to justify a political arrangement that favored the wealthy. According

⁵² These important thinkers were formative in the founding of the United States, and to many Christians' delight.

to Livy's *History of Rome*, in the sixth century BCE, a Roman senator named Menenius Agrippa had used a society-as-body analogy to justify aristocrats' maintenance of power. Facing insurgence among the plebeian underclass, who demanded fairer treatment and an end to crippling debt policies, Menenius is said to have assuaged the plebs with a fable about a body and its members. According to the story, some parts of the body

thought it unfair that they should have the worry and the trouble and the labor of providing everything for the belly, while the belly remained quietly in their midst with nothing to do but to enjoy the good which they bestowed upon it; they therefore conspired together that hands should carry no food to the mouth, nor the mouth accept anything that was given it, nor the teeth grind up what they received. While sought in this angry spirit to starve the belly into submission, the members themselves and the whole body were reduced to utmost weakness. Hence it had become clear that even the belly had no idle task to perform, and was no more nourished than it nourished the rest, by giving out to all parts body that by which we live and thrive ...⁵³

The allegory, which appears in several other ancient texts—including in Aesop's Fables—would likely have been familiar to most residents of the Ancient Roman Empire.⁵⁴ Its main aim is to rationalize the subjugation of the segments of society that correspond to the “hands” and “teeth,” for the benefit of the “belly.”⁵⁵ Menenius' tale leverages the fact of human interdependence—a fact we have discussed at length here—specifically to justify and maintain the hegemony of the patricians. It never registers, on the account that Menenius presents, that the “hands” and “teeth” ought to be conceived as having any sacred rights unto themselves.

Contrast to that fable Paul's well-known discussion of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:

... the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ... The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for

⁵³ As presented in McVay, “The Human Body as Social and Political Metaphor in Stoic Literature and Early Christian Writers,” 137.

⁵⁴ McVay, “The Human Body as Social and Political Metaphor in Stoic Literature and Early Christian Writers.”

⁵⁵ As discussed in McVay. The story also appears in the opening scene of Shakespeare's play, *Coriolanus*.

one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.⁵⁶

Notice that not only may no member of the body say “I have no need of you” to any of the others, but Paul also adds that the feeblest, the least honorable, the most vulnerable are to receive special regard.⁵⁷ Here, Paul completely inverts Menenius’ tale to draw attention to the least of these. There is no justification of the stomach’s incessant consumption; rather, each individual member of the body is indispensable to the entire system. All members are to offer one another the same care. No member’s suffering is to be borne for the alleged good of the whole, nor disregarded as “not my problem.” Paul is thus, like Rawls, not willing to overlook the distinction between persons; rather, he highlights and rejoices in the diversity of the body’s individual members.⁵⁸ Yet, with Pettit, Paul identifies each part’s integral positioning within a larger social arrangement. He nevertheless adds that, precisely because each member of the body is essential to the system, no individual member’s affliction can be justified by potential benefit to other members. Like Pettit, Paul thus anticipates and overcomes the troubles that some forms of communitarianism can present, because while he incorporates “many members” into one body, he insists on the indispensability of each of those members.

In fact, not only does each part need every other, but for Paul the parts must also be diverse. The body cannot thrive, Paul writes, if it were to consist only of a number of eyes or a number of feet. Thus, as Fee observes, the unity that Paul seeks in the body of Christ “does not mean uniformity... Paul’s concern is for their unity; but there is no such thing as true unity without diversity.”⁵⁹ Few images afford such a robust understanding of the unity *and* diversity of a

⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:14-26.

⁵⁷ In fact, the words from 1 Cor. 12:23-24 rendered here as “respectable” and “less respectable” might be better translated as “presentable” and “unpresentable.” Paul is likely here referring to genitalia.

⁵⁸ Recall the verse referred to above: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?”

⁵⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 602. Cf. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence*, 180.

community as the metaphor of the body. Paul does turn to other notions of the community—for example, he speaks of the community as the seed he has sown, or as a building erected with many building-blocks.⁶⁰ But Paul’s image of the community as a human body enables him to stress both the mutual interdependence *and* the distinctiveness of every part.⁶¹ Unlike the building metaphor, in the bodily metaphor, no part is interchangeable with another. The unique contribution of each is indispensable to the whole. In an organic illustration like that of the human body, this whole is much more than the sum of its parts. This is why Paul prefers to talk of individuals as a “members,” rather than as “parts” of the larger community. Let me explain further.

Part and parcel

As is often the case, much of Paul’s nuance in his original Greek is lost in translation into modern English. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul repeatedly employs two related words, μέρος and μέλος, which are both often rendered in English as a “part,” as in a part of a whole. However, the slight distinction in the meanings of these terms—just a letter’s difference—is not to be overlooked. Whereas μέρος connotes a portion or segment, μέλος signifies, as one classicist has put it, “an integral part, the changing or loss of which changes the whole.”⁶² Every part of an automobile would be rightly described as a μέρος—if its tires deteriorate, for example, they can be readily swapped with new ones.⁶³ There is nothing integral about any of the tires that makes them irreplaceable. The Greek term μέλος, however, is better translated as a “limb” or “member,” insofar as it signifies an essential component of a larger whole. It is, for example,

⁶⁰ 1 Cor. 3:6-15.

⁶¹ Best, “The Body of Christ,” 123.

⁶² Elder, “The Members of Rhetoric,” 328.

⁶³ Elder, 329.

much more difficult to replace a kidney than a tire. Such parts are not so dispensable—nor are they worth much apart from the body.

Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul draws on μέρος and μέρος and their cognates. Already in the opening of his letter, he defies his audience: “μεμέρισται ὁ Χριστός;” (which is commonly translated: “Has Christ been divided?”) The root word here, μερίζω, is a cognate of μέρος, and it means something like “to distribute” or “to apportion out.” We could, thus, translate the phrase more strongly: Has Christ been partitioned? Has Christ been *dissected*? The apostle, horrorstruck, can hardly bear to imagine it as he implores his readers. No, he wants us to say: Christ’s body is indivisible. It is not made up of μέρη, but of μέλη—it is constituted by integral parts that cannot be separated from one another, and which are of no worth in isolation from the whole.⁶⁴

Thus in 1 Corinthians 12, when Paul gives his most thorough depiction of the church as the body of Christ with many members, he repetitively describes all believers as being μέλη of Christ’s body.⁶⁵ He uses the term thirteen times in as many verses.⁶⁶ By contrast, μέρος appears in the next chapter four times in Paul’s descriptions of the pitiful nature of this world. Thus, the passage some readers may recall from wedding ceremonies—part of a well-known selection from 1 Corinthians 13—merits a reinterpretation, drawn from this context in which Paul favors μέλη to μέρη. In the present fallen condition of the world, “we know only in part (ἐκ μέρους), and we prophesy only in part (ἐκ μέρους); but when the complete comes, the partial (ἐκ μέρους) will come to an end.”⁶⁷ That is: when Christ returns to restore all of creation, all of our thinking in terms of divisible parts (μέρη) will finally cease.⁶⁸ In my reinterpretation of the famous

⁶⁴ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 991. Cf. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 60.

⁶⁵ Cf. Romans 12:4-5, Ephesians 4:25, 5:30, Colossians 3:15.

⁶⁶ cf. 1 Cor. 12:12, 14, 18, 19, 20, 22, 25, 26, 27

⁶⁷ 1 Cor. 13:9.

⁶⁸ Here, Paul uses (ἐκ μέρους) again. 1 Cor. 13:10.

passage, Paul's "in part" doesn't merely evoke our partial access to God's grace and wisdom, although perhaps it does suggest that. The "in part" of this passage could also indicate that all we know of God we know in divisive terms, in a certain way of looking at the world that imagines it as reducible to interchangeable components.

These two terms—μέρος and μέλος—may thus be similarly rendered in English with the word "part." However, it behooves us to recognize the wordplay Paul engages in when he contrasts the two expressions. Paul insists that believers are *members* of Christ, not segments or portions of Christ. A Nozickian vision of society is exactly the view that Paul rejects when he emphasizes our existence as *members* (μέλη) of a body rather than mere *components* (μέρη) of it. Paul's "was not an 'atomized' model of society," one commentator writes. "Far from it."⁶⁹ We can be members of Christ's body only insofar as we are diverse, interdependent participants in our community. More ought to be said here about the concept of *participation* in Paul's epistles.

Identity through participation

We encounter another difficulty of translation closely related to Paul's bodily metaphor when we consider the Greek term κοινωνία, which derives from the Greek word κοινός, meaning "common" or "shared."⁷⁰ (The nominal form of the same word, κοινόν, can be translated into Latin as "res publica.") The word plays a principal role in Paul's epistles, but it also occurs elsewhere: κοινωνία and its cognates appear in the Petrine and Johannine materials and in Acts, for a total of sixty-four times in the New Testament.⁷¹ The term has alternately been rendered as "participation," "communion," "sharing," "fellowship," and even "partnership."⁷² But it simply does not precisely correspond to any English word. However, we are best served by thinking of

⁶⁹ Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, 62.

⁷⁰ This is the word that yields us "Koine Greek"—the form of Greek that was common in first century antiquity.

⁷¹ Fuchs, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, 9.

⁷² See Fuchs' extensive concordance in Fuchs, 519–26. Hollander argues that κοινωνία in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 should be translated as "partnership" in Hollander, "The Idea of Fellowship in 1 Corinthians 10.14-22."

κοινωνία as “participation,” following Dale Martin’s lead. He explains that Paul not only insists that believers participate in the fellowship of Christ, but that Christians’ “identity is established by participation” in Christ.⁷³ It is to κοινωνία that the Corinthians have been called—in contrast to the partitioning of the body of Christ that they have effected.⁷⁴

In what Dale Martin calls Paul’s notion of “identity through participation,” we discover a fundamental aspect of Paul’s nuanced understanding of the relationship between a community and its members. A church ought not be a simple aggregation of atomized individuals; it is a fellowship with one another in an integrated life.⁷⁵ This does not entail the creation of an all-encompassing super-subject; as members of a body act independently, so do believers in community with one another. In fact, it is only in the context of the κοινωνία that believers can be fully themselves—just as it is only in union with the body that any member of a body, such as a heart, can perform its true function. “The person who enters into ... fellowship does not lose his personality,” Best says, “but rather finds it more truly.”⁷⁶ Again in Paul’s use of the metaphor of the body, we see a relationship between individual and community that grants priority to neither the individual nor her community. For Paul, the individual can be an individual only insofar as she participates in this communal fellowship. Individuality and communal participation aren’t competing forces; they go hand in hand.⁷⁷ One becomes more an individual the more she participates in her concrete, embodied community.

⁷³ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 132. Consider that the New Testament scholar Campbell explains κοινωνία does not imply a general association with another person as much as it signals a joint participation in *something* in Campbell, “Κοινωνία and Its Cognates in the New Testament,” 353.

⁷⁴ 1 Cor. 1:9. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, 42.

⁷⁵ Best, “The Body of Christ,” 128.

⁷⁶ Best, 127.

⁷⁷ This in contrast to Esposito’s observation that in the modern world, “[i]t is as if both the individual and the community are unable to escape from themselves that they do not know how to welcome or receive the one without absorbing and incorporating it without making it a part of themselves” in Esposito, *Communitas*, 53.

A sharing in the body

For Paul, participation in one's community doesn't take place in the abstract; rather, personal participation in fellowship takes place in communal practices. In Paul, the paradigmatic participatory act in Christian *koinonia* is believers' sharing in the fellowship of the Eucharist. Thus, Paul writes in 1 Cor. 10:16: "Is not the cup... a *κοινωνία* in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a *κοινωνία* in the body of Christ?" Yet, at the Lord's Supper, it was reported, various social strata regularly received preferential treatment.⁷⁸ Paul could barely endure the thought.

In a crucial and ambiguous phrase in 1 Corinthians 11:29, Paul writes that believers must "discern the body," else they drink and eat judgment upon themselves. At least a handful of readings are possible here.⁷⁹ On the one hand, "the body" could signify the body of Christ as evidenced in the shared loaf of which all partake (as in 1 Cor. 10:17); or, it could stand for the very physical body of the crucified Christ. Perhaps it could evoke the whole assembly as the body of Christ (as per 1 Cor. 12:27, *passim*.)—or the body of the Christian believer herself, or perhaps the body of her fellow believer. Paul's language is unclear; he could signify any or multiple of these various meanings. Indeed, Dale Martin recommends that the reader assume Paul suggested all these readings.⁸⁰ In preparation for the feast, the Christian ought to be mindful of Christ's sacrifice, of Christ's presence, of the conjoint participation in him which gives all believers their identity, of one's own bodily practices and how they influence the material circumstances of one's neighbor. After all, if Paul drew on the bodily metaphor to emphasize the mutual interdependence of Christians on Christ and one another, then each prescribed consideration involves and invokes the others.

⁷⁸ 1 Cor. 11:17-22.

⁷⁹ Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 446; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 563–64; Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence*, 152–53.

⁸⁰ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 194–95.

Paul is deeply concerned about the practices each individual engages in, and how they impinge on every other in the community. Discerning the body means not only to reflect on one's relationship to other believers and to Christ, but also to do so in such a way that transforms one's actions. As believers reflect on their belonging to Christ's body, they ought to recognize their belonging to one another, and act accordingly.⁸¹

Paul's corporeal ethic

In this section, I have tried to show the value of recovering Paul's nuanced understanding of the relationship between communities and their members as offered in his discussions of the body of Christ. For, while he is boldly committed to what Rawls would later quite admirably identify as the "distinction between persons," Paul does not go so far as to overlook the irreducibly social nature of human living. In fact, for Paul, these two aspects of human life are mutually dependent. We cannot grasp Paul's vision of the individual without coming to terms with the kind of communal unity that Paul advocated.⁸² Paul's view, like the best of Rawls' and Pettit's models, helpfully posits the individual and social aspects of living in a mutually beneficial relationship. The individual and the community are no more mutually exclusive than the body can exist apart from, say, its heart—or than the heart can exist apart from its body. Personhood requires community, and vice versa.⁸³ Neither ought to be granted priority over the other as mutually constitutive features.

⁸¹ Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, 228. Lamentably, Paul's instruction that believers reflect on their mutual interdependence and their joint participation in Christ has all but been lost in the modern age. Indeed, the first major schism among the Protestant reformers emerged as a result of a doctrinal discrepancy about Christ's real presence in the elements. Even today, many churches "fence" the Lord's table out of an intent to heed Paul's warning in 1 Cor. 11. Yet I fear with these developments we institute the same division of Christ's body that Paul so heartily abjures. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is supposed to be the very image of our fellowship, our participation—our *κοινωνία*—in Jesus, whereby Christians affirm that, as Fee puts it, "through Christ's death they are 'partners' in the redeemed community." In Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 469. Instead, it has become an occasion for dividing the community of believers, dissecting of the body of Christ.

⁸² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 616.

⁸³ For Paul, "[t]he idea of an autonomous Christian is a contradiction in terms. Believers are what they are because ... they belong to the body of Christ." Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, 197.

The Pauline view and reproductive justice

Paul's discussion of the body of Christ yields valuable insights for those thinking about the many different selves which contribute to and depend upon the society around them. He reminds us that no individual member of the social body can make it on her own. "We are members of one another," Paul writes.⁸⁴ As the reader may remember from chapter one, there is an ongoing debate in metaphysics concerning whether this might be the best way to describe the relationship between a fetus and the woman who carries it. Whatever the state of that discourse, it is clear that both within and beyond pregnancy, we depend upon one another and upon the varied gifts that each of us offers to others, and we owe one another special care. Our interdependence cannot be used to justify the exploitation of any of the constituents of the social body, however: each serves as an irreplaceable, uniquely worthy member of society.

It might be instructive to imagine what a Pauline social ontology would recommend concerning Carrie Buck and Doris Figgins, and Freddie Gray and his sisters. Surely, Paul's view helps us recognize both the irreplaceability and dignity of Carrie and Doris, to support the view that their bodies should not have been submitted to the cruelty of compulsory sterilization. Yet even as it would account for the unique value of these individuals, it would also identify the social resources that ought to have been available to—and were instead withheld from—Freddie Gray and his family. Furthermore, the Pauline account would insist that anyone seeking to excuse themselves from having to care for Carrie and Doris and Freddie's plight would have to answer for their failure to have concern for their co-members in the social body.⁸⁵

In short: Paul hopes to hold together human interdependence *and* our discrete embodiment. It plots a middle path between the liberal priority of the individual and the republican priority of

⁸⁴ Romans 12:5.

⁸⁵ This same insight—that we *owe* one another our care—would perhaps justify a national vaccine mandate in the present day.

the commonwealth, by positing the individual and community in a mutually supportive relationship.

This approach, as I see it, bears a resemblance to that of the framework known today as “Reproductive Justice,” developed by black women in the mid-90s to provide a more holistic alternative to the (largely white) pro-choice movement. In contrast to those who focused a discourse on “reproductive rights” around the individual choice of particular women to terminate a pregnancy, those who advocated for the Reproductive Justice framework looked to individual *and* communal aspects of reproduction. These women resisted the Nozickian overtones to the pro-choice movement, whose slogan “my body, my choice” occludes the profoundly communal aspects of reproduction. Yet they also grant the rights that must be granted to individuals. The founders of the Reproductive Justice framework, including renowned activist and MacArthur grant recipient Loretta Ross, thus presented the following three principles as foundational to the framework: 1) the right to *not* have a child; 2) the right to *have* a child; and 3) the right to *parent* in a safe and healthy environment.⁸⁶

First, the non-instrumentalization and respect that Rawls, Pettit, and Paul all prescribe regarding persons requires that women have the prerogative to choose whether to become mothers. As Paul affirms throughout his epistles, different members of the social body are granted diverse gifts that equip them for diverse callings as members of the body. The mere possession of a uterus does not of itself signify any single person’s calling to become a mother, as many infertile women know all too well. Rather, we must acknowledge that some women are called to live life without children. This includes many who choose not to have children so that they can support other members of the social body that do have children; among this contingent

⁸⁶ Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 9.

are those nuns who have foregone families to serve their communities.⁸⁷ Part of what it is to respect members of the body *as* members of the body is to appreciate their discernment about their identity and purpose. This is, in a Rawlsian idiom, part of what it is to respect persons *as persons*. This means accepting the testaments that members of the body offer regarding who they are—including their gender identity and sexuality—and providing healthcare that each member of the body seeks for their wellbeing. The body cannot be what it is without its members, and deprived of its members' continued health and wellbeing, the body will quickly collapse.

Second, those women who wish to have children have every right to do so. This principle is informed, among other things, by those women of color who reminded white feminists that their own reproductive autonomy had all too often been jettisoned in the same way as had Carrie Buck's.⁸⁸ As much as the earliest Reproductive Justice activists worked to increase access to birth control and abortion, they also wanted to protect the right of all to *become* parents—rights that have too long gone unprotected by federal and state governments in the United States. Furthermore, those who choose to have children deserve multiple forms of support as they seek to become mothers. After all, those who do the excruciating, socially beneficial work of gestating, birthing, nursing, and raising children should confidently expect significant social support. This includes, but is not limited to: sex education, robust prenatal care, autonomy with regard to birthing decisions, maternity leave, paternity and other family leave for family members, and lactation accommodations. The right to have a child does not only mean the right to conceive a child and birth it. It also means having the right to have a child safely and without suffering excessive burdens, like those social norms and institutions that consign pregnant

⁸⁷ For multiple examples, see Lane, *Someone Other Than a Mother*.

⁸⁸ For further discussion, see Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*.

women to a subordinate status.⁸⁹ Women are not to be treated as ends, but as indispensable, respected members of the body.

Finally, the right that each woman has as a member of the social body to become a mother does not end at childbirth. Reproduction is not just about bringing a fetus to term. Those that bear children also want to know that the children they bear will, in turn, be respected as members of the social body. Mothers also thus have rights to raise their children in environments that are safe and healthy for all involved. The right that Freddie Gray's mother had to parent her child in a safe and healthy environment was certainly violated on multiple occasions. As an indispensable member of the social body she—and her son—both deserved better.

. . .

IN THE MOST recent political disquiet over questions about abortion and birth control, the slogan “the personal is political” has gathered renewed attention and promotion. It deserves both, but more must be said. That the personal is political does not mean that all personal choices should be open to political debate, nor that the only thing the state must protect are personal rights. Instead, it means that the political community should be concerned with the personal mistreatments of its members, including their suffering of harm or disrespect. This chapter has sought to show, in fact, that individuals and communities—or, we might even say, persons and polities—exist in a mutually beneficial relationship, and as such, priority should not be granted to either. To do so, it has drawn on major insights from some of today's foremost political theorists and introduced additional contributions from the epistles of Saint Paul. This is just a preliminary step in a direction that I pray other scholars will join me in.

⁸⁹ Of course, women play other important and diverse roles in society. But one of the goals of this dissertation is to highlight women's unique capacity to bear children.

Especially in our current milieu, it is essential that we remember that the matrices we all come from—the uterine tissue that encircles us as we develop in those first forty weeks—are themselves parts of people. In the language of Paul’s bodily metaphor: every woman is a member of the social body, bearing intrinsic worth and dignity. As such, their unique contributions as childbearers (and otherwise) ought never to be taken for granted, but esteemed as indispensable, irreplaceable members of the social body.

CHAPTER FOUR

HYSTERICIS: GENDER AND THE DIACHRONICITY OF LIFE

The female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life. We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. This is where we have to begin.

—ADRIENNE RICH¹

What I increasingly felt, in marriage and in motherhood, was that to live as a woman and to live as a feminist were two different and possibly irreconcilable things.

—RACHEL CUSK²

“Do you know what you’re having?”

This was a question I could not evade as a pregnant woman in contemporary American public spaces. Not just in retail outlets—although the question was particularly pressing there—but also in the decidedly progressive climate at Princeton was I asked about the sex of my soon-to-be-born baby by some of the most left-wing minds I knew. In many cases, it was the first question asked of me. For some reason, it was important for people to know this one fact about my future child. Why was that?

Upon reflection, I came to recognize that it was not likely that my inquisitors cared all that much about the primary and secondary sex characteristics my child would possess. They simply were not asking about my child’s genitalia. That was not the kind of information they were after. They weren’t asking about my baby’s *sex*—a classification specified relative to the organs and secondary sex characteristics someone has—so much as her or his *gender*—a category which

¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 292.

² As quoted in Pick, “Chronicle of a Marriage Dissolved.”

names the way sex becomes socially meaningful.³ Where sex is about the possession of organs and other identifying features, that is, gender is about the way those features become socially meaningful to us, by means of social norms and signals. What my inquisitors wanted to know, I suspect, is what kind of life my child might have, and perhaps what kind of relationship I might have to her or him. Perhaps they wanted to add some specificity to their vision of what kind of person my child might become. Perhaps they wanted to anticipate some of the hardships she or he might endure. All these things would have everything to do with the way that my child would move and live in the social world we share. In any case, these many askers wanted to know.

