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## JUSTIFYING AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE TO THE VULNERABLE OTHER

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**Abstract:** Is it possible to justify requiring that I respond adequately to the other's vulnerability? I contend that insofar as I value my own personal identity it is consistent to respond adequately to the vulnerability of the other. Part one provides a break down of vulnerability in terms of its fundamental indeterminacy. Part two illustrates how the ability to respond either adequately or inadequately to the other's vulnerability is implied by the fundamental co-constitution of personal identity. I understand myself as a self only insofar as I stand in relation to other selves that see me as a self. If the relationship between recognition and identity also holds for the other, my response to her vulnerability founds her identity as well. In part three the relationship developed in part two is employed to justify the obligation to respond adequately to the vulnerable other. If I value my own personal identity, then I require an adequate response from others, because that response plays an integral role in the foundation of my personal identity. The other cannot respond adequately to my vulnerability unless her own identity is assured. Only if I respond adequately to the vulnerability of the other will she be in a position to assure my identity. Therefore, I ought to respond adequately to the vulnerability of others if for no other reason than it puts the other in a position where she can assure the personal identity that I value.

**Keywords:** *vulnerability, personal identity, indeterminacy, relational autonomy, feminist ethics, Emmanuel Levinas.*

Is it possible to justify requiring that I respond adequately to the other's vulnerability? By an adequate response to vulnerability I mean a response to the vulnerable other that respects her vulnerability and supports her personal identity. I contend that insofar as I value my personal identity it is consistent to respond adequately to the vulnerability of the other. Part one provides a break down vulnerability in terms of its fundamental indeterminacy. Part two illustrates how the ability to respond either adequately or inadequately to the other's vulnerability is implied by the fundamental co-constitution of personal identity. I am vulnerable to the other because the other has the ability to respond to me either adequately or inadequately, and I can never know how the other is going to react. The other is vulnerable to me for the same reason. It is my vulnerability, and the other's response to my vulnerability that either supports my identity or disrupts it. This kind of vulnerability is fundamental because the response of the other makes my identity possible. That is to say, I understand myself as a self only insofar as I stand in relation to other selves that see me as a self. If the relationship between recognition and identity also holds for the other, my response to her vulnerability founds her identity as well. In part three the relationship developed in part two is employed to justify the obligation to respond adequately to the vulnerable other. If I value my own personal identity, then I require an adequate response from others, because that response plays an integral role in the foundation of our identities. The other cannot respond adequately to my vulnerability unless her own personal identity is assured. Only if I respond adequately to the vulnerability of the other will she be in a position to assure my identity. Therefore, we ought to respond adequately to the vulnerability of others if for no other reason than it puts the other in a position where she can assure my personal identity.

### **PART ONE: VULNERABILITY AND THE ABILITY TO RESPOND: A RELATION FOUNDED ON INDETERMINACY**

All human beings are subject to ontological vulnerability. It is "a fundamental part of the human condition, (1) and I will demonstrate that at the heart of vulnerability is indeterminacy. Vulnerability is always vulnerability to that which I know not what. The fundamental indeterminacy of vulnerability is only resolved once I am undergoing a specific transgression. Vulnerability is transgressed when a painful or negative

happenstance that I am vulnerable to comes to pass. Once vulnerability has been fully determined, I am no longer vulnerable to that specific harm. I may be vulnerable to another harm, or the continuation or repetition of the harm that I am currently undergoing, but while my vulnerability is being transgressed I am no longer vulnerable to that particular transgression as the worst has already come to be. Once vulnerability has been transgressed it ceases to be vulnerability because it loses its fundamental indeterminacy in the specificity of transgression.

Consider the following example. Stacy has a body that is generally vulnerable to injury, death and decay. Her body is more specifically vulnerable to anaphylactic shock if exposed to peanuts. In the general case Stacy is vulnerable to any number of negative interferences with her body. However, when a car hits Stacy she is no longer vulnerable to being hit by this car. Rather, that particular vulnerability has been made determinate in its transgression. As a result, Stacy remains vulnerable to a wide variety of harms that have not been made determinate, being hit by another car for instance, or losing her shoes on the way to the hospital, but once vulnerability has been made determinate it is no longer vulnerability.

This is also the case with Stacy's more specific vulnerability. While a peanut allergy is much more determinate than general bodily vulnerability, it is still fundamentally indeterminate. While Stacy knows that peanuts will trigger her anaphylaxis, she does not know when or where or under what circumstances she might come into contact with peanuts. In this case it is not simply the timing of the event that is indeterminate, but Stacy's very vulnerability itself is a vulnerability only because it is indeterminate. While Stacy knows the direct trigger that leads to a transgression of her vulnerability, namely contact with peanuts, she is only vulnerable to this trigger insofar as it is fundamentally indeterminate how the trigger will appear for her. For instance, if it was the case that Stacy had a peanut allergy, but the only way for her to come into contact with peanuts is to enter one particular easily avoidable institution, and there is no chance of her running into peanuts in any other circumstance, it would be inaccurate to say she *is vulnerable* to peanuts. Rather we might say that she *could be* vulnerable to peanuts if circumstances were to change. It is my contention that if we had full access to the specific causes of vulnerability and perfect knowledge of how to avoid them then we could no longer claim to be vulnerable to those threats. It is the fundamental indeterminacy of never knowing exactly when or where or how one's

vulnerability can be transgressed that is at the heart of any definition of vulnerability.