Frankly, so did I. That's why, when I was asked by the technician at my twenty-week ultrasound whether I wanted to know the sex of the baby, I nodded "yes." Among other things, I sensed that this unfamiliar technician who would ascertain my child's sex—and include the baby's sexual organs among the many parts she inspected meticulously via ultrasound—should not know more about my dear baby than I. But I also shared the desire that every person who asked me that recurrent question displayed: I wanted, so badly, to gender my baby. I wanted to add color to the life I imagined my child would live: perhaps, I hoped, not just blue or pink, but still some kind of distinctiveness, some flavor to my visions of life with my first child. In fact, one of the most precious things about learning the sex of our child meant that I began to refer to him by the name we had chosen in case we were to have a boy: Max.⁴ Why, though, I wondered, was it *this* detail, concerning which set of sexual organs my baby possessed, that I mined for

³ Early feminists thus said gender was the "social meaning of sex"; the phrase also appears as "gender is the social significance of sex" and "gender is the social interpretation of sex." The underlying notion is first developed in Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Gayle Rubin as early as 1975 wrote that gender is the "socially imposed division of the sexes" in Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 179. Haslanger adopts the slogan as a helpful shorthand; see Haslanger, "Introduction," 7, 9; Haslanger, "Social Construction: Myth and Reality," 184; Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 227; Haslanger, "Future Genders? Future Races?," 248. Yet it is the major claim of this paper that gender and sex cannot be pulled apart as neatly as others might like to imagine. That said, there is a distinction worth making, which is the point of this sentence in the essay. (There is, of course, another possibility: for many, this question is one of the most accessible for those who don't know what to say to a pregnant woman, and who nevertheless want to politely show interest. Yet, that this question is the first to come to mind deserves notice.)

⁴ Of course, we could have selected a less gendered name (Max tends to be a name given to males). But we did not.

fodder for those visions? Of course, I too was not simply wondering about the particulars of my baby's genitalia; I too was trying to fill out the contours of the future life of my child. But the question remained: why should my child's pudendum play such a central role in my understanding of what my baby's life might be like?⁵

The fact is that it was not I alone who made the world this way. That her or his sex would have social meaning was never a product of my individual decision-making. We live in a world where baby shower decorations tend to come in blue or pink; where conventional pronouns come in gendered varieties; where, in many cases, not only our clothing but also our names—our very identities—intimate our sex. I inherited this world; my child has inherited it in turn. We do not have another.⁶

Nevertheless, upon reflection, I came to appreciate that the reason my son's sex mattered socially could not be said to be completely arbitrary. After all, my son, like nearly every human being alive today, owes his very existence to the coupling of two members of distinct sexes.⁷ Furthermore, I knew how much being pregnant meant to (and cost) me, and it couldn't but mean something that my son would never himself bear a child. Surely, the social benefits (and costs) of procreation that stem from the differentiation between the sexes warrant that sex be assigned at least *some* social meaning. There may, I realized, be some value in gender after all.

Could it be possible, I wondered, for sex to bear some social meaning—that is, for there to be gender—without such identification devolving into the kind of gross disparity that obtains today

⁵ A revisionary etymology for the term “pudenda,” derived from the Latin genitive of *pudere*, meaning “to be ashamed”: we are right to be ashamed of the wrongs that arise from the wrongs that we do to one another on the basis of gender.

⁶ This does not preclude the possibility of working for a more just social world. We just aren't able to do so in a vacuum.

⁷ To be sure, this coupling often takes on a conventional form, and sometimes does not (as in the case of artificial insemination or in-vitro fertilization). Yet even in the latter instances, human procreation involves two members of distinct sexes. I say “nearly” because there *have* been children who have been the offspring of three parents. In these cases, a sperm is introduced to fertilize an egg, the mitochondrial DNA of which has been replaced by that of a “third parent.” Yet, again, even in these rare cases—estimated to be at around 30-50 in the world as of 2014—the contributions of members of distinct sexes are necessary. See Pritchard, “The Girl with Three Biological Parents.”

between the sexes? Might we imagine a world in which the social taxonomy of reproductive roles need not hinder the flourishing of members of any sex?⁸

In the present chapter, I will defend the thesis that the maintenance of expectations with regard to gender are not only justifiable but in fact indispensable in human society.⁹ I will draw largely on Sally Haslanger's insight that justice requires the social identification of sex—which is precisely what she takes gender to be. According to Haslanger, the fact that the responsibilities of reproduction are unequally distributed, combined with our collective need for reproduction, means that society ought to accommodate those who bear an outsized share of the reproductive burden. Given that we all need there to be future generations, we need there to be some people willing to do the hard work of childbearing.¹⁰ And given that that work falls to only roughly half of the human population, it is important that we recognize those upon whom that duty disproportionately falls. I depart from Haslanger, however, insofar as the social recognition of sex that she recommends overlooks the diachronic nature of human life. Because our lives are shaped by our expectations of our own and others' commitments, we cannot simply appreciate the contributions childbearers are making in this or another moment. Rather, we need to have a more comprehensive view of the ways that the bearing of children—and even the mere ability to bear children—impacts a person's life over time. I also take up and address two worries: first,

⁸ Anne Fausto-Sterling points out that we might be helped by a taxonomy of (at least) five sexes in Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes." See further discussion in Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*.

⁹ This is not merely a philosophical exercise for me. As a parent, I find it imperative to bequeath to my child as just a world as possible; so, too, do I aspire to raise a child that will contribute to making our world more just. The questions that are raised in this chapter, therefore, are not raised as an exercise in woolgathering but rather motivated by very concrete commitments.

¹⁰ Anyone who has seen the movie *Children of Men* has seen this principle played out cinematographically. The film is dark, both visually and figuratively. Of course, exactly *how* many children is needed for society to continue to function is not always clear; it may be above or below the replacement rate. There may be reason to welcome the trend in declining fertility rates across the world. But few would be willing to live in a world in which *no one* bore children. Here it may be helpful to distinguish between the growing movement of "Birthstrikers," who themselves refuse to have children out of care for the environment, and "anti-natalists," including advocates for the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, who demand that *all* humans abstain from reproducing. Many might be reasonably convinced by concerns that birthstrikers raise; few, I think, accept the anti-natalists' view that it is morally wrong to have children, and that all human reproduction should come to an end. Even fewer would actually be able to manage in a world in which there were no future generations.

that the social identification of individuals' sex might unfairly constrain those individuals, and second, that the close identification of sex and gender might preclude the public expression of transgender identity. To address the first worry, I insist that we must not be withheld from identifying persons' capacities out of fear that such identification is constraining. To the second worry, I show that there are plenty of good reasons to loosen sex's grip on gender, including most notably, to ameliorate the suffering endured by those with gender dysphoria. I show that, hazards notwithstanding, it does not follow from these worries that gender ought to be eliminated, but rather restructured.

Before I begin, a note about language. At times in the opening section of this chapter, I appear to use the term "woman" synonymously with the phrasal noun "those who have uteruses" and "man" synonymously with "those who do not have uteruses." This is a shorthand that does not adequately appreciate the multiplicity of experiences and identities that persons have today, and for this and many other reasons, this kind of language must ultimately be jettisoned. In fact, that is the major claim of this chapter. However, because we cannot pick ourselves up by our own linguistic bootstraps, and because our idioms hail from east of Eden, we begin with crude expressions like "man" and "woman" only as holdovers from a passing, unjust age. As the reader will learn in the later sections of the chapter, it is my goal to work toward developing working language to replace the unjust grammar of gender prevalent today.

Gendered expectations

Ours is not a just world. Women make seventy-nine cents for every dollar made by men.¹¹ They make up only five percent of the CEOs managing Fortune 500 companies and only 23.7

¹¹ See Table A-4 of Fontenot, Semega, and Kollar, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2017"; Miller, "What We Can Do to Close the Pay Gap." Of course, the statistics are much worse for women of color. The exact ratio changes through a woman's lifetime, too: whereas women in their mid-twenties make about 90% of what their male

percent of the legislators in Congress (and the latter figure is an all-time high).¹² Conversely, women are disproportionately subject to sexual assault: one in five women have been raped in their lifetime, but only one in forty men experience the same trauma.¹³ Those serving in the military, according to testimony from former congressional representative Jane Harman, are “more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire.”¹⁴ According to the Pentagon’s estimates, six percent of women in the military have been sexually assaulted in the last year alone, during their service; less than one percent of men have been similarly victimized. These statistics are staggering. To be sure, they cannot be said to reveal some underlying incompetence or weakness that afflicts women; rather, they reflect the ways gender roles and norms have limited women’s flourishing in the world. A society like ours, which funnels women into lower-paying and lower-status occupations, systematically dismisses women’s leadership, and sanctions sexual violence toward women, certainly cannot be said to be just. These inequities and injustices, furthermore, are fueled by gender norms that prescribe certain lives and behaviors for men, and others for women. Achieving more just arrangements requires we do something about these problematic gender expectations.

A growing body of thought centers around the claim that the best way to respond to these gender norms is to work toward a world in which there are no gender norms at all. This view is known as postgenderism, gender abolitionism, or radical feminism. According to the view, in a

counterparts make, by age 45 that number drops 55%, according to two recent studies. See Miller, “Motherhood Has Role In the Gender Pay Gap.”

¹² Miller, “The Number of Women at the Top Is Falling”; Bump, “Congress Is More Heavily Female than at Any Point in History — Thanks Solely to New Democrats.”

¹³ Smith et al., “NISVS 2015 Data Brief.” According to the same data, however, as many as one out of six men experience unwanted sexual contact. Nevertheless, twice as many women—one in three—will experience unwanted sexual contact in their lifetimes.

¹⁴ The rhetorical move is powerful, in terms of the comparison between being the object of an enemy assault and being sexually assaulted by a fellow soldier. The likelihood of being killed by enemy fire, however, is relatively low: even in the height of the combat deaths during the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, only about one out of every thousand active duty members was killed in combat each year. This is, however, *significantly* lower than the number of women report being assaulted while serving every year: one out of fifteen. Holland, Rabelo, and Cortina, “Sexual Assault Training in the Military,” 289.

just world, there would be no gender norms in the first place. That is to say: if gender is the social meaning of sex, the existence of gender is unjust, as it is altogether unjust for individuals' anatomical sex to be socially meaningful. Thus Gayle Rubin writes that what feminists ought to work toward is "an androgynous and genderless" social order.¹⁵ Shulamith Firestone recommends an even more radical program; she writes that the feminist ought to work for "not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself."¹⁶ More recently, Robin Dembroff's work largely concentrates on the way that genderqueer and non-binary identities can function to destabilize—and perhaps to help eliminate—gender as it stands today.¹⁷ In a 2018 article in the *New York Review of Books*, they wrote that "[t]here is no good reason why our bodies or our gender identities should be recorded by the state."¹⁸ The major claim of this chapter is that, to the contrary, justice—the very purpose toward which the state is ordered—requires that anatomical sex continue to have social meaning. That is, that justice requires there to be gender.

Before I continue, it is important that I clearly outline what I take gender to be. I use the term gender, as have many feminists that precede me, to name the social meaning or interpretation of sex. It is not the *fact* of the possession of certain gonads and gametes, but the way that we those characteristics gain social meaning. In the present-day United States, that includes clothing and hygiene practices, the identification of sex on official documents, the designation of names, and a host of other practices. I am not suggesting that sex would be altogether opaque to us apart from the social conventions that identify sex and thereby constitute gender. Rather, gender works insofar as it makes sex socially meaningful. As an illustration, contrast sex with individuals' eye color. Certainly, there have been times when the color of one's eyes had some bearing on one's

¹⁵ Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 204.

¹⁶ Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 11.

¹⁷ Dembroff, "Beyond Binary"; Dembroff, "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender."

¹⁸ Dembroff, "The Nonbinary Gender Trap."

social status.¹⁹ Today in the United States, however, eye color is insignificant enough that it often goes unnoticed (at least, to the degree that it does not correlate with racial identification). One can easily walk away from an encounter with another person not knowing what that person's eye color was. This is not because one's eye color is somehow *inaccessible* to others, but because it simply isn't socially meaningful. We don't really pay attention. Or consider that, unlike in the United States, in parts of East Asia, blood type is a socially meaningful distinction that is hierarchically organized. Many Americans don't even know what blood type they are—not because they could never find out, but because it does not bear any social meaning.²⁰ On the other hand, we are *very* attuned to what (we assume) the sex of those we encounter might be. In our social interactions and practices, we make sex socially meaningful. I follow Haslanger's adoption of the slogan that "gender is the social meaning of sex" as a shorthand definition for what gender is and does. Yet Haslanger presents a much more comprehensive account of gender in her work that deserves outlining here.

For Haslanger, gender principally has to do with one's social positioning in society. Above all, gender shapes "how one is viewed, how one is treated, and how one's life is structured socially, legally, and economically."²¹ Gender is thus to be distinguished from sex, where only the latter is "defined in terms of intrinsic physical features."²² It is not the fact of one's having certain primary and secondary sex characteristics that gender indicates. Rather, gender identifies

¹⁹ The Nazis went so far as to institute a breeding program to create tens of thousands of children with blue eyes (and blonde hair). Landler, "Results of Secret Nazi Breeding Program."

²⁰ In South Korea, this becomes particularly salient, as the language includes as many as seven levels of formality; which level ought to be used is determined by the social position of the speaker in relation to that of her audience. To know which verb ending one must use, a speaker must first ascertain where on the social pecking order she stands in relation to her addressee(s). Many conversations in South Korea thus begin with questions that would be perceived in Western culture as remarkably intrusive—about age, marital status, and, because blood type can figure into this social positionality, blood type. See Nuwer, "You Are What You Bleed."

²¹ Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 229. Similarly, elsewhere, Haslanger writes: "[c]onstrued simply, genders are those social positions, within a particular culture, constituted by how sexed beings are viewed and treated." Haslanger, "Social Construction: Myth and Reality," 196.

²² Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 229. This draws dangerously near to the morass of debate about whether sex is socially constructed; I will steer clear of that here.

the *social treatment* of those taken to have certain primary and secondary sex characteristics.

Haslanger offers a helpful illustration of the distinction to be drawn between sex and gender by referring to the roles played by landlords and tenants:

Consider a landlord. One is a landlord by virtue of one's role in a broad system of social and economic relations which includes tenants, property, and the like. Even if it turned out as a matter of fact that all and only landlords had a closed loop in the center of their right thumbprint, the basis for being counted a landlord is different from the basis for being counted as having such a thumbprint. Likewise for gender, one is a woman, not by virtue of one's intrinsic features (for example, body type), but by virtue of one's part in a system of social relations which includes, among other things, men. Gender is a relational or extrinsic property of individuals, and the relations in question are social.²³

Yet the social positionality of gender nevertheless arises from the *presumption* of a target's sex.²⁴ Hence in Haslanger's definition of woman and man, she explains that a woman is, among other things, "regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction," while a man is correlatively "regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male's biological role in reproduction."²⁵ Elsewhere, she writes that "[s]exual difference functions as the physical marker to distinguish [between genders], and is used in the justification of viewing and treating the members of each group differently."²⁶ Therefore, while gender names something different from that which sex names, gender is nevertheless fundamentally dependent upon our assumptions about sex. Gender cannot be wholly dislodged from such categories. That is to say: while there is—and ought to be—some

²³ Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," 40–41.

²⁴ See discussion in West and Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," 132. They cite Kessler and McKenna's 1978 study, in which a child contends that "It's a man, because he has a pee-pee" and translate it as "He must have a pee-pee because I see the insignia of a suit and tie."

²⁵ Haslanger, "Social Construction: The 'Debunking' Project," 132–33; Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 234.

²⁶ Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 230. Dembroff says that this makes Haslanger an "externalist," in Dembroff, "Beyond Binary," 5. But Haslanger is not as purely externalist as Dembroff makes her out to be—Haslanger is simply not willing to say that gender identity has only to do with one's internal mental states or preferred identification.

space to be made for variations between individuals' sexual identifications and their gender identities, it's not as if sex and gender can be mutually disentangled altogether.²⁷

An additional aspect often discussed in Haslanger's various descriptions of gender is its hierarchical nature. Gender is taken to preponderate "in a broad structure of subordination and privilege," according to Haslanger.²⁸ Nevertheless, she is not always consistent about whether gender is, on her account, necessarily hierarchical. In her definition of gender offered in "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" Haslanger stipulates that "[g]ender categories are defined hierarchically within a broader complex of oppressive relations; one group (viz., women) is socially positioned as subordinate to the other (viz., men), typically within the context of other forms of economic and social oppression."²⁹ Yet later in that same essay, she writes that "gender can be fruitfully understood as a higher order genus that includes not only the hierarchical social positions of man and woman, but potentially other non-hierarchical social positions defined in part by reference to reproductive function."³⁰ Haslanger thereafter offers a modified definition of gender, which does not characterize gender as *necessarily* hierarchical.³¹ Her new definition concentrates instead on the social positionality of gender, which can be non-hierarchical.³² This variation notwithstanding, Haslanger is insistent

²⁷ This is, it seems, a minority report: Judith Butler, a towering figure among feminist theorists, wants to insist that there is nothing "natural" or "out there" as raw material that can be made to be socially meaningful. While I might want to grant that point, I'm certain that Butler would not deny the fact of our bodily particularity. There are reasons that many transgender men feel the need or desire to bind or tape or undergo top surgery. For more on the ongoing debates about chestbinding, see Sohn, "Chest Binding Helps Smooth the Way for Transgender Teens, but There May Be Risks."

²⁸ Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 233.

²⁹ Haslanger, 230.

³⁰ Haslanger, 235.

³¹ Haslanger, "Future Genders? Future Races?," 244. That she includes in a footnote her gratitude to a fellow philosopher "for suggesting this approach" leads me to suspect that Haslanger did not endorse a non-hierarchical definition of gender prior to working on this essay.

³² In a footnote in another essay, Haslanger reminds us that "not all social relations are hierarchical (e.g., being a friend is not), and not all hierarchical relations are relations of domination (e.g., although plausibly the relations of doctor-patient, mother-daughter, and so on are hierarchical, they are not themselves relations of domination). Unfortunately, the distinctions between social, hierarchical, and dominance relations are sometimes conflated." Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," 41 n. 13.

that the two most common genders—i.e., man and woman—are hierarchically ordered categories, and so she maintains her definition of woman as subordinate *as such* and, correlatively, man as privileged *as such*. She then specifies that she doesn't want to eliminate gender altogether; she just wants to get rid of men and women.³³

Just gender

In fact, Haslanger shows us that it would be misguided, indeed perhaps even detrimental to society, to imagine a world without gender—a world in which sex didn't have social meaning. She writes:

Given that as a species there are substantial differences in what human bodies contribute to reproduction, and what sorts of bodies bear the main physical burdens of reproduction, and given further that reproduction cannot really help but be a socially significant fact (it does, after all, produce children), it can seem difficult to imagine a functioning society, more specifically, a functioning *feminist* society, that doesn't acknowledge in some way the difference between those kinds of bodies that are likely able to bear children, and the we that aren't.³⁴

The inescapable fact is that human reproduction requires the contributions of two members of distinct sexes—even when, as is increasingly the case in the United States in the twenty-first century, that reproduction involves assistive reproductive technology.³⁵ Every living person owes their existence to the collaboration of two postpubescent people, and specifically that of

³³ She's insistent, nevertheless, that she does *not* want to get rid of males and females. "This will not require mass femicide!" writes Haslanger. "Males and females may remain even where there are no men or women." In Haslanger, "Introduction," 9. Also see Haslanger, "Future Genders? Future Races?," 252, 254, 269. I find this a helpful, if counterintuitive conclusion. One might suppose that a feminist would want to eliminate gender, not men and women. Haslanger, provocatively, wants to jettison the categories of "women" and "men," which she considers subordinate or privileged *by definition*, but approves of the maintenance of gender, the social meaning of sex.

³⁴ Haslanger, "Future Genders? Future Races?," 253–54. Italics in the original. As it so happens, Haslanger herself is not capable of bearing children. She discusses her own experience of attempting to become pregnant, discovering her infertility, and being pressured by medical professionals to go to any lengths possible to try to become pregnant in a comment on a blog for feminist philosophers. See "On Becoming Infertile."

³⁵ According to one report, assistive reproductive technologies (ART), which includes egg donation and in-vitro fertilization, accounted for just under 77,000 births in the United States in 2016, which was just under two percent of the United States total. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Society for Reproductive Medicine, and Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology, "2016 Assisted Reproductive Technology Fertility Clinic Success Rates Report." It is difficult to know how many births arise from donor insemination per year, as there is no federal requirement that such statistics be recorded. However, one estimate suggests the number to be at about 30,000 births per year; see Greif and Merz, "Manufacturing Children," 87.

two people who play divergent roles in the reproductive process.³⁶ This collaboration can be made possible only by a kind of semiotics of procreation, where sex bears at least some sort of social meaning.³⁷ That is to say: we assign some significance to primary and secondary sex characteristics in part to facilitate the union of dissimilar sexes that procreation requires. And this not only so that such unions can form domestic relationships, but even to simply distinguish which participants in artificial reproduction will play which role in the reproductive process.

To be clear: it's not as if we might not be able to recognize a difference in sex without there being some substantial significance attached to those bodily differences. We are able, after all, to tell the difference between people with blue and brown and green eyes. We just don't, usually, because the differences between these are not socially significant—at least, not as such in contemporary American society. However, because procreation requires two members of distinct sexes, it becomes helpful in the practice of procreation to make one's sex socially meaningful, such that one can collaborate—either conventionally or by other means—with others toward the ends of procreation. It makes sense to socially recognize those differences.

Moreover, given that the lion's share of the responsibilities of procreation are inequitably borne by half of the human population, a just society would acknowledge and make accommodations for this difference. This why Haslanger insists that a “functioning *feminist* society” must maintain the social meaningfulness of sex. As Haslanger discusses in a 2008 interview:

³⁶ I am a little surprised to find myself hesitating to make this point, for fear I might slip into the biological determinism that naturalizes gender. Surely, though, we must be able to find a way to name biological facts—such as the fact that humans come into being as the result of the coalescing of the reproductive contributions of two members of distinct sexes. A political program that would discourage the recognition of this fact would seem to me to be hazardous and misguided.

³⁷ Haslanger writes: “[s]exual reproduction, I submit, imposes some limits in forming a just society, though it is not clear what those limits are. Given that sex needs to be meaningful in order to achieve justice, a conception of gender that allows new non-hierarchical cases will be valuable in our efforts.” In Haslanger, “Future Genders? Future Races?,” 254.

[In] any just society where human beings reproduce sexually, so that it's not that we have test-tube babies, we're going to need to have some recognition of reproductive difference. Not just because we have to be able to tell, you know, who is donating the sperm and who is donating the eggs, but because pregnancy, I think, is a burden. It's also a joy for many people. But it's a physical burden and places physical constraints on the body that are different than what ejaculation does. You know, men can reproduce by just ejaculating, but women have a much greater burden to bear. And so I think that a just society must recognize that difference.³⁸

Haslanger does not offer an exhaustive account of what such recognition would involve, but suggests that they would include accommodations for maternity leave, assistance with medical costs associated with birth, and nursing and pumping spaces. These accommodations are owed to those who become mothers according to Haslanger because, while such individuals bear the significant burdens of childbirth and breastfeeding, the advantages of children being birthed and nourished accrue to society. Haslanger is worth quoting at length here:

it isn't clear to me that [mothers] shouldn't be given some accommodations in the workplace or some financial assistance because otherwise [they] are going to be disadvantaged by being the person who is going to bear the costs of that, but the benefits of that are to the whole society. I mean, I sometimes say to people who complain about parental benefits, well, my son is going to be the person possibly who takes care of you, who is your doctor in old age. And, you know, you want him to get a good education, you want him to have health care, you want all of these things because he is the next generation who is coming up, and he will have so much to offer to society. And so, for me to have to bear the disadvantages that might come with pregnancy and lactation, whatever it is, that it's nonetheless going to benefit lots of people other than me, I think that's unfair.³⁹

It is a matter of justice that we acknowledge and even compensate those who are able to carry children for facing the demands that only those who can carry children uniquely bear.⁴⁰

³⁸ Haslanger, *Understanding Womanhood*. The reader may recall that this quotation was introduced in chapter two, on page 108. It's worth highlighting Haslanger's opening caveat. In her *Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone insisted that the feminist revolution would depend on in vitro fertilization and the use of artificial wombs, which could "[free] women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology." Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 206.

³⁹ As Haslanger explains: In Haslanger, *Understanding Womanhood*. See also discussion throughout Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*.

⁴⁰ One might argue, in fact, that it is unfair *in principle* that any woman who might desire to procreate has to bear unequal burdens in comparison to their male counterparts, without adding the point about the benefits that accrue to society from this inequity. That would, I think, be a perfectly appropriate (and perhaps urgent) case to make. However, in this chapter, I am interested in the question of justice, which, as I see it, raises questions about what we owe one another *qua* fellow members of society. Perhaps it would be fair to say that what we owe to one another is a fair opportunity to not have to bear unique burdens for morally irrelevant reasons, such as which sexual organs one has. Yet I am particularly interested in highlighting the ways that our interdependence—for example, the dependence of childfree individuals on those that bear and raise children—demand of us a willingness to support parents and uniquely support childbearing women. To be completely candid, I am somewhat concerned about the degree to which the same feminist theory that jettisons the concerns of pregnant women is often produced by those who have never carried children and yet nevertheless benefit from the childbearing work of other women.

It is worth mentioning here that, according to some scientists, it is least theoretically possible, and perhaps even feasible in the near future, for a male to become pregnant following a uterine transplant. The first successful pregnancy following a female-to-female uterine transplant took place in Sweden in 2014; since then, several more have followed, including one in the United States.⁴¹ According to one doctor interviewed by the New York Times, it is conceivable that a male could be the recipient of such a transplant and carry a child to term.⁴² However, such births would, for the foreseeable future, be exceedingly rare and exorbitantly costly. (A female-to-female uterine transplant costs hundreds of thousands of dollars.⁴³) If we are to pay close attention to the material realities faced by human beings today—as I think we ought—we must not get preoccupied by such remote possibilities, but rather attend to the unfairness suffered by countless human beings in their everyday experience. It is concern for such material experience that motivates the need for things like maternity leave and lactation rooms.

Yet another consideration is relevant here. The difference between those who can bear children and those who cannot is not only important because we owe additional accommodations to those who do the work of bringing future generations into existence. It also yields another disparity between those who can and those who cannot bear children—namely, the potential *risk* of becoming pregnant that only some persons face. Men who conceive a child accidentally may be liable for supporting a child financially and otherwise, but they do not face the consequences that becoming pregnant can lead to, including job loss or suspension, health complications, or

⁴¹ Baumgaertner, “From a Deceased Woman’s Transplanted Uterus, a Live Birth”; Grady, “Woman Becomes First In America to Give Birth After Uterus Transplant.”

⁴² Grady, “Will Uterine Transplants Make Male Pregnancy Possible?” This is a very different matter than that of pregnancy among transmen; as I am interested in the social meaning of sex, I focus on pregnancy among those assigned male at birth.

⁴³ Grady, “Woman Becomes First In America to Give Birth After Uterus Transplant.”

even death.⁴⁴ Merely having the organs that can gestate a child renders one subject to these risks; those who do not have these organs will never experience these dangers. No birth control is completely effective, after all: even abstinence cannot ensure that a woman will not become pregnant, given the abovementioned statistics about rape.⁴⁵

Indeed, according to the Guttmacher Institute, the average woman wishes to bear two children in her life, and will spend approximately three years of her adult life either attempting to become pregnant, pregnant, or postpartum. She will spend the other thirty years she is of childbearing age—between about 15 and 50—*actively avoiding pregnancy*.⁴⁶ (Meanwhile, 5% of those capable of becoming pregnant who use contraceptive devices consistently become pregnant each year, and half of all such individuals have had an unintended pregnancy by the time they reach age 45.) There is no off switch for the female reproductive system, such that one can choose when she wants to conceive a child. To be able to have children at some point in their lives, many women must spend decades trying not to.

But those who have uteruses do not merely face medical and professional risks associated with pregnancy; they also face criminal risks. Many states have instituted, or are considering instituting, laws that criminalize “endangerment” of a fetus. Those who use drugs, self-harm, or even *accidentally fall down stairs* while pregnant unknowingly have been incarcerated on the basis of these laws, making many women responsible for actions that would not otherwise carry such harsh penalties in ways that men never would be.⁴⁷ Furthermore, in some cases, the childbearers in question had not even known that they were pregnant while committing the

⁴⁴ The chances, generally speaking, are relatively low: about one in every 3,500 pregnant women will die in childbirth. However, at least a quarter of these deaths are preventable. The United States, furthermore, has the highest maternal mortality rate of the entire developed world. Additionally, black women face a disproportionately high risk of death: one out of every 2,500 black women will die in childbirth. For more, see Brooks, “Mothers Are Dying. Does Anyone Care?”

⁴⁵ See note 13 above.

⁴⁶ Sonfield, Hasstedt, and Gold, “Moving Forward: Family Planning in the Era of Health Reform,” 7–8.

⁴⁷ Goodwin, “Pregnant and Punished.”

alleged crimes.⁴⁸ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has gone so far as to officially recommend that all females who are not on birth control refrain from consuming alcohol, and to refer to all females of childbearing age as “pre-pregnant.”⁴⁹ It is difficult to imagine what most male legislators would say about a proposed law that would severely penalize them for committing an offense while altogether unaware of their status as potential offender. We don’t know, because they don’t have to think about it—after all, they don’t have uteruses. Of course, given ongoing developments in national politics, it is likely that those able to gestate children may face further legal precarity in the coming years and decades.

Being able to bear a child is, therefore, hazardous and demanding in all sorts of ways. And yet, because society requires that some people bear children, we cannot manage without having some of us live with these hazards. Because these risks are inequitably distributed, they should be more equitably redistributed by means of social support and recognition.

Doing gender better

As we have seen, it is imperative that a just society recognize both 1) the fact that reproductive roles are differentiated across the sexes, and 2) the inequitable distribution of the burdens of procreation. For that reason, justice requires that sex must be socially meaningful. But the way that sex is socially meaningful today is hierarchical and unjust.⁵⁰ Our prevailing gender scheme demands replacement. What kind of non-hierarchical genders might replace the categories of “women” and “men” in a more just world? According to Haslanger, such alternatives need not correspond to what we tend to think of as “sex” today. They might, for

⁴⁸ It takes at least two weeks—and can easily take up to ten weeks—for women to learn they are pregnant, which also happens to be the period in which fetal development is most affected by injury or drug use.

⁴⁹ Victor, “No Alcohol for Sexually Active Women Without Birth Control, C.D.C. Recommends”; Armstrong, “Making Sense of Advice About Drinking During Pregnancy,” 66.

⁵⁰ I add the latter stipulation because I affirm, with Haslanger, that not all hierarchical orderings constitute domination; see note 32 above.

example, include “‘pregnant persons,’ ‘lactating persons,’ ‘menstruating persons,’ ‘infertile persons.’”⁵¹ These would be ways to identify categories relevant to justice socially without falling into a binary distinction.

I agree with Haslanger that our prevailing conceptions of gender are simply too mired in binary thinking. Yet here I part ways with Haslanger, as I suspect that her particular alternative vision fails to take into account the diachronic nature of the lives we lead and the long-term decisions we make. Colloquialisms notwithstanding, no one simply *falls* pregnant; they *become* pregnant, and, in the great majority of cases, do so as a consequence of certain choices.⁵² Especially in the present-day context, where birth control is largely accessible, procreation is something that some humans choose to pursue, while others choose to refrain from having children.⁵³ Choosing to breastfeed is also a decision mothers must make. All these decisions have long-term implications, and, in many cases, are themselves made over a long period of time. After all, bodily autonomy is a good worth protecting, and the exercise of bodily autonomy takes time. The reader may at this point want to revisit the specifics presented in chapter two, about the ways that our interdependent expecting over time forms us as individuals and facilitates our agency.

For this reason, what we might call Haslanger’s “time-slice” approach to gender, which simply pinpoints those belonging *at present* to categories relevant to justice—like “pregnant person” and “lactating person”—is insufficient. There is something crucial about identifying

⁵¹ Haslanger, “Gender and Race,” 244.

⁵² In cases where pregnancy does *not* arise as a product of choice—as in the case of rape—it is essential that women maintain the ability to choose to terminate the pregnancy. Even amid heated debates about abortion, this right garners significant bipartisan support. On the other hand, a great many women become pregnant despite their preference to not bear children, or at least to not bear children at the time. Nevertheless, one could say that their pregnancy is a product of their choices—to wit, their choice to use (or not use) birth control, their choice to have (or not have) sex, and, more controversially, their choice to avail themselves (or not) of emergency contraception and/or elective abortion.

⁵³ I should note that I am aware of the dangers of the kind of thinking that Lee Edelman describes in his *No Future*: the criticism of same-sex couples on the basis that such couplings cannot create children, and therefore reveals a “death drive” on the part of queer folks. Edelman, *No Future*.

those who *might become pregnant*, if she were to so choose, or who *might become a father*, if he were to so choose, or who *might become a nursing mother*, if she were to so choose. The coordination that is required in procreation—as well as in the decades of childrearing to follow—necessitates that persons have some sense of the social context in which they make those choices. The choice to become a nursing mother, for example, can depend in great part on one’s knowledge that she will have the support she needs to nurse, from both her family and her wider community. In this case too, then, the coordination required for childbearing and childrearing necessitates at least *some* continuity of persons’ gender over time. Haslanger’s “time-slice” genders, including “lactating person” or “pregnant person,” therefore aren’t suitable, given the diachronic nature of living and procreating.⁵⁴

That said, there are excellent reasons to put an end to the kinds of social signals we use today to identify those who have uteruses.⁵⁵ In the patriarchy we find ourselves in, one’s possession of a uterus is associated with a host of things that have no necessary (or appropriate) relation to that accident of birth. A woman is expected to be an expert in the kitchen and proficient in textile arts, but lack bravery and logical thinking, for example—things that have nothing at all to do with possession of a uterus.⁵⁶ These constraining and harmful expectations must be abolished. Meanwhile, the perpetuation of norms unrelated to uterus possession has created a setting in which some classified male at birth have found themselves more comfortable living according to

⁵⁴ I think it much more reasonable to endorse Haslanger’s suggestion, introduced in the abovementioned 2008 interview, that a just world might institute roughly four genders. This system of four genders includes one for young children, another for aging adults past the age of childbearing, and two for adults of childbearing age: one for adult males and another for adult females. See Haslanger, *Understanding Womanhood*. According to Haslanger, this sort of system exists in some extant cultures, though she is not specific about which ones (and I do not know which she is referring to). A worry that one might raise about this system would be that the introduction of age distinctions could lead to ageism. Another worry would concern those individuals who would not fit so neatly into this scheme, for example, the members of the three additional sexes discussed in *A just world’s gender norms* would have to resolve these problems creatively.

⁵⁵ I must admit here that I am using “uterus” as a synecdoche. By “uteruses,” I mean the entire female reproductive system, which includes the uterus, the Fallopian tubes, the ovaries, and the vulva.

⁵⁶ Whenever we’ve had contractors do work on our home, they’ve almost always tried to explain their work to my husband, though I am the one who has done the remodeling and woodwork—while my husband watched our child!

the expectations visited upon women, and identifying accordingly. (And vice versa.) As such, it becomes less and less appropriate to even maintain the use of the term “women” in the first place to identify possessors of uteruses. Yet, it is imperative, as I hope I have shown here, that we have some way to socially identify those who indeed have a uterus.

We must address *both* of these concerns: first, the pressing demand to eliminate the patriarchal expectations associated with the concept of a “woman”, and the necessity for a new social grammar for attending to the unique challenges those with uteruses face. This is a crucial point, and one that I believe might also help resolve one of the most heated disputes in feminist thinking today. While many feminists rightly want to be inclusive toward trans women, as a matter of justice, others have raised concerns that doing so might turn our attention away from the challenges that those who are able to carry children uniquely face. This is the most charitable reading of J.K. Rowling and others’ recent critiques.⁵⁷ Such an objection is not unfair: for example, nowhere in their scholarly effort to fight patriarchal systems does Robin Dembroff ever discuss or consider the unique burdens of pregnancy.⁵⁸ The closest that they come to addressing these challenges is in discussing the fight for reproductive rights. Because there are so many challenges that those with uteruses face—especially, but not exclusively, in the work they face in

⁵⁷ Frankly, I doubt that many of the so-called “terfs” deserve charity—they tend to be polemical and exclusive without granting their audience particularly good reasons for their dogged exclusion of trans women. However, I do think there is some kernel of their worries that is worth highlighting. Feminists simply do not sufficiently attend to the inevitable challenges that those with uteruses uniquely face. We need a better analysis, and that also requires a new vocabulary for thinking about bodily burdens.

⁵⁸ Dembroff is not unique but actually quite characteristic among feminists in this regard. Even feminist theory that focuses on care regularly overlooks pregnancy. To be fair, I can think of at least four reasons that motivate this abstention. First, feminists rightly seek to transcend the dyadic thinking that troubled works like Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, where women’s “nature” is subjected to a certain essentialist portrayal over and against that of their male counterparts. Second, it is important to vacate motherhood from the ideals of womanhood to which women are often subjected. Third, pregnancy raises thorny political questions about abortion that undermine political unity. Fourth, pregnancy is an act of care that some people—including many women—cannot participate in, and so to highlight it can be exclusionary. Other difficulties remain. Nevertheless, I am troubled that that concern has consigned pregnancy to the margins of feminist theory, even as the lion’s share of women will become mothers at some point in their lives. Bordo (2004, 95) notably urges that while “[f]eminists may be made queasy” by focusing on pregnancy, “we stand a better chance of successfully contesting [patriarchy] if we engage in the construction of a public, feminist discourse on pregnancy and birth rather than leaving it in the hands of the ‘prolifers.’”

pregnancy—it is essential that we publicly bring attention to and relieve these challenges. The issue is not that Rowling and others insist that we need such a designation, it is that they insist that we should simply use the term “women.” That expression is loaded with patriarchal inheritances that we must work to abolish.

Some might suggest that we can merely use whatever term that might be relevant to the matter at hand. Tampon manufacturers, doctors, and journalists have referred to “menstruators,” for example. This, quite fairly, has received some criticism, insofar as it seems to reduce persons to mere biological functions. Some have alternately recommended that we refer to “people who menstruate,” or in the idiom I have introduced intermittently above, “people with uteruses.” However, I think we ought to avoid depending on such turns of phrase, as they seem to suggest that it is merely incidental that some people have uteruses—like “people who have Toyotas” or “people who have braces.” Consider, for example, the work that is done by the phrasal term “those who are experiencing homelessness,” as contrasted to “homeless people.” The point is to identify the experience of homelessness as incidental, rather than more fundamentally identity-shaping. But having a uterus *is* identity shaping, even if not ineluctably so. Even as it is only by chance that some of us are born with uteruses and some of us are not, this arbitrary condition can bear decisive significance for people’s lives, in various different domains.

In a similar but distinct vein, I exhort my readers to resist using the language of “pregnant persons” or “pregnant people” *as a matter of justice*. A central claim of this chapter is that it is fundamentally unjust to elide the fact there remains a distinction between those who are (presumptively) capable of becoming pregnant and those who are not. In fact, this very elision was committed in *Geduldig v. Aiello*, a notorious Supreme Court case that held that firing pregnant women was not discrimination on the basis of sex, precisely by using the language of

pregnant and “non-pregnant persons.”⁵⁹ The fact remains that the work of childbearing in the great preponderance of the cases is borne by a limited segment of the population—a segment that tends to be subject to many other forms of oppression, either as women or as trans men. We do wrong to ignore this fundamental inequity.

Hysterics

I therefore recommend that we seek to develop a non-patriarchal social system for acknowledging the unique challenges and burdens that those with uteruses bear. I do not have a comprehensive proposal for how we might transform the hierarchical arrangement of genders that prevails today, though I think one is sorely needed. However, I do have one minor, if somewhat facetious, suggestion: that those with uteruses be identified as “hysterics,” per the Greek term for uterus, *hysterā*. The reader will recall, of course, that “hysteria” was the diagnosis given to women who did not comport themselves according to social norms, or who suffered mental illnesses. The use of “hysterics” is intended to serve as a linguistic reclamation of the term, analogically to the use of the word “queer” in contemporary critical theory and activism.⁶⁰

We might give a provisional—and by no means decisive—definition of a hysteric. A hysteric, according to the story I might offer, is

*someone who, for all we know, is capable of playing a particular reproductive role, should they so choose, where that particular reproductive role involves a more demanding commitment than other reproductive roles, though they nevertheless must cooperate with others to procreate.*⁶¹

This sketch highlights three significant components that must be incorporated in any social semiotics of sex. First, note the use of the phrase “for all we know.” This phrase crucially acknowledges the fact that many (though not all) individuals who are infertile do not become

⁵⁹ Geduldig v. Aiello.

⁶⁰ I am not the first to try to reclaim the term. See especially Gilman et al., *Hysteria beyond Freud*.

⁶¹ Determining what kind of language might be used to describe the variety of identifications and bodily conditions of those who are not hysterics is a task I will leave to future scholarship.

aware of their infertility until they attempt to have children.⁶² Those who learn that they are unable to have children (at whatever moment in their lives) certainly have a right to decide whether and when to make that fact known to others. Second, the focus is on the apparent *capacity, pursuant to choice*. Given that apparent capacities can easily devolve into normative prescriptions—e.g., “you can be a mother, therefore you *ought* to be a mother”—it is essential that the concept of a hysteric maintains a great deal of latitude for individual choice about whether to exercise one’s reproductive capacity. This will be discussed in further detail below. Finally, as has been discussed repeatedly in this chapter, it is worth noting that hysterics, whether or not they choose to reproduce, face unique challenges as a result of their reproductive capacity.

Though I have argued that “time-slice” genders do not sufficiently support the kinds of diachronic decision-making related to procreation and childrearing, I should note that it is not clear to me that being a hysteric must be a lifelong enterprise. As reproductive capacity has a beginning point for all humans (and, in many cases, an ending point), it might be possible to imagine an alternate gender system that involves only semi-permanent membership.⁶³ That said, I suspect even such a vision might risk moving too far in the direction of the monochronic view of personhood. It is, after all, relevant that some humans, which we tend to call “girls,” will likely become able to bear children someday. It is even more relevant that those who have gone through menopause have experienced a life that has been shaped in some way by their capacity to bear children.⁶⁴ In any case, the degree to which gender ought to be stable throughout one’s

⁶² The commonly accepted medical definition of infertility refers to the inability of a person to conceive after twelve months of contraceptive-free intercourse. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Society for Reproductive Medicine, and Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology, “2016 Assisted Reproductive Technology Fertility Clinic Success Rates Report,” 534.

⁶³ See note 54 above.

⁶⁴ I thank Liz Harman for raising this point.

lifetime is not something I seek to conclusively determine in this essay.⁶⁵ The purpose of the foregoing discussion, instead, is simply to propose a social scheme that would, presumably, be necessary for 1) procreation to be possible and 2) the burdens of pregnancy to be more equitably shared.

Facing important worries

Some may want to raise some worries in response to the discussion I've offered in the preceding section. The first worry that comes to mind involves the tendency for generic descriptions to slip into normative prescriptions. The concern would be that, simply by *identifying* a person as someone who can do *X*, that person may feel constrained to do *X*. Often, when we say that, for example, "*As* do *X*," there are several implications hidden in that generic description.⁶⁶ Often, the way that generics function in common language is to negatively assess variances: "*As* who don't do *X* are anomalous, and that is a bad thing." Note the two moves made in this implication. First is the assumption that there is something about doing *X* that is connected to being an *A*. Second is the assumption that there is something undesirable or adverse about the aberration. Haslanger calls the first notion the "Essentialist Assumption" and the latter notion the "Normative Assumption," and shows that both tend to linger in our generic descriptions by default.⁶⁷ When the implications are injurious, they merit explicit challenge.

We can easily imagine the harm to be drawn from certain social identifications of a given individual's gender. For example, we might be inclined to say the socially relevant aspect of an individual's sex is simply their capacity to play one or another reproductive role. We could

⁶⁵ This is, to be sure, a pressing question. I do not think that anything I have said here *proscribes* either a discontinuity of a person's gender identification, though it might call into question one's fairly recurrent alteration of their gender presentation. But I do not have a decisive answer to the question. It would be well to address the problem in future work.

⁶⁶ Sarah-Jane Leslie discusses the puzzling nature of generics in Leslie, "The Original Sin of Cognition."

⁶⁷ Haslanger, "The Normal, the Natural and the Good: Generics and Ideology," 379, 382.

consider the following generic formulation, which I suspect would be commonly accepted in contemporary American society:

*A woman is a person who can play a particular role in procreation, by gestating and nursing children.*⁶⁸

Given what has been discussed above about generics, including especially those that include the form “*As do X*,” we can see the danger in the preceding formulations. Suppose, for example, we assume the previous formulation, and then add the following premises:

1. *Anne is a woman.*
2. *Anne declines to bear and nurse children.*

In this case, if we did not defeat the default essentialist and normative assumptions, we might end up with the following conclusions, respectively:

3. *Anne is deviant.*
4. *Anne ought not to be deviant; she should bear and nurse children.*

Simply by describing Anne in a certain way—especially if these descriptions commenced at birth or a very young age—Anne would likely feel the force of those essentialist and normative assumptions as inducements to bear and nurse children. The fact is, in a just world, people who do not want to procreate would not be compelled to be procreate.⁶⁹ This is not least because

⁶⁸ At first glance, we may want to inject the qualifier—*for all we know*—and yet, I fear that appropriate stipulations regarding the possibility of infertility are all too absent in contemporary society. Infertility can be an incredibly painful situation to deal with. Among the reasons for that are the difficulties it can pose for individuals who struggle with gender norms about mothering.

⁶⁹ I suspect that one reason that women have historically sensed such pressure to have children is that an insufficient number of women would do the hard work of gestating and nursing children if they were not pressed to do so. After all, it is hard work. And, while there are certainly considerable joys to be derived from the work of pregnancy and motherhood (as with fatherhood), I cannot help but speculate that some of the joys that women derive from the experience of motherhood are those that women have been socially groomed to feel. Again, this because, apart from the socialization of women into motherhood, I wonder if sufficient numbers of women would shoulder the responsibilities of pregnancy and nursing. (A thought experiment: if all persons could choose, at the outset of adulthood, whether to take on the males’ reproductive tasks or the females’, how many would choose the latter? I suspect the number would not reach fifty percent.) The fact is, some females will feel the biological impetus to reproduce; some won’t. If a socially insufficient number of females feel the inclination to have children, they should be incentivized to do by means of benefits afforded to them by society, not by means of constraining, coercive gender norms.

individuals' wills should not be so controverted—especially in the case of those whose reproductive burden is significant—but also because children ought to have parents who want to be parents.

For this reason, a just social semiotics of gender must be understood to be constrained by a number of significant limitations. Recall that we have stipulated above that a hysteric is

someone who, for all we know, is capable of playing a particular reproductive role, should they so choose, where that particular reproductive role involves a more demanding commitment than other reproductive roles, though they nevertheless must cooperate with others to procreate.

Note that the emphasis is on *(apparent) capacity, pursuant to choice*. The fact is that reproductive capacity, generally speaking, is what is socially relevant for procreation and for justice, and so it cannot be neglected. But reproductive capacity need not be exercised. Nor need the decision whether to discharge one's reproductive capacity be made at the outset of adulthood. That choice is something that can be—perhaps ought to be—made over time, as discussed above.

By emphasizing choice, we may sidestep the most detrimental aspects of gender's hold on identity. Gender, in a just world, names what is possible, not what must be. It puts potentialities on the table—and identifies, in some cases, what potentialities are not on the table (e.g., that those who are not hysterics cannot do the significant work of bearing and nursing children). Gender highlights what individuals might do, were they to so choose. Not unlike a high school career aptitude test, it reveals the panoply of futures that might be on one's horizon, *pursuant to choice*. Moreover, by moving conception, gestation, and nursing to the domain of potentialities, we might loosen gender's firm grip on identity formation. In this scheme, gender is not somehow a quintessential part of who you are; it rather names the array of options available to you.

An additional defense against this first worry goes as follows. Surely, in a just world, it must be permissible to name what is possible, to name individuals' capacities to perform certain undertakings. It would be an odd thing if, out of apprehension that identifying individuals' capacities compelled them to *have* to discharge those capacities, it were prohibited to identify individuals' capacities in the first place. Would we restrain ourselves from telling young children to dream about being whatever they wanted to be—an astronaut, or the president, say—because calling attention to what they might be would be tantamount to some sort of implicit coercion? It would be somewhat absurd to suppose that identifying possibilities (and impossibilities) in the way I've outlined above leads to such dangers that we must preclude ourselves from doing so.

A second worry about the approach I've recommended here concerns whether it connects sex and gender in such a way as to exclude the possibility of transgender identification. If gender were to be no more than the mere social identification of sex, would that mean that those who socially identified in a way that diverged from the sex they were assigned at birth committed some sort of violation? The answer is simply: no. While the foregoing has been a defense of the view that there are good reasons to maintain a social semiotics of sex, as a result of the unique demands that sexual difference places on certain individuals, that does not mean that that semiotics must be coercively enforced. Similarly, to suggest that there are good reasons to defend a stable gender system is not to preclude circumstances in which individuals' gender identity would shift during their lifetime. There are plenty of good reasons to make space for individuals to identify differently than per the sex assigned to them at birth, or to change their gender identification. Eminent among these reasons is a desire to ameliorate the suffering that is often associated with the experience of gender dysphoria. There is no reason that a system

devised to alleviate the inequitable burdens faced by hysterics could not be elastic enough to accommodate those who identify otherwise.

There is a larger metatheoretical point to be made here, that I hope might also help to reframe the conflict between trans exclusionary and trans inclusionary feminists. It does not follow, and ought not to be assumed, that underscoring one specific consideration *necessarily* destabilizes others. This is one of Ray Briggs and B.R. George's principal arguments in their 2019 article defending the use of gender-neutral language in medical and other public venues. "The supposed conflict between trans inclusion and feminism rests on a simplistic understanding that ignores individual difference," they write. Our critics presume that we must pick out one proper term for every physiological reality that we wish to discuss, and that advancing one term is equivalent to censoring another ... But that's simply not the case."⁷⁰ Nor is it the case that to focus on the demands faced by those who are able to become pregnant negates the struggle to defend the rights of all transgender people—including those who do and those who do not bear children for whatever reason. The proposal that I make in this chapter is a modest one: we ought to have some kind of shared language that helps us to recognize the work that those who are able to carry children do. I suggest that the term "hysterics" might be used to pick out this class of people. By no means does that recognition require that we neglect other unique needs of other groups.

Reconceiving gender

Gender norms, as they exist today, are determinative of too much of our lives. Furthermore, the content of that determining is altogether oppressive. It constrains individuals by subjecting them to arbitrary norms, and, even worse, it incites violence against those who are inclined to

⁷⁰ Briggs and George, "Why Trans-Inclusive Language Is No Threat to Cis Women."

resist its grip.⁷¹ It may be tempting to propose that, in an ideal world, such norms would be rooted out of our social life entirely. We may have some good reasons to share Gayle Rubin's dream of a genderless world, or Shulamith Firestone's hope that someday half of the population might not be so subject to "the tyranny of their reproductive biology."⁷² Chief among those reasons is that such visions seek to protect all persons' legal and social equality.

Yet Sally Haslanger is right to remind us that, though those views may be appealing, "it is not at all clear that societies can or should avoid giving meanings to the body, or organizing themselves to take sexual and reproductive differences into account."⁷³ Conceding Haslanger's insight need not mean giving into a malicious breed of biological determinism. It simply involves recognizing the unique circumstances whereby human beings come to procreate, and the burden of gestation that is exclusively borne by a limited number of persons. This chapter, with Haslanger, seeks to avoid the mire of biological determinism. It instead tenders the more minimal claim that justice requires the existence of gender, *in some form*, in order to make the social recognition of reproductive capacities and burdens possible. Our expecting must change—but it must not end.

⁷¹ For further discussion, see Manne, *Down Girl*.

⁷² Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 206. Recall from note 38 above that Firestone's program explicitly demands the implementation of assistive reproductive technologies including not just in vitro fertilization but also artificial wombs.

⁷³ Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 243.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE VILLAGE: THE COEFFICIENT GOODS OF AUTONOMY AND SOCIAL FORMATION

Two hundred years ago—hell, one hundred years ago—you’d have a child surrounded by other women: your mother, her mother, sisters, cousins, sisters-in-law, mother-in-law. ... You’d share childcare with a raft of women. They’d help you, keep you company, show you how. Then you’d do the same. Not just people to share in the work of raising children, but people to share in the loving of children. Now maybe you make a living, maybe you get to know yourself on your own terms. Maybe you have adventures, heartbreak. Maybe you nurture ambition. Maybe you explore your sexuality. And then: unceremoniously sliced in [*explicit*] half, handed a newborn, home to your little isolation tank, get on with it, and don’t you dare post too many pictures. You don’t want to be one of those.

—ELISA ALBERT¹

From the time you were very little, you’ve had people who have smiled you into smiling, people who have talked you into talking, sung you into singing, loved you into loving.

—FRED ROGERS²

Throughout most of this dissertation, our study concentrates on the experience of childbearers. As I hope to convince the reader, the early relationship between a very young child and her mother is formative and might therefore serve as a device for reframing dominant paradigms about human agency. Human beings are fundamentally social—not on account of their own choosing, as in the reveries of the social contract theorists, but as the very condition of the capacity to choose in the first place. Our very beginnings are hidden within the depths of another. Furthermore, it is not as if our lives merely begin in this profoundly social condition, whence we progressively whittle ourselves into autonomous, independent creatures. Though many of us do experience periods of relatively more or less social dependence, we are hardly ever the self-sufficient agents that prevailing social structures would have us believe ourselves to

¹ Albert, *After Birth*, 174.

² *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?*

be. Instead, our lives and our agencies are formed by social forces, by our expectations regarding others' behavior, and their expectations of us.

Those who are presumptively capable of bearing children—who I will often refer to in this chapter as women, foregoing caveats notwithstanding—have a particularly intimate awareness of humans' sociality. From puberty, they enduringly face the possibility of pregnancy and all its attendant benefits and burdens (a condition which requires a certain kind of interpersonal activity). Their lives are, in many cases, shaped by this abiding potentiality. When they do become pregnant, childbearers come to know their dependence on others anew, as they count on kin and medical professionals to support them in the laborious season of life that is pregnancy, as discussed in chapter one. Benjamin, the reader may recall, pointed out how the experience of childbirth can expose the illusion that a person has of her own autonomy. We have also seen that childbearers furthermore become intimately aware of the kind of human sociality that involves being the object, rather than the subject, of dependence. Childbearers are induced to care for their growing offspring: in early pregnancy by avoiding nauseating foods, for example, and after birth by the tenacious cries of an eager newborn and the involuntary bodily response that usually accompanies that sound.³ (Recall, as discussed in chapter one, that new mothers often experience involuntary lactation when they hear their newborn's cry, often called a mother's "let down.")

Human sociality, however, is not always dyadic. While relationships between mother and child, or between two cooperative procreators, or between childbearer and medical professional link together two persons, each of these relationships is also facilitated and constrained by additional ties to third parties. The mother-child relationship can be supported by a second parent or other kin, and by medical or other professionals. In some cases, healthcare workers help to

³ I have myself been beckoned by such sounds and involuntary responses during the writing of this chapter. As Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande has pointed out, sometimes the concurrence of the infant desire to nurse and a mother's need to nurse—to empty the breast—is a blessing. At other times, the infant's cry is a rude interruption to her mother.

establish a mother's relationship to the child she carries: ultrasounds technicians, for instance, often refer to the objects of their examination as "mama" and introduce childbearers to their nascent offspring. And in birth, healthcare workers not only facilitate relationships between mother and child but are often essential to the wellbeing of those being birthed.⁴ As mentioned in chapter one, my own ability to nourish my first child depended on my partner's willingness to feed him while I pumped.

Thus we may want to recognize that we do not only develop within specific matrices—within, that is, the women who bear us for six to nine months—but also within matrices that are themselves located within matrices. Like Russian *matryoshka* dolls, social relationships are always contained and constrained by other social relationships.⁵ This is, to be sure, no new insight on this author's part. This nesting-doll aspect of social relationships can, for example, be traced in Levinas' conception of the "third" (*le tiers*). To Levinas' famous dyadic pairing of the self and other, he sporadically and often abstrusely introduced a third: the *other* other (or others).⁶ It is with the introduction of such a third party that Levinas moves from ethics to politics—or, as Levinas puts it, "it is the third man with which justice begins."⁷ Though the preceding chapters have also addressed political questions, I here want to move, like Levinas,

⁴ Relationships between mothers and their partners and doctors, furthermore, are governed by social and legal norms.

⁵ The resemblances between the Russian *matryoshka* and the Latin *matrix* is no coincidence. *Matryoshka* is a diminutive form of "matron" or "mother." The very first doll, made in 1892, depicts a peasant mother, who encloses within herself five young girls, a boy, and a tiny baby at the center. The doll is taken to be a totem of fertility and maternity. As Joanna Hubbs describes it, the doll communicates the Russian "mythology of maternity in which the relationship of mother to child is regarded as a primordial and gravitational force ... as the form of all social community and the basis for individual existence." See Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, 237.

⁶ Levinas' discussion of "thirds" is infamously perplexing. His use of the word throughout his oeuvre signifies various things: in some cases non-human objects, in other cases singularly human subjects, and, with the introduction of his concept of "illeity," God. Yet the observation that every self-other pairing also has another other that complicates and multiplies the ethical obligations of the self is the same point I am making here.

⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150. Nor am I the first to connect this theme to mothering: Mara Benjamin's recent book on motherhood spends an entire chapter on the role of "thirds."

beyond the dyadic structure of most ethics and think more explicitly about the networks of relationships in which all of us abide.

There are several insights that might be borne when we direct our attention to the networks of relationships that enfold us, particularly in the context of caregiving. The first insight is an anthropological one: it enables us to better understand ourselves as a species. Sarah Hrdy, the primatologist and sociobiologist, has carefully substantiated her contention that it is our cooperative breeding—rare among primates—that made us the other-regarding, collaborative species we are. According to Hrdy’s theory, cooperative breeding among hominins both preceded and produced the behaviors that we consider to be distinctive of *homo sapiens*: language, symbolic logic, and theory of mind. The second sociological insight is that networks of relationships can serve as a wellspring of social benefit for those who are otherwise marginalized or oppressed. To better understand this, we will turn to Patricia Hill Collins’ description of “othermothers” in her magisterial *Black Feminist Thought*. There, she shows how the multiplication of relationship networks that are necessitated in contexts of social oppression can serve both as a salve and as a political resource. The final, and perhaps most fundamental, insight is a political one, and it builds on the first two. It is the idea that the model of autonomous agency that is prevalent in Western liberal democratic society is deficient. Autonomy is an appropriate desideratum; it is right and just to ensure individuals have as much latitude as is possible regarding their own life projects, out of respect for their individuality. Yet the value of autonomy must be reframed to highlight the social context that makes autonomy possible. Here I follow the work of feminist political theorists like Jennifer Nedelsky and Diana Meyers who have defended a conception of “relational autonomy.” Yet I depart from these theorists insofar as

I hope to conceive of relational autonomy as a resource, rather than the quandary that these theorists often take it to be. This chapter focuses on each of these three insights in turn.

A final thought before we turn to the value of cooperative childrearing. To some degree, this chapter serves as an answer to a question that I have frequently received when speaking about my work publicly. Not a few times, when I have shared about this project on motherhood, have I been asked: “well, what about fathers?” The thesis of this chapter is that motherhood ought never simply begin and end with the mother-child dyad, and as such, the central role played by fathers, adoptive parents, and other caregivers—including those women who have not or will not ever bear children—ought not be overlooked. In fact, the division of labor regarding social childcare is a proper political issue, given that it is something that can be redistributed. But we would be remiss to foreground those who do the childrearing to the exclusion of those who do the childbearing, as I fear often happens in feminist political theory and metaethics. This is precisely because there are lines dividing those who can bear children from those who can’t that cannot be crossed in any kind of political redistribution of labor, as was discussed in chapter four.⁸

Cooperative childrearing

Many, if not most, Western social theory begins with an origin story, either hypothesized or hypothetical. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Rousseau all ground their theories in state of nature accounts. Even critical theorists like Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault demonstrate the same sort of

⁸ Pregnancy is treated in political theory more as an anomalous state of affairs—when it is discussed whatsoever. I find it surprising that feminist political theorists have not given more attention to childbearing as a valuable resource. The *only* discussion I have seen of pregnancy among the feminist theorists of relational autonomy appears in Marilyn Friedman’s repeated characterization of pregnancy as anomalous. See Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, 16, 32. It bears mentioning that Friedman does this to make the important point that humans live in distinct bodies, and thus persons ought to be conceived differently than, say, coral reefs. They are, as she points out, organically disconnected after birth—that is, with the exception of pregnancy. But why underplay the crucial fact that *every human being begins life organically connected*, by treating pregnancy as such an anomaly?

approach.⁹ Rawls, for his part, postulated a theoretical, rather than historical, “original position.” More recently, Philip Pettit similarly described the conjectural “birth of ethics” in a thought experiment about the social lives of early hominins. Too few of these sorts of treatments, however, sufficiently interface with anthropological scholarship that might helpfully substantiate or destabilize received wisdom in social theory. If, as we have seen in preceding chapters, much depends on where and how we are to begin, it might be appropriate to rethink the points of origin whence social theorists initiate their theorizing.¹⁰

Recent scholarship in anthropology suggests that the behaviors commonly identified as unique to the species *homo sapiens*, including their development of language, symbolic thought, and theory of mind, all follow rather than predate the appearance of cooperative childrearing. The highly celebrated anthropologist Sarah Hrdy has devoted a career to uncovering the evolutionary history of childrearing in our early hominin ancestors. Her most notable finding is the centrality of *allomothering*—the rearing of children by those other than their biological mothers—to the emergence of our species’ social cooperation.¹¹ Though it is not possible to directly observe the behavior of the young offspring of our early hominin ancestors, Hrdy traces the evolutionary family tree whence we have come, noting divergences between ourselves and our closest primate cousins. Whereas many great apes demonstrate several some of the same prosocial behaviors that we do—chimps are able, for example, to mimic facial expressions at birth, as are newborn humans—only humans receive care at a young age from non-biological parents. Among most primates, like chimps, orangutans, and gorillas, neonates remain continually physically attached to their mother for between five and eight months and remain

⁹ See Palmeri, *State of Nature, Stages of Society*.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Eddie Glaude for teaching me, in Said’s words, that “the problem of beginning is the beginning of the problem”; Said, *Beginnings*, 42.

¹¹ Hrdy uses “allomothering” rather than “alloparenting” in *Mothers and Others* because it is often difficult to determine paternity, and “allomothering” is a term which may include the biological father. Hrdy 22. Hrdy, *Mothers and Others*, 22.

their mother's primary focus until she reproduces again after about three years.¹² This kind of singlemindedness about caring for one's young is highly evolutionarily costly: it elongates the interval between gestation and requires much of the provisioning mother. As a point of comparison, for humans, lactation generally takes about five hundred calories, and carrying an infant for a day can demand even more. The individual care that offspring require generates a high evolutionary burden.

In contrast with their primate cousins, rarely do human mothers refuse to allow others to hold or care for their babies. As Hrdy puts it, "what stands out and contrasts with other apes is that [human] mothers trust others and allow them to take their infants shortly after birth."¹³ Humans, unlike apes, in fact *depend* on others to care for and even nurse their offspring.¹⁴ For humans, whose newborns are perhaps the most biologically needy in the animal kingdom, allomaternal care is requisite. Hrdy cites studies that show that human children require around thirteen million calories between birth and maturity, an amount that mothers could hardly provide without help. Among our hominin ancestors, "once mothers embarked on an evolutionary course of producing unusually large, slow-maturing, needy, and long-dependent offspring, there was no turning back. Without help from others, such children could not survive."¹⁵

The development of alloparenting in our evolutionary history introduced additional selection pressures: the children most appealing to potential alloparents were the most likely to survive. According to Hrdy, this helps to explain why human newborns have as much as five times the fat that other primates do at birth, and more importantly, why they developed intersubjective

¹² According to Hrdy, citing a Goodall study, "[t]he earliest a wild chimpanzee mother has ever been observed to voluntarily let a baby out of her grasp is three and a half months." Hrdy, 68.

¹³ Hrdy, 78.

¹⁴ The human history of wet nursing is fascinating and yet underexplored. For a survey, see Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present*. Throughout history, wet nursing provided some women a rare opportunity to be financially independent; on the other hand, in many cases, women had to hire a poorer wet nurse to feed their own children in order to take on employment as a wet nurse.

¹⁵ Hrdy, *Mothers and Others*, 140.

engagement at a very young age. At some point around the emergence of the genus *Homo*, Hrdy says, mothers became more willing to allow others to hold their babies. This would prompt these little hominins, “already endowed with considerable gifts for reading (and even imitating) the facial expressions of others and with the neural equipment for rudimentary mind reading, to devote even more time and attention to interpreting the intentions of others, an activity which in turn would affect the organization of their neural systems.”¹⁶

To substantiate her theory, she introduces the case of callitrichids, a taxonomic family of marmosets and tamarinds. These very distant primate cousins of ours do not share the advanced intelligence of great apes but do engage in cooperative breeding. In fact, they practice what Hrdy calls “full-fledged cooperative breeding,” meaning that they not only *care* for offspring that are not their own, but also *feed* them.¹⁷ The tiny-brained callitrichids, lacking the sophisticated wiring that we, like our chimpanzee cousins, inherited nevertheless demonstrate remarkable altruism, social sensitivity, and other-regarding behavior. They are far more likely to be concerned with their neighbors’ needs than even the larger-brained and much smarter chimpanzees. Callitrichids are the only other primates that engage in full-fledged cooperative breeding, and they are the only other primates that are sensitive to the needs of others similarly to humans. Hrdy even cites experiments with tamarinds that “may be the best demonstration to date of reciprocal altruism and the importance of ‘reputation’ in a nonhuman animal.”¹⁸ (Some readers may be interested to know that callitrichids are also well-known for their tendency to rapidly colonize new areas. The rapid procreation facilitated by callitrichids’ alloparenting practices also make it possible for these creatures to take over new habitats in short order.)

¹⁶ Hrdy, 115.

¹⁷ Hrdy, 92.

¹⁸ Hrdy, 97.

Notice the twin hypotheses Hrdy develops. The first is, as she puts it, that “[w]ithout alloparents, there never would have been a human species.”¹⁹ The second is that the development of cooperative breeding in the genus *Homo* not only set humans apart but gave us the combination of social sensitivity and highly advanced mental capacities that made sophisticated cooperation possible. For Hrdy, we are who we are because of cooperative breeding, and we can do what we do—engage in complex social cooperation—because of cooperative breeding, too. The emergence of human intersubjectivity, in short, is to be credited to early hominin babysitting.

In one particularly engaging section early in her latest book, Hrdy introduces a context familiar to many of us: embarking on a plane. She then offers a thought experiment. “What if I were traveling with a planeload of chimpanzees?” Hrdy writes. “Any one of us would be lucky to disembark with all ten fingers and toes still attached... Even among the famously peaceful bonobos ... veterinarians sometimes have to be called in following altercations to stitch back on a scrotum or penis.”²⁰ Instead, humans are relatively well-equipped to cooperate. Our “heightened interest in and ability to scan faces, and our perpetual quest to understand what others are thinking and intending, to empathize and care about their experiences and goals, help make humans much more adept at cooperating with the people around us than other apes are.”²¹ Even if we tend to take our capacity for empathy and intersubjectivity for granted, it remains all the same, facilitating sophisticated projects like big game hunting, building bridges, flying on planes, and even academic inquiry. And those capacities, Hrdy’s investigation of cooperative breeding among primates shows, likely materialized in an evolutionary history because of the relationships mothers and babies developed with thirds. That is to say, if Hrdy is right, then

¹⁹ Hrdy, 109.

²⁰ Hrdy, 3.

²¹ Hrdy, 2.

Philip Pettit's recent account of the "birth of ethics" among our early human ancestors is missing one crucial element: cooperative childrearing.

While Hrdy's proposal was originally controversial, her theory is by now widely accepted by anthropologists. However, even if Hrdy were able—as she admits she is not—to substantiate her work by time-travelling to the Pleistocene and observing the childrearing behaviors of our early human ancestors, questions would remain for ethicists reading her work. We are, of course, familiar with the naturalistic fallacy that reminds us that just because something *is* does not mean it *ought*. Identifying practices that our ancestors may have engaged in does not of itself commend those practices to us. That we are naturally omnivorous should not preclude vegetarianism or veganism, for example. Why should Hrdy's work, acclaimed though it is, translate to our recognition of and advocacy for cooperative childrearing? Furthermore, even if it is widely accepted that alloparenting played a role in our evolutionary development, does that mean it continues to be essential to our maintenance of cooperation today?

When considering these questions, it's important to keep in mind the subjects that are repeatedly involved in the kind of investigation Hrdy often cites: infants. Babies are hardwired from birth to mimic their caregivers' expressions, to seek approbation and provision from caregivers, and to form attachments to those caregivers. Each of us developed our capacities for intersubjective engagement at a very, very early age. For the same reason that scientists have determined that separating baby monkeys from their mothers is akin to other forms of animal torture, granting human infants the manifold interpersonal engagement they receive in alloparenting is necessary for their healthy development. Primates are built to bond. Babies form attachments, and their ability to form attachments to multiple caregivers is correlated to several desirable outcomes for both child and mother. All children, but especially those born to mothers

belonging to marginalized or otherwise precarious populations, demonstrate increased cognitive development, emotional stability, and physical health when they receive care from multiple caregivers.²² Some studies show that children with more supportive caregivers present are less likely to die from preventable deaths; others show that Mothers who receive the that support are even considerably less likely to abuse their children.²³ As Hrdy put it in a recent interview, this evidence should prompt us to rethink the way we conceive of motherhood. “If anything goes wrong,” Hrdy laments, in contemporary Western society we tend to “blame the mother. We need to rethink that. If we evolved as cooperative breeders, when things go wrong we need to say that a larger community is at fault than just the mother.”²⁴

To be sure, some political coalitions have agreed that mothers ought not be left to parent single-handedly. Unfortunately, the alternative that these advocates push is one that maintains the privatization of parenting—just by two, rather than one. And those two are assumed to be members of a heterosexual, married couple. They lament what they style the “decline of the family,” where *family* is strictly taken to mean *traditional nuclear family*. One typically-argued ruling against same-sex marriage in the New York Court of Appeals reasoned that it “it is better, other things being equal, for children to grow up with both a mother and a father. Intuition and experience suggest that a child benefits from having before his or her eyes, every day, living models of what both a man and a woman are like.”²⁵ Similarly, a 2005 Supreme Court upholding of a Florida state ban on gay adoption endorsed a lower court’s finding that “[a]lthough social theorists from Plato to Simone de Beauvoir have proposed alternative child-rearing arrangements, none has proven as enduring as the marital family structure, nor has the

²² Hrdy cites a half dozen studies to support these claims, but the record has grown since the publication of *Mothers and Others* in 2009. The point is almost too obvious, and yet goes underrecognized by a culture that privileges the nuclear family model.

²³ As cited in Hrdy, *Mothers and Others*, 104 n102.

²⁴ Johnson, “Raising Darwin’s Consciousness: Sarah Blaffer Hrdy on the Evolutionary Lessons of Motherhood.”

²⁵ Smith, *Hernandez v. Robles* at 338, 359.

accumulated wisdom of several millenia of human experience discovered a superior model.”²⁶ None other than the President of the United States declared in 2005 that “[s]tudies have shown that the ideal is where a child is raised in a married family with a man and a woman.”²⁷ This kind of approach is by no means solely supported by conservatives; Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial 1965 report pinning widening racial inequality on the breakdown of the family in African American communities continues to enjoy support from liberals to this day.²⁸ Though these advocates agree that mothers cannot go it alone, their proposed remedy involves adding to maternal caregivers a male heterosexual partner, and essentially suggesting that the two go it alone together. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in the United States, for example, spends a full \$150 million of its annual budget on programs to promote marriage, rather than providing those resources directly to families that need it.²⁹

That children who receive care from two caregivers, rather than one, would enjoy better life outcomes is beyond obvious. Parenting is hard, and two people can do it better together than one alone. That co-parenting must be done by two caregivers in a married relationship, however, is *not* obvious; it’s merely presupposed. Insufficient work has been done to investigate the benefits that various nontraditional family structures might offer to young people. But a groundswell of research demonstrates the value of early childhood development programs outside of the household.³⁰ Maternal care is best supported not only by alloparents *within* the home—including

²⁶ Birch, Lofton V. Secretary of the Department of Children and Family Services at 820. Judge Birch, who wrote the opinion, could learn a great deal from Hrdy’s work on the family structures that dominated human social life for at least hundreds of thousands of years.

²⁷ Rutenberg, “Mary Cheney’s Pregnancy Is Just Fine, Bush Tells Magazine.” In footnotes, Hrdy also cites President Bush’s 2003 Proclamation for “Marriage Protection Week.” In it, Bush declared that “[r]esearch has shown that, on average, children raised in households headed by married parents fare better than children who grow up in other family structures.” See Hrdy, *Mothers and Others*, 146 n8.

²⁸ See Kristof, “When Liberals Blew It.”

²⁹ Cross, “The Myth of the Two-Parent Home.”

³⁰ The research on this subject is overwhelming. Perhaps foremost among this deluge of research Nobel Laureate James Heckman’s work that shows that for every dollar that the state invests in early education programs like Head Start, it receives \$13, conservatively, in return. His more recent analysis includes studies of children receiving care

fathers or other mothers, grandmothers, aunts, other extended family members, or even non-kin—but also by professional caregivers who nurture children *beyond* the home.³¹

The value of extended families' and other social networks' sharing in childrearing can be substantiated both anthropologically and sociologically. At this point, however, I'd like to turn to one particular sociological account that highlights the benefit of allomothering for one particular marginalized community: black women.

Othermothers

Twenty years before Sarah Hrdy shared her study on the centrality of allomothering to human evolutionary history, Patricia Hill Collins published her pathbreaking *Black Feminist Thought*. The text synthesizes the perspectives of Black women thinkers within and beyond the academy, including Angela Davis, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde. Collins presents concepts that endure in the study of race and gender, including her theorization of the “matrix of domination” to which Black women are uniquely subject, akin to Kimberlé Crenshaw's development of the concept of “intersectionality.” Among the aspects of Black women's lives that receive treatment in Collins' masterpiece is a comprehensive study of motherhood among Black women. In a chapter on the matter, Collins denounces the controlling image of Black mothers as matriarchs or sacrificial superheroes, lamenting the high bar to which Black mothers are held. She then presents various themes that appear in Black women's experience of motherhood.

outside the home starting as early as eight weeks of age. See García et al., “Quantifying the Life-Cycle Benefits of an Influential Early-Childhood Program.”

³¹ In fact, this is the point that bridges Hrdy's more recent work to her earliest research. In the seventies and eighties, Hrdy wrote on the phenomenon of infant abandonment among humans and other primates. Interestingly, while other advanced primates never engage in such behaviors—to the point that, if their offspring dies, they will maintain skin-to-skin contact with its shriveled corpse for days—humans do, as do our cooperative breeding callitrichid fellows. But in almost all the cases of infant abandonment among humans that Hrdy identifies, the babies' mothers appear to be motivated by a perception of a lack of social support. The implications for contemporary policy are clear.

Foremost among these themes is the presence and import of what Collins calls “othermothers,” following Rosalie Riegle Troester. Othermothers, Collins explains, are “women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” and who “traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood.”³² The women that undertake these childrearing responsibilities are in some cases kin, like grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins, and in other cases “fictive kin” or other members of the community. In all cases, given the social oppression that black women so often face, Collins writes, “maintaining community-based child care and respecting othermothers who assume child-care responsibilities can serve a critical function in African-American communities.”³³ Sometimes this othermothering role is supportive, but other times it is more involved, when othermothers go as far as to adopt otherwise dispossessed children. Nor does the model always entail older women acting as othermothers. Collins cites Ella Baker’s recollection of her experience as an othermother at the age of ten, when the future activist would be instructed to bathe and launder the clothes of a nearby widow.³⁴ Men and boys are occasionally recruited as othermothers, but usually, as Collins notes, they were expected to devote their energies to participating in the labor force.³⁵

Collins cites a wealth of studies that show the value of cooperative childrearing in the social context Black women occupy. The landscape she surveys extends back to the period of American enslavement, when enslaved women were often tasked with caring for the children of other enslaved laborers. But “the relationship between bloodmothers and othermothers also survived the transition from slave economy to post-emancipation Southern rural agriculture,” when those who were able to pursued wage labor, leaving their children in the care of others in

³² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 178.

³³ Collins, 180.

³⁴ Collins, 180.

³⁵ Collins, 180. Here she quotes Ella Baker again: “My father took care of people too, but . . . my father had to work.” As cited from Cantarow, O’Malley, and Strom, *Moving the Mountain*, 59.

their community.³⁶ This dynamic continues on into the present day, when, as in the June Jordan quote Collins cites as an epigraph for the chapter, there are “Black women still cleaning somebody else’s house or Black women still caring for somebody else’s sick or elderly, before they come back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families.”³⁷ Jordan wrote those words about a memory of being in a white neighborhood, watching Black woman after Black woman waiting for the bus to return to their homes from their work in white homes. Thus goes a more local version of what Arlie Hochschild has called the “global heart transplant,” where poorer women enlist other caregivers to watch their children, so that they can work in domestic labor in another’s home.³⁸

Collins notes, however, that the twin epidemics of drugs and poverty in the nineteen-eighties and nineties exacerbated the demand for othermothering, to a degree that exceeded the supply. “African-Americans of diverse social classes found themselves in new residential, school, and work settings that tested this enduring theme of bloodmothers, othermothers, and woman-centered networks. In many inner-city, working-class neighborhoods, the very fabric of African-American community life eroded when crack cocaine flooded the streets.”³⁹ Yet the othermothering tradition endures, and has served as a lifeblood for communities ravaged by drug use and crime. Collins cites examples of children who would have ended up in foster care, after their mothers were incarcerated or died, but for the intervention of grandmothers who adopted them.⁴⁰

At the same time, another social trend undermines the practice of othermothering that Collins describes. Those Black families that have moved into the middle class find themselves in social

³⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 181.

³⁷ Jordan, *On Call*, 105. Quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 173.

³⁸ Hochschild, “Love and Gold,” 22.

³⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 181.

⁴⁰ Collins, 179.

contexts where practices of maintaining dense networks of relationships with extended kin is not particularly legible. “Not only are woman-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers much more difficult to sustain structurally,” Collins writes, but “such ideas are often anathema to the ethos of achievement.”⁴¹ Some middle-class Black women are transformed by this ethos, according to Collins, and begin to see their working-class Black women counterparts as mere employees, a treatment which is harmful to both constituencies. Those Black women who are upwardly mobile, but resist this trend, valiantly call into question presuppositions that undergird middle-class family life in late Western capitalism.

To be more precise, in Collins’ telling, prevailing assumptions about families today privatize family life, rewarding those women who can secure successful husbands and afford the best amenities for their children by deeming them to be “good mothers.” Furthermore, this view posits children as pseudo-property, granting parents rights to rear their children as they see fit—within limits—and always expecting them to do so independently. “By seeing the larger *community* as responsible for children and by giving othermothers and other nonparents ‘rights’ in child rearing,” Collins writes, “those African-Americans who endorse these values challenge prevailing capitalist property relations.”⁴² Refusing to undertake the nuclear-familial model therefore constitutes an important form of political resistance.

This leads to another value of the practice of othermothering among Black communities, according to Collins: it trains black women for political activism. “Experiences both of being nurtured as children and being held responsible for siblings and fictive kin within kin networks can stimulate a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African-

⁴¹ Collins, 182.

⁴² Collins, 182; italics in the original.

American women,” Collins writes.⁴³ Ella Baker’s autobiographical remarks are cited three times in this chapter, for example; she describes her experiences variously as beneficiary, bestower, and beholder of othermothering. Per Collins, Baker’s witnessing her aunt adopt three children after having thirteen of her own, and being a part of the caregiving network that made such families possible, provided a sort of training ground for her later organizing work. Furthermore, the diffuse networks of care in which Black women participate deepen their sense of solidarity with Black communities. Collins demonstrates this by noting the language and particularly the pronouns that are used in Black women’s discussion about their communities. “Black women frequently use family language to describe Black children ... The following comment is typical of how many [Black women] relate to Black children: ‘There were a lot of summer programs springing up for kids, but they were exclusive ... and I found that most of *our kids* were excluded.’”⁴⁴ In another example Collins draws on, the practice of othermothering prompts volunteers working for affordable housing—who themselves were homeowners—to talk about renters in the first person plural. “Yet we still felt like it really was ‘we’ living in those terrible places, and it was up to us to do something about them,” writes the civil rights activist and public-school teacher Mamie Garvin Fields.⁴⁵ The identification is so strong that homeowners include themselves in descriptions of unfair treatment of local tenants.

Beyond this field training by means of othermothering, Collins goes so far as to call the work that many othermothers do “activist mothering,” following Nancy Naples. Not just those experiencing upward mobility, as discussed above, but Black women in various circumstances who take up the responsibility of alloparenting are engaging, as Collins sees it, in a sort of political resistance *just by alloparenting*. Because “their very definitions of good mothering went

⁴³ Collins, 189.

⁴⁴ Collins, 190–91.

⁴⁵ Fields and Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, 195. As quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 191. Collins adds the italics that I have included here; they do not appear in the original text.

beyond a simple measure of caring for their own biological children ... they saw good mothering as comprising all actions, including social activism, that addressed the needs of their children and community.”⁴⁶ It’s not only that othermothering prepares women to be community leaders—though that certainly is the case—but that othermothering is *itself* a sort of activism. “Community othermothers’ participation in activist mothering demonstrates a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis of either community organization or individual self-actualization,” Collins writes. “Instead, the connectedness with others and common interest expressed by community othermothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward.”⁴⁷

There is a deep political and ethical wisdom in the othermothering tradition Collins describes. While there are often high expectations of birthmothers in diasporic African communities, usually twinned with high reverence toward those in such roles, othermothering practices reflect a sober recognition that mothers cannot be expected to do the work of childrearing alone. As Collins puts it, “African and African-American communities have ... recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible.”⁴⁸ Collins’ use of “possible” in this sentence could be interpreted at least two different ways. She could be pointing out that, particularly in the social context in which Black women tend to find themselves, mothering without any help would prove impossible. Self-care for Black women is challenging and radical enough; adding to that the work of providing care and necessities for children unaided would simply be too great of a burden. Though I suspect that this is what she is trying to say, it is also possible that Collins is rightly identifying the impossibility of *any* human being ever mothering singlehandedly. In either case, expecting a

⁴⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 191.

⁴⁷ Collins, 192.

⁴⁸ Collins, 178.

mother to do the work of mothering without support is most certainly unwise. While it is important to refrain from valorizing the exigent circumstances whence this recognition for the need to provide social support to mothers comes, her insight is indispensable.

Thus Collins and Hrdy both signpost a truth that has consistently gone unrecognized—at least, until COVID-19 and its attendant quarantines prompted widespread media coverage of degree to which parents, and especially mothers, have been forsaken in the United States. The fact of the matter is that mothers cannot and should not be expected to raise their children singlehandedly. Neither is leaving the care of children to private nuclear families just or prudent. Parents need social support. And babies need their parents to have social support, too.

Relational autonomy, positive and negative

Both parents and their children depend on the involvement of networks of third parties—including extended family members, childcare professionals, and health-care workers, among others. The work that these people do to contribute to the health and well-being of children ought not go as underappreciated as it has in recent decades. But this underappreciation not only afflicts the halls of policymakers. It also permeates prevailing Western political assumptions about what human agency looks like. We may have progressed somewhat from Hobbes' proposal that we think about human agents "as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other."⁴⁹ But we may not have. As Susan Moller Okin puts it, contemporary political theorists tend to "take mature, independent human beings as the subjects of their theories without any mention of how they got to be that way."⁵⁰ Too often, the agents that our politics presuppose are

⁴⁹ Hobbes, *De Cive*, 117.

⁵⁰ Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 9–10. Italics in the original. Linda Barclay affirms alongside Okin that "contemporary champions of individual autonomy, such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick presuppose women's

discrete, detached participants joined by merely accidental social ties.⁵¹ If we are members of a social body, we are only so secondarily—either in terms of priority, or chronologically, or both. Or so goes the going wisdom. It is in the context of this kind of thinking that autonomy is taken to be a fundamental good to be protected at almost any cost. Individuals’ autonomy is to be secured and safeguarded by means of civil and private rights—especially property rights—set against the power of the state.

For several feminist political theorists like Jennifer Nedelsky, Catriona Mackenzie, and Diana Meyers, this prioritization of autonomy is not altogether wrong, but needs to be reframed. They agree that the freedom of individuals deserves protection, but they seek to complicate the common picture of autonomous agency. To that end, they have developed the concept of “relational autonomy.”⁵² By foregrounding the *relational* nature of autonomy, these theorists underscore the function that various social actors—including parents, extended kin, and caregivers—play in the development of autonomous citizens. “If we ask ourselves what actually enables people to be autonomous,” Nedelsky writes, “the answer is not isolation, but relationships—with parents, teachers, friends, loved ones—that provide the support and guidance necessary for the development and experience of autonomy ... relatedness, even dependency, is not, as the Anglo-American theoretical tradition teaches, the antithesis of autonomy, but a literal precondition of autonomy.”⁵³ Or, as Linda Barclay forcefully puts it, “[t]he fact that any of us has the capacity for autonomous agency is a debt that we each owe to others.”⁵⁴

labor and care for the family and at the same time deny, even if implicitly, that they are politically relevant.” In Barclay, “Autonomy and the Social Self,” 57.

⁵¹ Without doubt, there are many who have called into question this kind of thinking. I am thinking of the scores of social philosophers who call attention to human intersubjectivity: Hegel, Buber, and more recently, Judith Butler. Yet I also think that thinkers like Judith Butler would fully endorse this sentence.

⁵² According to Mackenzie and Stoljar, Nedelsky was the first to develop this notion, as noted in Mackenzie and Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy*, 26–27.

⁵³ Nedelsky, “Reconceiving Autonomy,” 12.

⁵⁴ Barclay, “Autonomy and the Social Self,” 57.

The aim here is not to reject the value of autonomy wholesale. Indeed, champions of relational autonomy insist that the primary concerns of most feminists involve enabling women to make choices for themselves—or, in other words, protecting women’s autonomy. The concept of autonomy is fully embedded, even if inadvertently, in feminists’ principal commitments. “No one among the feminists,” writes Nedelsky, “is prepared to abandon freedom as a value, nor, therefore, can any of us completely abandon the notion of a human capacity for making one’s own life and self ... Feminists therefore need a language of freedom with which to express the value underlying this concern.”⁵⁵ If feminists cannot jettison the value of autonomy altogether, then they must rehabilitate the concept.

To demonstrate the trouble with the concept of autonomy as it stands, Catriona Mackenzie introduces the case of “Ms. B.,” a British woman who, in 2002, sued her hospital for the right to turn off the ventilator that was keeping her alive.⁵⁶ Ms. B. had suffered a series of spinal hemorrhages that left her paralyzed from the neck down, and her condition was rapidly deteriorating. Though three psychiatrists had found her competent to make such a determination, a fourth considered her not so competent, and so plans to turn off the artificial ventilation system were overturned at the last minute. It appeared, however, that the decision to keep Ms. B. on life support had more to do with the reservations of her medical team than with her competency to refuse treatment. Upon reviewing the evidence, the presiding judge in the case, Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, ruled in Ms. B.’s favor. Butler-Sloss insisted that she sympathized with the hesitations of Ms. B.’s medical team, but that ultimately, “we have to try, inadequately, to put ourselves into the position of the gravely disabled person and respect the subjective character of

⁵⁵ Nedelsky, “Reconceiving Autonomy,” 8–9.

⁵⁶ Mackenzie, “Relational Autonomy, Normative Authority and Perfectionism.”

experience. ... There is a serious danger, exemplified in this case, of a benevolent paternalism which does not embrace recognition of the personal autonomy of the severely disabled patient.”⁵⁷

What was at stake for Butler-Sloss, and for many clinical professionals today struggling with questions concerning medical ethics, is the importance of respecting individual autonomy in medical decisions. Failure to respect the free choice of a competent adult demonstrates, in some way, failure to respect that person altogether.⁵⁸ As morality requires the respect that is owed to persons *qua* persons, this also includes respecting the free choices that such persons make. We must, as Butler-Sloss ruled, respect the determinations of another given her first-personal, subjective experience. To do otherwise—for example, to insist on providing medical treatment that a patient would forego, for the sake of one’s own values—would constitute insufficient respect for another.

Thus proceeds classical concerns about respect for individual autonomy. Yet, as Mackenzie explains, one might consider a parallel case, where it would be much more difficult to determine whether the decision to terminate life support was *really* the patient’s. Mackenzie calls this the case of Mrs. H:

In contrast to Ms. B., Mrs. H. does not have a sense of herself as having rights and does not reflect deeply on her practical identity. Mrs. H.’s drama is played out in an oncology ward where she has just had a leg amputated below the knee as a last resort treatment for aggressive bone cancer. Mrs. H. has lost her hair from chemotherapy and she is having to come to terms with the prospect of permanent disability, perhaps eventually death, although her doctors are fairly confident that her short to medium term prospects for survival are quite good. Her husband has recently left her because her disability would be burdensome and he finds her and her condition an embarrassment. Mrs. H.’s practical identity involves a conception of herself that is governed by the norms of traditional femininity that are taken as authoritative within her cultural community, and her husband’s abandonment has left her feeling worthless as a person and without a reason to live. Mrs. H. informs her treatment team that she wants to die and that she wants no further treatment if the cancer spreads to other parts of her body.⁵⁹

How seriously, asks Mackenzie, ought Mrs. H.’s medical team take Mrs. H.’s determination to end her life, or to refuse lifesaving treatment? Should they consider her attitudes concerning her

⁵⁷ Jackson, *Medical Law*, 899.

⁵⁸ For discussion, consider Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, 22.

⁵⁹ Mackenzie, “Relational Autonomy, Normative Authority and Perfectionism,” 518.

own self-worth to be expressions of her autonomous will? Or ought her doctors consider the damaging impact of her husband's disgraceful behavior toward her, and the deleterious effects of the norms Mrs. H. grew up with as constraining her ability to make such choices competently?

Mackenzie's example brings to light the crux of the concern that motivates the recent development of theories of relational autonomy. Insofar as autonomy is valued in liberal political communities, it is so valued because it is closely tied to the liberal commitment to individuals' liberties and rights. Yet, as the example of the hypothetical—and yet perhaps all-too-common—Mrs. H. reminds us, it can become difficult to say what properly and accurately represents an individual's will, given that individual's subjection to oppressive socialization. Theorists of relational autonomy don't necessarily want to relinquish the commitment to individual liberties and rights. In fact, it is often in the service of that very commitment that many feminists argue for wage equality, the right to choose, and sexual autonomy.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the puzzle about Mrs. H. evinces the difficulty of ascertaining what choices and expressions are rightly considered those of an autonomous individual. Diana Meyers poses the problem poignantly. "If women's professed desires are products of their inferior position," she writes, "should we give credence to those desires? If so, we seem to be capitulating to institutionalized injustice by gratifying warped

⁶⁰ Feminists in general ought to be concerned about any political program that doesn't recognize and defend individual freedom. According to Linda Barclay, while communitarians rightly consider inherited relationships to be constitutive of human life, they also "seem to believe that they are, or should be, more immutable than any feminist could be satisfied with ... Feminists have argued that not only can we do without the particular roles and identities we inherit but also that sometimes, at least, we are better off without them ... We need to consider *which* particular attachments to nourish, *which* particular shared values should be part of our common good ... To consider which particular attachments we should reshape, which to reject, which to choose, and which to promote, we need autonomy. We do not simply want to endorse what we inherit and later discover. This is neither a descriptively accurate assessment of what our agency is capable of nor a liberating vision of what kind of agency deserves our evaluative endorsement. Nor is it a liberating vision of political community. We need and should cherish the capacity to decide and choose." Barclay, "Autonomy and the Social Self," 67–68. Mackenzie and Stoljar agree; see Mackenzie and Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy*, 23; Oshana, "A Commitment to Autonomy Is a Commitment to Feminism."

desires. If not, we seem to be perpetuating injustice by showing disrespect for those individuals.”⁶¹

What might explain our hesitancy to recognize Mrs. H.’s desire to die as properly her own, in contrast to Miss B.’s wishes? We might be inclined to say that, as Harry Frankfurt once argued, the important difference lies in the degree to which Ms. B., and not Mrs. H., has had the opportunity to critically reflect on the situation she faced.⁶² Yet, as some feminist theorists have shown, the relationship between critical reflection and autonomy ought not to be taken as a given. Paul Benson, for one, points out that oppressive socialization can corrupt higher order desires just as easily as it can corrupt first-order desires. He writes, “a thoroughly feminized woman’s desire to be an appealing sight for men need not motivate her independently of her higher-order wants. She has been taught to want to want this.”⁶³ Social norms concerning, say, femininity don’t simply influence women’s actions and choices, but can also constrain women’s ability to engage critically with those norms in the first place. In fact, oppressive socialization, according to Benson, “acquires its insidious power ... by limiting in well-organized ways what sorts of reason to act persons are able to recognize.”⁶⁴

Another possibility for discerning whether Mrs. H.’s expressed desire to die ought to be considered autonomous might be found by drawing certain substantive limits around those acts that can be plausibly considered autonomous in the first place. Perhaps there are basic requirements associated with autonomous agency. Perhaps, that is, expressing such an inadequate sense of self, as does Mrs. H., ought to prevent us from considering such expressions

⁶¹ Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, xi.

⁶² Friedman calls this approach the “‘split-level’ conception of the self” in Friedman, “Autonomy and the Split-Level Self.” This predominant philosophical line of thought privileges the rational self as the “real” or “true” self. Friedman instead advances an “integrationist” model of the autonomous self, which considers an agent autonomous when her “motivations, intermediate standards and values, and highest principles” come into accord, whether or not she engages in critical reflection.

⁶³ Benson, “Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization,” 391.

⁶⁴ Benson, 396.

or actions to be those of an autonomous agent. Susan Wolf, Benson, and Mackenzie each present theories that substantively limit what can be considered autonomous performances. For Wolf, an individual must be capable of tracking the right or the good in order to be counted as an autonomous agent. Simply pursuing one's own ends does not suffice; those ends must correspond with objective moral reasons.⁶⁵ Benson emphasizes the importance of self-worth and self-trust in the exercise of autonomy and considers acts that demonstrate a deficient supply of either to reveal a deficiency in autonomy.⁶⁶ Mackenzie shares Benson's view that agents certainly must have a sense of self-worth in order to be considered autonomous. She thus makes the striking case that respecting—and indeed, *promoting*—Mrs. H.'s autonomy requires denying her request.

John Christman, however, raises concerns about instituting such prerequisites for individual autonomy from the outset. After all, such an approach would give too much latitude to, say, the psychiatrists evaluating Miss B. to disrespect her autonomy by declaring her refusal of treatment as demonstrating an inadequate sense of self-worth. Setting substantive limits on what can be considered autonomous actions gives us too much latitude to interfere in the individual choices of others. Christman's fear is that in so doing, we may run the risk of "perpetuating injustice," as per Meyers' quote above, by further disrespecting the very individuals who have been subjected to historical subjugation.

Diana Meyers offers helpful language for overcoming the impasse between procedural and substantive approaches when she presents what she calls a theory of *autonomy competency*.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Wolf, "Freedom Within Reason."

⁶⁶ Benson, "Free Agency and Self-Worth." Also see Govier, "Self-Trust, Autonomy, and Self-Esteem."

⁶⁷ I will borrow Meyers' term regularly henceforth, as I find it instrumental in identifying what theorists often mean when they invoke the concept of autonomy. It may be important to note that Meyers envisions her theory as a procedural approach. It's worth noting that Benson is skeptical that Meyers' approach is *really* value-neutral. "The agentic skills she describes," writes Benson, "seem to import specific values into the account." He claims that, by

Rather than claim Mrs. H. is incapable of acting as an autonomous agent, Meyers suggests that we consider Mrs. H. to have an underdeveloped autonomy competency.⁶⁸ This highlights several fundamental aspects of autonomy, on Meyers' conception. First, autonomy is better conceived as a matter of degree, rather than as something that either does or does not characterize an agent or her actions.⁶⁹ Thus it may be helpful to describe someone as exhibiting some degree of personal autonomy, or to speak of the diminishment or enhancement of personal autonomy. Second, it may be more worth attending to what Meyers calls "programmatic autonomy"—that is, the exercise of autonomy in one's life more globally, over a broad span of time—than "episodic autonomy"—the exercise of autonomy in one momentary event.⁷⁰ Third, and finally, individual autonomy is better understood as the implementation of a "repertory of coordinated skills," rather than the self's rational and independent discovery of her chosen ends, or the self's exertion of the self over and against her social context.⁷¹ This may include critical reflection, but it also involves, as Meyers puts it, "self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction."⁷² These three observations bear out some of the things we have observed heretofore in this project: that agency may come in greater or lesser degrees; that it takes time; and that it requires a number of resources available to the agent, including imagination and self-respect, not just reason. This intervention may prove immensely helpful to those seeking to rethink autonomy in the context of the birthing plans discussed in chapter one.

There are a number of virtues to the kind of account Meyers offers. One such virtue, which I'd like to concentrate on for the rest of this section, is the fact that it transcends a zero-sum

including self-worth and self-respect among the requisites for autonomy capacity, Meyers' conception is weakly substantive. See Benson, "Feminist Intuitions and the Normative Substance of Autonomy," 135.

⁶⁸ Meyers, "Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization," 627–28.

⁶⁹ Meyers, 624, 625.

⁷⁰ Meyers, 624–25. Also see discussion in Mackenzie and Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy*, 14–17. (This dovetails with my discussion in preceding chapters about the diachronicity of human living.)

⁷¹ Meyers, "Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization," 627.

⁷² Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, 96.

approach to thinking about autonomous agency. Mackenzie's introduction of the hypothetical case of Mrs. H. is very typical of much of the literature on relational autonomy: *either* one is constrained by her socialization, *or* she is free to act autonomously. But that kind of approach just reduplicates the problems that the theorists of relational autonomy are trying to solve. (Recall Nedelsky's point that relatedness is a precondition for autonomy.) Rather than focus on *oppressive* socialization, feminist theorists should highlight the ways that certain forms of socialization *facilitate* autonomous agency—not least because a great deal of the socialization that Americans undergo is performed by women!

Let me be clear: it's not as if I am unaware—both academically and from personal experience—about the degree to which women's and other marginalized persons' socialization is often oppressive. The fact of the matter is that some of the third parties that contain and constrain mother-child relationships are relations of domination.⁷³ For example, extensive scholarship has demonstrated the role that daycares and preschools play in inculcating in children harmful gendered practices—from their earliest days—in ways that promote boys and subjugate girls.⁷⁴ Even those parents who do not approve of such socialization may depend on the day care centers that practice it and have little choice about their children's subjection to such subtle yet sexist practices. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter two, many parents who selectively subject their children to rigid gender norms do so not because they endorse them, but out of fear of the consequences for their children should they fail to comply with social expectations.⁷⁵

Collins' work is illustrative on this point. In her chapter on motherhood in *Black Feminist Thought*, she writes at length about the dilemma faced by many Black mothers, who need to

⁷³ I'm using this word as a term of art, borrowing from Pettit's definition in Pettit, *Republicanism*, 63.

⁷⁴ For an excellent example of such scholarship, see Martin, "Becoming a Gendered Body."

⁷⁵ For example, Mackie discusses mothers' subjection of their daughters to female genital mutilation (FGM) not because they themselves endorse it, but because without pursuing the procedure, their daughters might not be eligible for marriage. See Mackie, "Ending Footbinding and Infibulation." See discussion of this on page 96.

teach their children, and daughters in particular, how to navigate a world that disvalues black life. They want to instill their daughters with the self-worth that will enable them to resist becoming participants in their own domination. Yet they also know that, as Collins puts it, “Black daughters with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically survive.”⁷⁶ That is, the mother-daughter relationships that Collins concentrates on are shaped by relationships with other members of a racist social order that is likely to undermine the well-being of both Black mothers and daughters. In Collins’ telling, Black mothers are often troubled by the fact that they have to participate in preparing their children for life in such a lamentable context.

But Collins also focuses on the agency that Black mothers carve out for themselves and their children as they manage parenthood in such a challenging context. “African-American mothers often try to protect their daughters from the dangers that lie ahead by offering them a sense of their own unique self-worth,” Collins writes.⁷⁷ She cites a verse from a traditional blues song: “I ain’t good lookin’ and ain’t got waist-long hair / I say I ain’t good lookin’ and ain’t got waist-long hair / But my mama gave me something that’ll take me anywhere.”⁷⁸ The resources Black mothers endow their children with, according to the numerous studies Collins surveys, certainly involve the “self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction” that Meyers prescribes for autonomous agency.⁷⁹ Furthermore, in another section of the same chapter on motherhood, Collins writes about the ways that Black mothers themselves further develop their *own* self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction, in Meyers’ terms, precisely by engaging in the work

⁷⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 183–84.

⁷⁷ Collins, 186.

⁷⁸ Collins, 186.

⁷⁹ Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, 96. In fact, Collins herself talks about self-definition as a critical component in a full life, and writes explicitly on the ways that Black mothers try to offer their children the opportunity to engage in self-definition.

of Black motherhood. “Her child serves as a catalyst for her movement into self-definition, self-valuation, and individual empowerment,” Collins explains.⁸⁰

It seems to me that too often, scholars of relational autonomy focus on the concept as a problem, rather than as a resource. They present what we might call *negative accounts* of relational autonomy, insofar as they concentrate on the conditions that impede individuals from fully developing autonomy capacity. Yet I suspect that feminist political theorists also have more than adequate resources to develop *positive accounts* of relational autonomy. Such accounts would more closely attend to the ways that caregivers—who tend, of course, to be women—play a unique role in the development of the autonomy capacity of those in their care. Nedelsky, for example, has recommended considering the phenomenon of childrearing as a more helpful paradigm for thinking about autonomy than the unfettered property owner, though this approach has not been adequately elaborated thus far.⁸¹

Developing a positive account of relational autonomy bearing in mind caregivers’ nurture of autonomous-citizens-to-be may also help us to elude some of the dichotomous, individual-versus-collective thinking that plagues so much political theory. Whereas negative accounts reinforce the opposition between individual and collective by underscoring the adverse effects of social norms on individuals’ ability to choose and act autonomously, positive accounts would do otherwise. Positive accounts would draw attention to the ways relationships provide the resources necessary for individuals to acquire autonomy more fully.

That said, however, just because competition between individual autonomy and socialization is not *necessary* does not mean that it is not *possible*. Positive accounts of relational autonomy need not controvert negative accounts of relational autonomy. That is, the former would not deny

⁸⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 198.

⁸¹ Nedelsky, “Reconceiving Autonomy,” 12; Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations*, 124. She mentions this suggestion in passing, but does not fully flesh it out. Her suggestion to turn to childrearing as a paradigm for thinking about autonomy, as far as I can tell, has not yet been borne out by any other political theorists, either.

the possibility that oppressive socialization can constrain autonomy. There are simply too many cases like that of Mrs. H. to suggest otherwise. A positive account of relational autonomy would simply insist that such a scenario is one possibility among many. Nedelsky puts it thus: “[i]t is probably the case that all relationships necessary for autonomy can easily be perverted to undermine it.”⁸² In fact, this is another reason that caregiving work merits more attention from ethicists: it involves the regular exercise of authority and power between unequals, and is thus prone to abuse.⁸³ Recall, for example, the discussion in chapter one concerning the disturbing feelings some new mothers experience when confronted with the considerable power they wield over their children. There is simply no way to avoid the asymmetry of power between a mother or other caregiver and her child, and this demands further theorization. Yet to recognize the *possibility* of competition between a caregiver’s agency and that of a dependent is not to render that an inevitability.

In my view, those theorists of relational autonomy that begin from the assumption that the preponderance of socialization is oppressive, or that the most important thing about socialization is that it is oppressive, are mistaken. As we have seen above in chapter two, many of the best things in our lives—some of those things we most tend to take for granted—are only made possible by human cooperation. And human cooperation requires the socialization that incorporates young children into the social body, granting them the language and other social tools necessary for working together toward shared goals.

This is not to say that we ought to endorse all the schemata that we inherit from our social worlds. There are plenty of concepts and processes that we ought to eliminate—the notion of the self-made, autonomous agent among them. *But even the task of eliminating harmful social*

⁸² In Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations*, 410.

⁸³ Sullivan-Dunbar, *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics*, 143.

notions itself requires our cooperation! This is one of the insights that we receive from Collins. Black mothers' courageous imparting their children the tools to engage in revolutionary self-love and self-definition is made more possible when done in the context of networks of othermothers that can support that radical work. The good news here is that, because women often play central roles in the socialization of children, we can be among the vanguard in the work of nurturing children to be more fully autonomous agents.⁸⁴

In sum, we feminist social theorists are sorely in need of more positive accounts of relational autonomy. We ought to devote more resources to thinking about the kinds of social institutions and practices that are necessary for the development of children's autonomy. It is misguided to seek to discover, once and for all, which of an agent's choices represent her "true self" and which represent a socially imposed, alien will. The point of theorizing about relational autonomy, after all, is to draw attention to the ways that our very selves are constructed by social forces that make us who we are. It would be worthwhile to concentrate more and to better understand how members of a political body *come to be* autonomous agents. As Nedelsky, the earliest advocate for the concept, and one of the few who promotes a more positive account of relational autonomy, puts it:

What is required is an understanding of the substance of autonomy and of the practices that foster it so that citizens can ask whether the actions or institutions proposed in their collective decision-making are consistent with the autonomy of all. We must, for example, ask whether official action in any particular circumstance denies clients basic respect or treats them in ways that makes them less able to understand what is happening to them, less able to participate effectively in the decisions affecting their lives, less able to define and pursue their own goals—in short, in ways that undermine rather than foster their capacity to find and live by their own law.⁸⁵

My only potential departure from Nedelsky's point here would be to replace her language concerning the "official action" that could promote or constrain autonomy with an emphasis on

⁸⁴ This is not to "blame" caregivers either for the misdeeds of children in their care, or for reduplicating the oppression to which their children may be subject. Rather, it is to highlight resources that are within women's grasp to ameliorate the patriarchal socialization that many children undergo. But this cannot be done in a vacuum; it requires cooperation.

⁸⁵ Nedelsky, "Reconceiving Autonomy," 34.

the *social practices* that promote and constrain autonomy. Not because social practices are unaffected by policy—to be sure, public funding and advocacy are essential to the establishment of worthwhile social practices—but because the political *is* personal, after all. The cultivation of autonomy that we ought to consider is not happening in Congressional buildings as much as in classrooms. The “official action” that could support the cultivation of autonomy that most needs our attention in the early twenty-first century America would be the public funding, or at least subsidization, of childcare. This support is critical. Beyond it, however, we also need to consider more specifically what kind of care networks ought to be available, and what kind of socialization could be promoted (and rejected) by those networks. It is not wrong to desire that our children be enabled to live full and free lives when they reach maturity. It would only be wrong to imagine that they might be able to do so without the care of others.

The village

The present dissertation foregrounds pregnancy and motherhood to think anew about the social constitution of agency. In chapters preceding this one, I have focused on the way mothers, and particularly gestating mothers, play a crucial and yet underappreciated role. Those who bear children, I have argued, are essential workers, and deserve recognition as such. But, because motherhood requires the involvement of third parties of all sorts—fathers, extended family members, daycare workers, medical professionals—it would be an incomplete project if I did not directly treat the role of these third parties in the mother-child relationship.

In this chapter, I have focused on scholarship from various disciplines—anthropology, sociology, and political theory—that stresses the role third parties play in the experience and work of motherhood. Raising children does, indeed, take a village. Those mothers upon whom

children depend are themselves are dependent, in turn, upon others. Justice demands that we ensure mothers receive the support they need to do their essential work.

CHAPTER SIX

CRITICAL PIETY: OUR URGENT NEED TO RECOVER AN ANCIENT VIRTUE

But, you see, if you eats these dinners and don't cook 'em, if you wears these clothes and don't buy or iron them, then you might start thinking that the good fairy or some spirit did all that. They asked a little white girl in this family I used to work for who made her cake at one of her little tea parties. She said she made it and then she hid her face and said the good fairies made it. Well, you are looking at that good fairy. Black folks don't have no time to be thinking like that. If I thought like that, I'd burn cakes and scorch skirts. But when you don't have anything else to do, you can think like that. It's bad for your mind, though.

—ROSA WAKEFIELD¹

You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;
you forgot the God who gave you birth.

—DEUTERONOMY 32:18

There has been a lamentable trend, in the age since the Great Awakenings, to use the word “piety” as a synonym for “devoutness.” Piety, to the contemporary ear, conjures a sense of personal religious feeling and practice. For example, Saba Mahmood’s distinguished text, *Politics of Piety*, has as its theme the individual agency of women in Islamic societies. Meanwhile, untold books in the field of religious studies simply use “piety” as a stand-in for “religion.”² This use of the term is not limited to the academic study of religion; recently, one liberation theologian has even demanded that we move, in the words of the title of his book, *Beyond Piety*.³ The thesis of that book rests on the premise that piety is altogether private, and insufficiently materially productive.⁴

¹ As quoted in Gwaltney, *Drylongso*, 88. I was first introduced to this extraordinary book in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

² Perhaps this is understandable, given concerns about the historical baggage associated with the word “religion.”

³ Cavazos-González, *Beyond Piety*.

⁴ “Christian spirituality,” Cavazos-González writes, “is about traditional piety and devotional practices, but these are worthless if it is not also about justice, peace, and liberation.” In his conclusion, he puts the same point this way: “I love pious and devotional practice ... However, I also know that it does me no good to wear a crucifix if I do nothing for the crucified people of the earth.” Cavazos-González, 2, 108.

According to the ancients, though, piety is neither of these things. Piety, for Cicero, motivates the pious to “render kind offices and loving service to one’s kin and country.”⁵ As such, the ancient virtue of piety is fundamentally public, insofar as it pertains to one’s public tribute to her kin and fellow citizens. Furthermore, piety is productive, insofar as it motivates the pious to accomplish good things on behalf of her kin and fellow citizens. The ancient virtue therefore involves the near inverse of what the modern term suggests today.⁶ Where contemporary uses of the word “piety” are often preceded by the word “personal,” the ancients would have been bewildered by such a formulation.

This chapter does not dare try to account for how the ancient virtue of piety disintegrated to the point of becoming a matter of private religious practice. For those who are interested in that topic, many historians (and non-historians) offer various narratives to explain that trajectory.⁷ However, I will refrain from so doing. Instead, in what follows, I seek to illuminate the ancient virtue of piety, and show why we need so urgently to recover it. As I describe it, piety involves our appreciation for those things that make our lives possible. Furthermore, I will also update the ancient virtue, so to speak, to situate it in our modern context. That requires three substantial interventions. First, I show that piety must be comprehensive and even *prospective*. That is: not only ought we to be grateful for those who have made our lives possible up to and including the present moment, but we ought also to be grateful for those whose *future* work will sustain our continued wellbeing. Second, I show that piety must not only be symbolic or expressive, but also

⁵ “... pietatem, quae erga patriam aut parentes aut alios sanguine coniunctos officium conservare moneat.” Cicero, *On Invention. The Best Kind of Orator. Topics*, 230. (*De Inventione*, 2.53.161.)

⁶ This explains why many translators of classic texts often do not translate *pietas* but leave it in its original Latin.

⁷ This is what I take to be implicit in Brad Gregory’s book. See Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*. His is representative of a broader genre of decline narratives that posit the Protestant reformers as agents of an irreversible and lamentable atomization of society. Though I hesitate to offer any account for the shift, I suspect that it might have much more to do with the influence of Jerome’s view of piety on all subsequent readers of the Vulgate. Jerome interpreted Christian piety to be something very different from the piety Cicero describes, and his authoritative translation renders “piety” as something having to do with personal faith, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person. See discussion in Garrison, *Pietas from Vergil to Dryden*, 35–38.

material. However, I do not intend to neglect the importance of expressive piety. Third, I concentrate on the appropriate means for acknowledging those sources of our being that are not altogether (or at all) commendable. Finally, I offer some reflections of what this meditation on piety might teach us about what is owed to mothers in contemporary American society.

Reconstructing piety

Ancient piety

It can take some effort to comprehend what *pietas* meant to the ancients, especially given the modern connotations associated with its contemporary English cognate. It takes even more to grasp how central this virtue was in ancient Greek and Roman society. Both efforts, however, are worthwhile. The task of the present section is to describe the meaning and import of this ancient virtue.

We could certainly do worse than to start with Cicero's characterization of *pietas*. For the celebrated philosopher and statesman, *pietas* is the virtue that binds us in gratitude to those to whom we owe our lives. On the one hand, this may be said to pertain specifically to our parents: "what is piety," Cicero asks in his defense of Plancius, "but a grateful feeling towards one's parents?"⁸ That gratitude extends, however, beyond our most immediate relations to include those who make our lives possible more generally. In the sixth book of his *De Re Publica*, where Cicero narrates an imaginary dream of the Roman general Scipio, the latter is authoritatively advised to "love justice and piety, which are certainly due to parents and kinsmen, but most of all

⁸ "Quid est pietas nisi voluntas grata in parentes?" Cicero, *Pro Archia. Post Reditum in Senatu. Post Reditum Ad Quirites. De Domo Sua. De Haruspicum Responsis. Pro Plancio*, 512. (*Pro plancio* 33.80.)

to the nation.”⁹ Elsewhere, Cicero confirms the primacy of one’s country over one’s kinsmen in meriting the duty of *pietas*.¹⁰

To some degree, Cicero’s early comparison of *pietas* to the related virtue *religio* may be illustrative. Where religion names the “fear and worship of the gods,” *pietas*, glossed as “duty” by one classic translation, “warns us to keep our obligations to our country or parents or other kin.”¹¹ Here we see the familiar Roman formulations of *pietas erga patriam* (piety toward one’s nation) and *pietas erga parentes* (piety towards one’s parents). But this comparison is presented in Cicero’s *De Inventione*, written while Cicero was yet a young man. In his later writings, *pietas* and *religio* are not so easily distinguished. In *De Finibus*, Cicero discusses the importance of *pietas adversus deos* (piety towards the gods) and “the degree of gratitude we owe them.”¹² In *Topica*, Cicero simply defines *pietas* as “equity ... to the gods in heaven.”¹³ Equity granted toward other human beings is glossed as justice. And in *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero writes plainly that piety consists in “justice towards the gods.”¹⁴ It may be difficult, therefore, to defend

⁹ “... iustitiam cole et pietatem, quae cum magna in parentibus et propinquis, tum in patria maxima est.” Cicero, *On the Republic. On the Laws*, 268. (*De Re Publica* 6.16.1.)

¹⁰ “Sed si contentio quaedam et comparatio fiat, quibus plurimum tribuendum sit officii, principes sint patria et parentes, quorum beneficiis maximis obligati sumus, proximi liberi totaque domus, quae spectat in nos solos neque aliud ullum potest habere perfugium, deinceps bene convenientes propinqui, quibuscum communis etiam fortuna plerumque est.” Cicero, *On Duties*, 60. (*De Officiis* 1.58.)

¹¹ “Religionem eam quae in metu et caerimonia deorum sit appellant; pietatem, quae erga patriam aut parentes aut alios sanguine coniunctos officium conservare moneat.” Cicero, *On Invention. The Best Kind of Orator. Topics*, 230. (*De Inventione*, 2.66.) Cicero more or less restates this same principle later in the work, though there he reverses the order of “country” and “kinsmen”: “Religio est, quae superioris cuiusdam naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam caerimoniamque affert; pietas, per quam sanguine coniunctis patriaeque benivolum officium et diligens tribuitur cultus.” Cicero, 328. (*De Inventione*, 2.161.)

¹² “nec vero pietas adversus deos nee quanta iis gratia debeatur sine explicatione naturae intellegi potest.” Cicero, *On Ends*, 292. (*De Finibus* 3.73.)

¹³ “atque etiam aequitas tripartita dicitur esse, una ad superos deos, altera ad manes, tertia ad homines pertinere; prima pietas, secunda sanctitas, tertia iustitia aut aequitas nominatur.” Cicero, *On Invention. The Best Kind of Orator. Topics*, 452. (*Topica* 90.)

¹⁴ “Est enim pietas iustitia adversum deos.” Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods. Academics*, 112. (*De Natura Deorum* 1.41.116.)

a Ciceronian view of *pietas* that does not also include proper gratitude toward the gods. For the later Cicero, at least, *pietas* and *religio* are mutually imbricated.¹⁵

Two things remain clear in Cicero's understanding of piety throughout his writing, however. First, one bears enduring obligations towards one's compatriots, kinsfolk, and gods, and this is rightfully identified as *pietas*, or piety. The relative priority of these various demands may seem to shift—as it does in many ancient writings—but one's obligation to respond to such demands is never in question in Cicero's writing. The difference of emphasis observed through Cicero's oeuvre is *only* a difference of emphasis. Second, Cicero repeatedly claims that these duties are the basis from which other virtues spring. In his defense of Plancius, for example, Cicero calls piety the “foundation of all virtues.”¹⁶ Similarly, in *De Legibus*, he writes that “the foundation of justice” is founded in “our natural inclination to love our fellow-men.”¹⁷ And in the opening pages of his *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero surmises that the disappearance of piety toward the gods “will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself.”¹⁸ There is a relation between our appreciation for the divine and human sources of our being.

The virtue of piety is fundamental to human society, according to both Cicero and to the Roman society in which he lived and served. That same virtue became even more intensely

¹⁵ Hendrik Wagenvoort suggests that this development in Cicero's thought has much to do with the transition from Republic to Empire that occurred in the closing years of Cicero's life. According to Wagenvoort, it seems that Cicero wanted to introduce some objective moral standard to the notion of piety, by integrating loyalty toward the gods in one's duty to one's country. Wagenvoort, *Pietas*, 9.

¹⁶ “*nam meo iudicio pietas fundamentum est omnium virtutum.*” Cicero, *Pro Archia. Post Reditum in Senatu. Post Reditum Ad Quirites. De Domo Sua. De Haruspicum Responsis. Pro Plancio*, 442. (*Pro Plancio*, 12.29). Garrison points out that Lactantius writes something similar—“*pietas autem summa virtus est*”—but that this appears to be an adaptation of a line from the *Hermetica*, not an adaptation of Cicero. See Garrison, *Pietas from Vergil to Dryden*, 11.

¹⁷ “*atque si natura confirmatura ius non erit, tollantur; ubi enim liberalitas, ubi patriae caritas, ubi pietas, ubi aut bene merendi de altero aut referendae gratiae voluntas poterit existere? nam haec nascuntur ex eo, quia natura propensi sumus ad diligendos homines, quod fundamentum iuris est.*” Cicero, *On the Republic. On the Laws*, 344. (*De Legibus*, 1.43.)

¹⁸ “*... haud scio an pietate adversus deos sublata fides etiam et societas generis humani et una excellentissima virtus iustitia tollatur.*” Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods. Academics*, 6. (*De Natura Deorum* 1.2.4.)

central to the Roman state as it transformed from republic to monarchy. While Cicero himself identified Rome's exceptional display of piety as a justification for Rome's annexation of other territories,¹⁹ this principle became official state doctrine under Augustus.²⁰ This is most apparent in the epic poem that became Rome's most noteworthy founding myth, the *Aeneid*. Commissioned by Augustus himself, Vergil's narrative served to justify the ascendancy of the Julio-Claudian dynasty by portraying Rome's noble founding and tying the emperor to Aeneas' bloodline. More than anything, however, what legitimized the Augustan empire was Augustus' emulation—and the entire empire's emulation—of Aeneas' renowned *pietas*. Before his name even appears in the poem, Aeneas is identified as a man noted for his piety (*vir insignis pietate*).²¹ Throughout the epic, *pious* or some similar modifier is associated with Aeneas at least twenty-five times, even to the degree that one commentator writes that “[w]e are wearied, it must be confessed, by being continually reminded of his piety.”²² Perhaps the modern reader might be so wearied; Augustus, apparently, was not. Even as Vergil had stipulated that the manuscript of the epic be burned after his death, presumably because it was unfinished as he neared death, Augustus ordered that it be published instead. Vergil's masterpiece became a cornerstone of Roman identity, at the same time as temples were built and coins minted honoring Roman *pietas*.

What was it about Aeneas that was so *pious*? Surely, not everything he did was plainly *blameless*: he abandoned his betrothed, and murdered Turnus as the latter begged for mercy. But

¹⁹ Cicero wrote that Romans “have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in vigor, nor Carthage in versatility, nor Greece in art, nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety, in devotion to religion, and in that special wisdom which consists in the recognition of the truth that the world is swayed and directed by divine disposal, we have excelled every race and every nation.” “... *tamen nec numero Hispanos nec robore Gallos nec calliditate Poenos nec artibus Graecos nec denique hoc ipso huius gentis ac terrae domestico nativoque sensu Italos ipsos ac Latinos, sed pietate ac religione atque hac una sapientia, quod deorum numine omnia regi gubernarique perspeximus, omnes gentes nationesque superavimus.*” Cicero, *Pro Archia. Post Reditum in Senatu. Post Reditum Ad Quirites. De Domo Sua. De Haruspicum Responsis. Pro Plancio*, 340. (*De Haruspicum Responsis*, 19.)

²⁰ We might want to identify this as the dark side of Augustan piety. This sort of vicious propagandaizing likely merits what I will below call critical piety.

²¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3. (1.11.)

²² As discussed and quoted in Moseley, “Pius Aeneas.”

even these deeds prove Aeneas' piety. In each of these undertakings, and throughout Vergil's narrative, Aeneas repeatedly experiences a conflict between his own predispositions, on the one hand, and the demands of god and country and kin, on the other. At nearly every turn, *pious* Aeneas submits to the latter. His clandestine departure from Dido is prompted by Mercury's reminder of his duty to continue to Rome. And he cannot help but slay Turnus when he discovers Turnus is wearing as a trophy the swordbelt of Pallas, a young Greek soldier who Aeneas had all but adopted. Aeneas' piety is best illustrated, however, in the famous scene in Book Two wherein Aeneas takes his father, Anchises, onto his shoulders to flee burning Troy:

Come, my dear father, let's leave! Set the weight of your limbs upon my neck.
I'll support you on my shoulders. This labour won't burden me greatly.
Come what may in the fall of events, we'll share every danger.²³

He commits himself to a shared destiny with his own dear father, and even insists that his father's weight will not overcome him. It is not only his past that Aeneas shoulders in Vergil's story, however: at the close of book eight, Aeneas takes up a shield the god Vulcan forges for him at the request of Venus, Aeneas' mother. The shield portrays Rome's future glory, which Aeneas doesn't yet grasp, but bears nonetheless:

Such sights he admires on the shield of Vulcan, his mother's gift,
and, though he knows not the events, he rejoices in their representation,
raising up on his shoulder the fame and fortunes of his children's children.²⁴

It is not merely toward his progenitors that Aeneas shows his piety, therefore, but to all of his compatriots, including those who are yet to come. He willingly bears them upon his shoulders, scarcely burdened by the effort. In that act, as in so many acts in Vergil's narrative, Aeneas fulfills his duty to his country (*pietas erga patriam*) and his duty to the gods (*pietas adversus deos*).

²³"*ergo age, care pater, cervici imponere nostrae; ipse subibo umeris, nee me labor iste gravabit. quo res cumque cadent, unum et commune periculum.*" Virgil, *Aeneid*, 50. (2.707-709.)

²⁴"*Talia per clipeum Volcani, dona parentis, miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum.*" Virgil, 207. (8.729-731.) Here I have used the Loeb translation in place of the Ahl translation.

Even as Cicero had entertained the possibility of a conflict between one's duty to country and one's duty to the gods in his writings, according to the antique Roman conception of piety such divergences were uncommon. The logic was rather plain: venerating the gods was not only a religious obligation, but doing so also served to secure Rome's continued prosperity, for one's own benefit and for the benefit of others. Performing *pietas erga patriam* helped to ensure the wellbeing of one's kin and compatriots. This was a central reason that early Christians were reviled and persecuted. Their failure to offer appropriate worship to the gods—to perform sacrifices and oaths, for example—imperiled their fellow Romans. It is unsurprising, therefore, that much early Christian writing was preoccupied with the conflict between piety toward God and piety toward one's kin and compatriots, beginning with the canonical texts in the New Testament. Even in those writings, though, many early Christians sought to soften the tension between one's duty to God and one's duty to country, to prove that Christians, too, could comport with the prevailing Roman standards regarding *pietas*.²⁵

Christian piety

Following the Christianization of the empire, however, the compatibility of piety toward God and piety toward one's compatriots was more easily presumed. That this was so is forthrightly revealed in both Chrysostom's and Ambrose's interpretations of Luke 14:26, where Jesus seems to require that all of his disciples "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters." This does not constitute a proscription of familial *pietas*, according to these late Antique fathers, but merely a warning that one ought be *willing* to forsake kin who obstruct one's discipleship. Chrysostom writes:

... if if Paul gives many directions touching parents, commanding us to obey them in all things, marvel not; for in those things only doth he mean us to obey, as many as do not hinder godliness. For indeed it is a sacred duty

²⁵ Christopher Hoklotubbe's *Civilized Piety* helpfully situates the pastoral epistles within an ancient context that prioritized *pietas*. See Hoklotubbe, *Civilized Piety*.

to render them all other honors: but when they demand more than is due, one ought not to obey. For this reason Luke saith, “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple;” not commanding simply to hate them, since this were even quite contrary to the law; but “when one desires to be loved more than I am, hate him in this respect.”²⁶

Writing at about the same time, albeit on the other side of the empire in Milan, Ambrose agreed.

Though the duties of religion take precedence over the duties of piety—“*religio enim praestat pietatis officiis*”—by no means does the former preclude the latter.²⁷ Instead, Ambrose justifies the language in Luke 14:26 by supposing that the relations that, according to Jesus, merit repudiation are simply gentiles.

Augustine certainly assented to this line of reasoning.²⁸ The most noteworthy endorsement of the ancient virtue of piety, however, comes from Aquinas, who integrated it in his methodical theological account of the virtues. For Aquinas, piety is analogous to religion: if religion is granting the worship to God that is due, it is not unlike piety, which grants due appreciation to all the various sources of our being.

God ... is for us the first principle of being and government. On the second place, the principles of our being and government are our parents and our country, that have given us birth and nourishment. Consequently man is debtor chiefly to his parents and his country, after God. Wherefore just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so does it belong to piety, in the second place, to give worship to one's parents and one's country. The worship due to our parents includes the worship given to all our kindred, since our kinsfolk are those who descend from the same parents ... The worship given to our country includes homage to all our fellow-citizens and to all the friends of our country. Therefore piety extends chiefly to these.²⁹

Of course, for Aquinas, the virtues are never in conflict, and so the virtues of *religio* and *pietas*—Thomas' counterparts to *pietas adversus deos* and *pietas erga patriam aut parentes*—do not conflict. Wherever they might appear to, one must always remain faithful to God, and if that requires an apparent disregard of *pietas*, such disregard is *merely* apparent. Again, the same

²⁶ Chrysostom, *Homily 35 on Matthew* (3).

²⁷ Ambrose, *Expositio in Lucam* 7.146.

²⁸ From Letter 243: “A man should always pay his filial duty, but let these things keep their place where higher duties do not call.” Augustine, *Letters* 204-270, 223–24.

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II.103.1. That said, Aquinas is not always so clear about the distinctions between religion and piety. For he distinguishes the *virtue* of piety and the *gift* of piety, and says that “[b]ut to pay worship to God as Father is yet more excellent than to pay worship to God as Creator and Lord. Wherefore religion is greater than the virtue of piety: while the gift of piety is greater than religion.” See Aquinas, II-II.121.1.

insistence on importance of the virtue of *pietas* that resonated in Cicero and other antique Roman writers appears here in Aquinas. We bear obligations to those to whom we owe our being, and we fulfill them in acts of piety.

Pragmatic piety

It is important to note at this point that I follow many others in promoting a retrieval of the ancient virtue. Early twentieth century pragmatists like John Dewey and George Santayana insisted on the need to nurture humans' recognition of their indebtedness to one another and to their shared heritages. Dewey insisted that it was essential for humans to have a sense of their participation "as a cooperating part of a larger whole."³⁰ Our contemporary disinclination to acknowledge our mutual interdependence must be corrected by our appreciation for those upon who we depend. "Such piety," Dewey wrote, "is an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life."³¹ Santayana similarly interprets piety as follows:

Piety, in its nobler and Roman sense, may be said to mean man's reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment. ... This consciousness that the human spirit is derived and responsible, that all its functions are heritages and trusts, involves a sentiment of gratitude and duty which we may call piety. The true objects of piety are, of course, those on which life and its interests really depend: parents first, then family, ancestors, and country; finally, humanity at large and the whole cosmos.³²

In more recent years, scholars of the pragmatist tradition including Jeffrey Stout, Melvin Rogers, and Joseph Winters have reiterated Dewey and Santayana's focus on piety as a democratic virtue. Stout champions the virtue at length in his *Democracy and Tradition*, and Rogers treats it in a chapter of *The Undiscovered Dewey*.³³ Stout, for his part, defines piety as the "just or appropriate response to the sources of one's existence and progress through life."³⁴ He further

³⁰ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 23. In his 1922 *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey echoes these words, by insisting we develop "a sense of the whole," "the sense of an enveloping whole," "the sense of this effortless and unfathomable whole."

³¹ Dewey, 24.

³² Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 107. Note the absence of obligations to a deity: Santayana himself was an atheist.

³³ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*; Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey*. Also see Winters, "Dewey, Walker, and the Piety of the Uncommon."

³⁴ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 20.

explains that even as such a practice can seem anti-democratic—especially if it is assumed to require blind deference to those sources of existence—it is necessary in democratic society.³⁵ For, especially in a democratic social context, where critical engagement with the past is promoted, it can be too easy to succumb to “the temptation of denying the very conditions of one’s own existence or otherwise masking from oneself the sources on which critical thinking depends.”³⁶ Any community, including or perhaps especially a democratic one, that demonstrates insufficient gratitude toward those people and efforts that have constituted it is bound to suffer.

It is my privilege to join the classic and contemporary advocates of the virtue of piety. It is ever more apparent that, in a society in which forsaking the health of others by foregoing mask-wearing is the epitome of patriotism, it is urgent that we recuperate *pietas*. We might imagine, for example, that the experience Rosa Wakefield describes in the epigraph of this chapter might be otherwise if the white family she worked for better demonstrated the virtue of piety. Yet it is also the case that we cannot simply retrieve the virtue that once was; we also must make it our own, which requires bringing *pietas* into the contemporary context. Thus, in what follows, I offer three amendments to even the more modern retrievals of piety found in Stout, Rogers, and others.

Reviving piety

Prospective piety

Santayana’s understanding of piety may have channeled Aquinas’, as Santayana’s definition of the virtue as “man’s reverent attachment to the sources of his being” resembles Aquinas’ description of piety as that which is owed to “the principles of our being.” It is unsurprising,

³⁵ “Piety, if understood as deference to a hierarchy of powers on which social life depends, seems simply to be washed away in a tidal wave of democratic self-assertion.” Stout, 25.

³⁶ Stout, 31.

therefore, that Santayana would write that piety is “retrospective,” given that it binds us to “the past which has made us.”³⁷ Stout endorses this gloss.³⁸ Those who have made us who we are accomplished that task in the past. Or so Santayana and Stout would suggest.

Yet as I argue elsewhere,³⁹ cotemporary philosophy and theory would do well to be more attentive to the diachronicity of human living. We do not live in a series of instants; our lives unfold over time. Furthermore, many of the choices we make as we navigate the worlds in which we live are shaped by our expectations of others’ behavior. Social cooperation requires time. This is one of the many bizarre and unanticipated insights into human society that this year’s coronavirus pandemic has afforded us. As early as March 2020, we were implored to help “flatten the curve”—not because doing so would necessarily limit the number of total cases, but because it would buy healthcare providers more time to develop a response plan. Throughout the spring of 2020, countries struggled to amass stockpiles of ventilators. Ventilator suppliers found it impossible to keep up with demand—not least in part because they needed more parts than their own suppliers could provide. It takes time, after all, for factories to convert from building car parts to ventilator parts, especially in the middle of a national shutdown. In May 2020, another disaster unfolded through time as meatpacking plants across the Midwest were forced to shut down amid viral outbreaks. Not only did that lead to empty meat departments in grocery stores across the country, but it also meant that millions of hogs were euthanized and thrown into landfills, because they could not be processed and packaged for sale. Each of these hardships underscores how human social cooperation takes place over time, with actors expecting certain types of cooperation from their collaborators in the time to come.

³⁷ Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 117, 107.

³⁸ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 9.

³⁹ I also make this case in an article in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*. See Nickel, “Conceiving Selves.”

It is not just the goods we have received in our past that make us, therefore, but also the continued efforts of those in our proximity, materially or figuratively, that continue to make our lives possible, in the present and in the future. Because human living is so dependent upon our expectations of the future to come, piety also demands our proper acknowledgment of the many sources of our continued and presumptive lives in the times to come. I am not merely indebted, that is, to those who have made me who and what I am up to the present point. I am also indebted to those around me, both physically and metaphorically, whose continued cooperation makes my continued living, into the future, possible.

Piety ought not to be conceived of as retrospective, therefore, *contra* Santayana and Stout. Instead, piety ought also to include what one scholar has called “civic gratitude.”⁴⁰ Certainly, Cicero and Aquinas considered such civic gratitude to be integral to *pietas*. We have good reason, however, to doubt that they and other ancients appropriately appreciated the work of, for example, essential workers and domestic caregivers. Civic gratitude must be extended to all with whom we share our lives, including even or especially those whom we have (in most cases, unconsciously) organized our lives to be able to avoid.

Symbolic and material piety

Charles Pinches and others have already raised concerns that Stout’s language in *Democracy and Tradition* is not yet specific enough. *Which* sources deserve *what degree* of acknowledgment? “[Stout] does not really give direction about to whom piety binds us, nor about how it governs and directs what is done in our relations with them,” Pinches complains. “[P]iety needs specification. Who or what are these ‘sources’ democracy trains me to be pious towards?”⁴¹ Pinches is right to insist that piety must be exemplified concretely, in particular

⁴⁰ Hankins, “Pietas.” This article will be discussed below.

⁴¹ Pinches, “Stout, Hauerwas, and the Body of America,” 17–18.

practices and reparations. But Pinches is wrong to ask Stout to do the work for him, so to speak, of discerning who is and is not eligible to be the object of any individual's piety. Acknowledging the sources of our being does not merely mean acceding to something that is brought to our attention by someone else, or to some definition already delimited. That acknowledgment cannot be mandated from on high, but ought to come from below, from each individually. Discerning who and what deserves our piety *is itself* required by the virtue of piety. As Stout puts it, "piety holds ... that it is our own responsibility to imagine the sources on which we depend."⁴²

Nevertheless, we would do well to recognize the importance of Pinches' entreaty that we not consign our pious appreciation to mere abstraction. Stout's piety, Pinches worries, "refers to no bodies. It seems to dangle in the air, perhaps the stale air of an academic meeting room in a hotel somewhere in America."⁴³ While it remains essential that each of us participate in discerning who merits our pious gratitude, we also must be vigilant, lest we slip into a pattern in which we reserve our appreciation for a formless, faceless "other." There are too many that in fact deserve our gratitude for us to misdirect it so haphazardly.

It also must be said that piety ought to be concrete, not only in the identification of the specific objects of our piety, but also in the ways that we manifest our piety. Those to whom we owe our lives ought to be shown our appreciation not merely symbolically, in words and other expressions, but also materially. Failing to demonstrate both senses of piety is insufficient. It is an emaciated piety indeed that merely professes lip service to those whose painstaking efforts have made our lives possible; our demonstration of gratitude must also be accompanied by tangible, substantial offerings. Such offerings cannot be considered recompense; those to whom we owe a debt of piety can never be repaid in kind for their part in granting us our very selves.

⁴² Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 37.

⁴³ Pinches, "Stout, Hauerwas, and the Body of America," 23.

Piety is that which is owed to those who make our very lives possible, and therefore there is a certain asymmetry to the relationship of the pious with the object of her piety. Nor, however, are they charity, to insofar as they are in at least some sense *owed* to the objects of our piety. Neither ought we to imagine that piety can be bought, as it were, without being accompanied by an expression of personal gratitude. “To be devoted to one’s parents is far more than to keep the parents alive physically,” says Confucius, an enthusiast of piety, “merely to feed one’s parents ... even dogs and horses are fed.”⁴⁴ Of course, one could hardly be pious without actually feeding one’s parents. But both elements are necessary: piety cannot be either merely symbolic or merely material.

Critical piety

Perhaps the most important specification to include in a modern account of piety is related to a distinction Stout identifies between the virtue of piety and blind deference. For Stout, piety requires the “proper acknowledgment” and the “just and appropriate response” to those that have made our existence possible. As Stout argues, blind deference would hardly ever constitute such a proper response, and so democrats’ worries about piety requiring such deference can be assuaged. More can be said, however, about the substance of what might constitute a proper response to the sources of our being. Stout does acknowledge that the pious must discern who does and who does not merit their piety. He does not, however, ever explicitly entertain the idea that in some cases, what would constitute a “just and appropriate response” to the sources of our being is not *appreciation* but *denunciation*. It is not merely that some do and others do not deserve our recognition as sources of our being. It is also that some of those sources must be recognized favorably, and some of those sources must be identified with grief.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Pinches, 17.

Put another way: piety ought not always arouse positive feelings in us. Put yet another way: some of the sources of our existence and progress through life merit not gratitude but condemnation. As a white person, for example, I have personally benefitted from a racial caste system in the United States that promotes me while demoting my neighbors and friends, in some cases to lethal conclusions. And as a woman, I have been deformed by a patriarchal social arrangement that recruits me into participating in its wrongs even as it subjugates me. These institutions have indeed made me who I am, they have formed and even constituted me. But their role in forming my existence should not make me rejoice; it rather should prompt me to lament. Piety, as we have seen, demands that I properly acknowledge and respond justly and appropriately to these institutions. As we turn to such tragic inheritances, it becomes clear that the just and appropriate response to them is nothing other than renunciation.

This point is particularly significant given the rising tide of traditionalism that seeks to revive piety without its vital critical edge. For example, a recent commentary by James Hankins in *First Things* insists, just as this chapter does, that piety must once again be a valued virtue. This reader is quite compelled by Hankins' concern that we have failed to cultivate that piety that crucially "binds communities together and builds trust and a sense of common purpose."⁴⁵ Absent those elements, it is hard to imagine how a life-giving arrangement, even as simple as the road traffic discussed in chapter two, might be achievable. But the cultivation of such a virtue is not desirable if we fail to recognize that, in many cases, the just and proper response to the sources of our being is not veneration but its very opposite. Hankins laments, for instance, that "[o]ur cities display, or used to display, statues of our great leaders to remind us of what we owe them and to encourage us to similar virtue." A reader might fairly ask: which great leaders, exactly, have since disappeared from view? Jefferson Davis? Nathan Bedford Forrest? And which of

⁴⁵ Hankins, "Pietas."

their virtues are now insufficiently encouraged? Sedition? Treason? Disenfranchisement? The piece thereby exemplifies what Stout calls “traditionalism,” which he is justifiably troubled by in *Democracy & Tradition*. The traditionalist, according to Stout, is one who assumes “that piety consists essentially in deference toward the hierarchical powers that be.”⁴⁶ Hankins (and other traditionalists) might be offered a little more charity than are granted in such a definition.⁴⁷ It nevertheless remains difficult to believe that Hankins really affirms that the pious citizen is one who *both* “shows gratitude for what [our country] has given us,” *and* “feels shame at its faults, and commits with fierce resolve to amend” it. This especially vivid when Hankins bemoans the materialization of “an educational culture bent on repudiation of the past” and “media awash with anti-American propaganda.” One wonders how a pious citizen’s shame and resolve to remedy injustice ought to manifest, according to Hankins, apart from educational reform and public information campaigns.

Crucially, however, Hankins’ critique is not just directed at those who disapprove, as he does, of the faction in America that “uncritically celebrates our history and traditions.” He has in mind a more specific cabal: those “liberal individualists” who fail to see in American society anything that is theirs, whether good or bad. The issue for Hankins is not merely that such people fail to recognize the contributions that early Americans made to all of humankind—though I suspect Hankins is troubled by this, too. The central concern for Hankins is such “globalists” fail to recognize those American foreparents as *their own*: “The globalist ... has no ancestors, no Founding Fathers.” “He cannot have piety because he owes nothing to that corner of the world into which he has been cast.” Interestingly, I suspect this is where Hankins and Stout (and this

⁴⁶ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 37.

⁴⁷ Pinches makes a similar point, writing that “it is difficult to find much ‘deference’ in anything Milbank, MacIntyre or Hauerwas do and say.” Pinches, “Stout, Hauerwas, and the Body of America,” 19. Nevertheless, it is surely the case that Milbank, MacIntyre, and Hauerwas recommend much more conformity to tradition and traditional authority than do the pragmatist thinkers that have significantly influenced both Stout and twentieth-century American democracy.

author) may find common cause. There is a striking paucity of piety in contemporary American movements, including those that righteously pursue the abolition of unjust systems.

This is the crucial point: even critics of institutions like patriarchy and white supremacy *must* acknowledge the degree to which those institutions have constituted their being—*as well as* the truth that their conviction that such institutions are unjust also spring from American sources. A bolstered piety would bolster the critique. For if we take conservatives like Hankins at their word, that they feel shame at their country’s faults, and fiercely resolve to amend them, then identifying both white supremacists *and* abolitionists as forebears will prove more effective than invectives from one “side” against another.⁴⁸

Critique is all the more powerful when it is pious. This is so both because it is more effective, *and* because it fulfills the demands of justice that the virtue of piety requires of us: we do better when we grant to the sources of our being what is owed. In some cases, what is owed is renunciation. But what is important here is that to *renounce* is not the same thing as to *repudiate*: the latter is to deny, to refuse to acknowledge something. The kind of piety I commend, what I want to call “critical piety,” deliberately acknowledges the more dreadful sources of one’s being as *fully one’s own*, at least insofar as that object of piety made one who one is. Only after acknowledging the influential role a source of one’s being played in one’s life can the critically pious disclaim that inheritance. Disclaim, not simply reject: as it is *as hers* that she disclaims it. What’s more, in many cases, such disclamation can never be total or final. My whiteness stays with me, for example, even as I make deliberate choices to struggle to remove myself from its clutch. Some inheritances can never be fully relinquished.

⁴⁸ This is among the many things that I take to be so powerful about the 1619 Project: Nikole Hannah-Jones’ opening description of her dad’s proud display of an American flag in her yard.

The many matrices in which we are embedded are, as Rorty would say, ours.⁴⁹ We may do one of three things in response: we may undertake them without amendment, or refashion them, or renounce them.⁵⁰ Which of those we pursue is up to us, but those are the only options available to us. Recognizing that our options are limited to these three is a vital part of piety.

Honoring our (and all) mothers

We are all debtors, so to speak, with debts we could never repay. We are remiss when we fail to acknowledge the degree to which we are and have been dependent upon others. This much is clear. It is incumbent upon all of us to recognize that indebtedness, and the impossibility of repaying those gifts that constituted our very selves. It is also incumbent upon us to be concrete about that acknowledgment.

Without doubt, there are many persons and groups of people to whom we owe our constituted selves: the teachers who shaped us, the healthcare workers who maintain our health and well-being, the migrant laborers who produce and package the food we eat on a daily basis. Indeed, we have heard more and more about the importance of appreciating these essential workers, especially during the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020-2021. Such attention is overdue. Yet I am continuously astounded by the degree to which we fail to acknowledge those to whom we owe our very bodies: those women who carried us for the better part of a year, who endured illness and pain on our behalf.⁵¹ As each of us owes something to the woman who

⁴⁹ Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," 234–35.

⁵⁰ Here I have in mind Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*.

⁵¹ Throughout this project, I have explained my advised use of the term "woman" to characterize those persons who have undergone pregnancy. Not all of those who have borne children identify as women; I do not use the term to exclude such persons. However, I find it essential, as a matter of piety, to insist on recognizing the fact that only about half the human population is capable of taking on that essential work. There is a great deal of disregard shown by those who talk about "pregnant persons," as if there is no difference between those who are capable of bearing children and those who are not. Nor should we use the term "gestators" or "menstruators," in a move that, like the use of the word "female" makes scientific this important social distinction. However, I acknowledge that using the term "woman," as it is the most commonly used term to identify those people who are capable of bearing children, is unjustly exclusive, and I proposed an alternate term in chapter four of this project. Indeed, it may be a matter of

carried us for between six and ten months, the responsibility of piety also devolves upon each one of us. Of course, none of us can offer our mothers the care they offered us in the act of childbearing. Instead, we offer them piety, a distinct kind of reverence and gratitude. Failing to be so pious is a serious injustice.

Yet while our indebtedness to our own mothers endures, it is not just our own mothers that deserve our piety, but *all* mothers. As I have revealed above, piety ought not only be granted retrospectively, so to speak, but also prospectively, toward those whose continued efforts make our future lives possible. We ought to be grateful for essential workers like teachers and produce pickers not only because they have made our lives possible *so far*, but also out of gratitude that we are able to expect that they will continue to do so tomorrow. Similarly, it is not only our own mothers who deserve our gratitude and respect, but also all mothers, whose painstaking efforts at bringing new persons into existence make the maintenance of our society possible. Mothers, too, are essential workers: without them, our social world would collapse. As such, *all* mothers merit our piety.

Of course, mothers are without a doubt granted plenty of lip service in modern American society, but that is often associated with unbearable expectations of self-sacrifice placed on mothers, and hardly ever accompanied by any material assistance. American mothers are rarely thanked by having their load lessened and are instead all too often thanked by being granted the privilege of putting ever more effort into the enterprise of mothering. This, like many things, has been particularly underscored in the present coronavirus pandemic. Yet as I have shown in the foregoing, piety must not only be exemplified symbolically—even as the symbolic expression of

piety that we move past this exclusionary language, in order to appreciate the unique contribution that trans men and women make to our world today.

gratitude is a necessary condition of piety—but also must be communicated in material terms.⁵² Mothers deserve our grateful piety, for example, in the form of expanded parental leave policies that publicly acknowledge the laboriousness of labor, and materially give them the opportunity to recover and develop a healthy relationship with their newborn child. Instead, in the United States, we withhold such accommodations. As discussed in chapter two, we are one of only two nations in the world that does not federally guarantee paid maternity leave.⁵³ In fact, as we have seen, we actually tend to *punish* those who choose to become mothers.⁵⁴ Michelle Budig, a sociologist at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, finds that, on average, women’s salaries drop by four percent for each child they have, while men’s increase by six percent.⁵⁵ Budig’s conclusion compellingly portrays the need for piety toward mothers as a matter of justice: “there is a serious equity problem,” she writes, “when we all free ride on the benefits of mothers’ labor, while mothers bear much of the costs of rearing children.”⁵⁶

Even as it is urgently needed, the piety that we ought to develop toward mothers—including mothers of all kinds—ought nevertheless to be distinctly critical. We cannot allow the need to

⁵² In fact, one Biblical scholar points out that the piety to which the Romans were committed motivated Roman rulers to grant mothers in particular and parents in general especial esteem, including tax breaks and preferential treatment in political offices. Hoklotubbe, *Civilized Piety*, 29.

⁵³ The other is Papua New Guinea, the South Pacific island nation of eight million with a per capita GDP of \$2,400. Even in Papua New Guinea, however, all public servants, including nurses and teachers, get twelve weeks of paid maternity leave. Meanwhile, 85% of the globe’s nations offer *at least twelve weeks* of paid leave.

⁵⁴ Whereas women out of college make ninety percent of what their male counterparts make, by age forty-five that gap grows, such that women make only 55 cents on a man’s dollar. Reports suggest that most of this gap emerges as a result of women’s leave from work following the birth of a child, and that paid maternity leave would do much to change this trend. Miller, “Motherhood Has Role In the Gender Pay Gap.”

⁵⁵ Budig, “The Fatherhood Bonus and the Motherhood Penalty.” Low-income earners are particularly impacted by this trend. In another study, sociologist Shelley Correll sent over a thousand fake résumés out to hundreds of employers, all identical—except that some of the résumés included a line about membership in a parent-teacher association, signaling that the applicant was a parent. Mothers received a call back about half as often as nonmothers, while fathers were slightly *favoured* over their nonfather counterparts. Correll, Benard, and Paik, “Getting a Job,” 1330. Furthermore, Correll found that employers indicated that, if hired, fathers ought to be offered a starting salary that was \$6,000 more than nonfathers; mothers, on the other hand, were to be offered \$11,000 less than nonmothers. Correll, Benard, and Paik, 1316. A more recent study shows that it takes as much as ten years for women to return to the earning rates they enjoyed prior to the birth of their first child. The gap that swells between mothers’ and fathers’ earnings after childbirth never disappears. Chung et al., “The Parental Gender Earnings Gap in the United States.”

⁵⁶ Budig, “The Fatherhood Bonus and the Motherhood Penalty,” 221.

recuperate a piety toward mothers to justify the maintenance of unjust, patriarchal norms about gender, the family, and the workplace. Some of the institutions to whom we owe our existence do not merit approbation but reprobation, and those institutions that aim to consign persons, especially women, to marginalized forms of life deserve the latter. Of course, disentangling those practices that warrant not only preservation, but also piety, from those that do not is quite an undertaking. That such an undertaking is a difficult one does not justify our foregoing it. Indeed, it is a part of piety—a duty of justice to which we are all obligated—to recognize that which deserves our gratitude, and that which ought to be abandoned.

CONCLUSION

We mothers are neither simply ‘one with’ our children, nor simply independent of them; assimilation and abandonment are not our only options. ... The fact that our children shape the very terrain of our life possibilities ... is usually cause for our commitment and celebration, not selfish or grudging regret. None of this detracts in the slightest from our very real need for limits, privacy, a separate identity, self-determination, and a room of our own.

—QUILL KUKLA¹

The day that my final draft of this project was due, as I was furiously formatting my footnotes and rewording a few stubborn sentences, I got a phone call. My twenty-one-month-old daughter had a fever and needed to be picked up from her daycare. Whether it was poetic or farcical, I have not yet determined. One of the upshots of the foregoing study is that, somehow, it may be both. The final touches on this dissertation, therefore, were completed in the same way as much of the rest of the project was—and as many of the volumes surveyed in chapter one were. In snatches and starts, under the conditions of relative privation of attention, this author completed most of the present dissertation.

For that and other reasons, this project faces significant limitations. I have, for example, not even introduced the particular challenges of mothering children with disabilities—an experience I have, since the inception of this project, myself undergone—or mothering with one’s own disability. The materials I have drawn inspiration from, as discussed in chapter one, overrepresent white, affluent, straight, Western women and insufficiently attend to the experiences of Black and brown mothers in the United States. I do not concentrate on queer and trans mothers, and what they might teach us about mothering anew. I have chosen to say very little about fathering and co-parenting, and instead focused on childbearing and those matrices that support childbearing. There is also much more to say about religious language and practices that pertain to mothers—including on Mariology, pregnancy and birthing rituals, and feminine

¹ Kukla, *Mass Hysteria*, 231.

conceptions of God—which I have not concentrated on here, either. My assessment of these limitations, and the assessment I hope my reader might share, is that there remains much work to do: much too much for one mother-academic to accomplish in one dissertation.

In what has preceded, rather, I have labored to illuminate the depths of human sociality, and how pregnancy and early motherhood bear out our sociality in unique ways. We have seen how human agency unfolds over time, against a backdrop of social expectations in chapter two. We have learned about the discreteness of our embodiment, even in the context of our extensive interdependence, and the importance of not subjecting either persons or polities to the whims of the other in chapter three. We have considered the implications of our disparate sexed bodies on gender justice, and determined that justice requires *some* form of gender, if different than the system that obtains today in chapter four. We have focused on the importance of communal supports for mothers, both descriptively and normatively, in chapter five. Finally, in chapter six we have reflected on the imperative all of us have to appropriately acknowledge and appreciate those who make our lives possible, even—or perhaps especially—if that acknowledgment requires critique. These are things we better understand, I have argued, if we keep pregnancy and early motherhood at the forefront of our attentions, if but for a while, in ethical and political reflection.

That pregnancy and motherhood deserve greater attention in the academy and in our common life is no new claim. While I am privileged to join the chorus chanting this theme, I am only one of its relatively new members. Yet in this dissertation, I hope to grant additional urgency and force to the premise by showing how the obfuscation of pregnancy and motherhood is both symptom and multiplier of a deeper problem. We are terribly deficient in our recognition of the matrices to which we owe our bodies, our agencies, our selves. Our concealment and repudiation

of those matrices—among them our and others’ mothers, but not to the exclusion of many scores of domains and systems—that make our lives possible is an ethical and political transgression. The damages that wrong inflicts on mothers of all kinds deserves our attention, and a large portion of this dissertation’s focus is on those damages. But the consequences of our failure to recognize matrices extends far beyond the mistreatment of mothers.

This point is among the many to be presented in this dissertation that has acquired new sharpness and pressure in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Too often, the idealization of the “self-made man” has prompted too many of us to disregard the numerous, often unidentified others whose efforts make our lives possible. Many who opposed mask and stay-at-home ordinances failed to consider the countless medical professionals upon whom they depend in medical emergencies, and how their behavior translated into greater risk and trauma for such professionals. Some have suggested that those who refuse to wear masks should be required to sign waivers affirming that they relinquish access to medical treatment for COVID, given that their own refusal to wear masks reveals their disregard for medical professionals. (That over three-quarters of such an essential workforce is comprised of women is also insufficiently acknowledged.) This does not even begin to appreciate the risks so many others working outside of medical context have endured in order that basic societal necessities might be met: grocery workers, produce pickers, waste collectors, transportation personnel, and, of course, teachers and childcare providers.

All of us desperately need many others whose labor and cooperation make our continued life possible. Our general discomfort with that fact does not justify our failure to acknowledge our enduring dependency on others. In fact, we perform a double wrong by first taking advantage of others’ social contributions and subsequently concealing the ways those contributions benefit us.

What I find particularly distressing, however, is that even as the Michiganders' April 2020 protests put this cultural failure into sharp relief, the negligence does not only appear in one or another corner of our political landscape. Women who freely choose to stay home with their children, for example, are looked down upon by a social milieu committed to women's liberation. Many progressives seem to act as if "the system" as such is a social evil, even as it makes possible extraordinarily vast mail delivery, food distribution, and even an unprecedented vaccination effort, however imperfect. Because different configurations of social norms have repeatedly marginalized too many individuals, anti-normativity has become a buzzword in many academic circles. These efforts, too, obscure or neglect the many matrices that make living possible.

At the same time, a crucial point must be taken seriously. The mere fact of each of our dependency on others does not and cannot generate some kind of boundless obligation on each of our parts. We are discrete beings, living in bodies that have spatial and temporal limits. Our mutual dependence does not abrogate those limits, even as it binds us together in certain ways. We do not by virtue of our need for one another constitute a superbeing of some sort. We remain discretely situated, and that discreteness, too, deserves our attention. The boundary-drawing may be difficult at times, but such difficulty does not mean we can abandon the task.

As I have endeavored to make clear in this dissertation, there is little better site for trying to untie these conceptual knots than the pregnant body. There, we encounter discrete persons, each with their own proper bodies, their own limits, their own volitions. There is a relationship of deep dependency, which is not at all mutual, even as the pregnant mother does in fact benefit from the act of childbearing. The pregnant mother also herself becomes more deeply dependent upon others in the event of pregnancy. She relies on medical professionals and networks of

support that make it possible for her to maintain health and wellness in the midst of the challenge of childbearing. That every human being is a product of such efforts further underscores the germaneness of the case.

If we were to take this phenomenon more seriously, I suspect, we might also be able to recover our appreciation for the many matrices to whom we owe our existence. Surely, there are many theoretical questions to be considered as we look more closely at the phenomenon of pregnancy. Many, though not all, have been addressed in the preceding chapters. Further reflection is urgent. In any case, it is my hope that this dissertation might constitute yet another contribution to the effort to better appreciate matrices.

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