Three factors contribute substantially to the fundamental indeterminacy of vulnerability. These include the endlessly vulnerable body, the unknowable and uncontrollable other, and the indeterminacy of my own capacity for resilience. The most straightforward way that indeterminate ontological vulnerability manifests itself is through the prone body, “for instance, my body is vulnerable to death, injury and decay.” (2) I am subject to the unspecified but inevitable decaying of my body. I am also prone to an array of possible injuries, or even death, as a result of my vulnerability to my environment.

A further instantiation of the characteristic indeterminacy of vulnerability is the indeterminacy of one’s own resilience. Even if someone were to know exactly what she was vulnerable to and the precise manner in which she might come into contact with that to which she is vulnerable, she can still never be certain of her own reaction to a transgression. Resilience here is meant to indicate “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks.” (3) While an individual may have a sense of her own ability to cope with a transgression of her vulnerability, she cannot know for certain if she can maintain functionality or her sense of personal identity on the face of a major transgression of her vulnerability. It may be possible that an individual has a high expectation of her ability to cope with a particular transgression, but when that transgression comes to pass and she is not resilient enough to cope, or the other way around. This lack of certainty regarding one’s own resilience further illustrates the indeterminacy of vulnerability. Even in the case that a vulnerable individual has perfect knowledge of the risks associated with her vulnerability, she still cannot know her own ability to cope with a transgression, and thus her vulnerability remains inherently indeterminate.

The fundamental indeterminacy that is at the heart of vulnerability is also at the heart of our interactions with others. In the introduction to *Vulnerability* Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds claim, “as embodied social beings we are both vulnerable to the actions of others, and dependent upon the care and support of other people.” (4) This suggests two ways in which I am vulnerable to the other. The first is my vulnerability as an embodied being and the second is my vulnerability as a social being. In the case of my embodied vulnerability to the indeterminate other, given

that my body is “fragile...[and] susceptible to wounding and to suffering” (5) in ways that I can hypothesize about, but never predict with certainty and given my contact with the other who is both powerful and unpredictable, I cannot know all of the things that she might do or fail to do that could hurt my vulnerable body. What defines ontological vulnerability is that to be human is to be open to the threatening unknown that Levinas describes as “an exposedness to the other” (6) and the other is inaccessible to me. Vulnerability is indeterminate because I am vulnerable to the other and the other is unknowable

It is not simply the case that I am vulnerable to one another in terms of my embodied nature; I am also vulnerable to the other as a result of my status as a social being. For instance, as a social being I am vulnerable to the denial of my personal identity by being “excluded by others.” (7) Insofar as people are inherently vulnerable, and inherently relational relating to others, “exposes us to the actions of others and may elicit a wide range of responses from them... this ambiguity is an ineradicable feature of the self-other relation.” (8) In each case the vulnerable person has no way of predicting how the other will respond, and there is always the possibility that the response will be harmful or inadequate. Thus, whenever I relate with another person all of our interactions are characterized by the fundamental indeterminacy that is at the heart of vulnerability.

For instance, when I wave hello to someone I solicit a response, and I have a specific expectation of what that response will be. I wave to Joan with the expectation that she will wave back to me. However, in relating with Joan I am putting myself in a vulnerable position because I do not know what her response will be, and it could very well be an unexpected or harmful response. Perhaps Joan will not wave back at me, maybe she will rush me with a hug that makes me uncomfortable, maybe she will punch me in the face, maybe she will not respond leaving me feeling like a fool. Here we can see the demand of vulnerability in action. Vulnerability demands a response such that even a non-response is a kind of response. In any case, my relation with the other leaves me vulnerable to her response to me. Vulnerability is inherently indeterminate. The body is endlessly vulnerable, resilience is unpredictable and the other is unknowable. As we will see this relationship of indeterminate vulnerability with the radical alterity of the other co-constitutes personal identity.

## PART 2: RELATING VULNERABILITY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

It is the relationship with others that makes possible my personal identity. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas argues, “identity here takes form not by self-confirmation, but, as a signification of the one-for-the-other.” (9) My understanding of the continuity of myself is only possible as a result of the other who looks at me. If I had no concept of an other who sees me, then I would have no reason to ever reflect on the continuity of my experience. Rather, I would go on directly experiencing with no trigger to reflect on my personal identity in terms of an enduring, holistic self. Peperzak comments that for Levinas “I am a human body of flesh and blood, simultaneously independent and pertaining to the Other.” (10) On this account the response of the other to my body founds my personal identity.

In her article on the narrative constitution of identity Somers argues, “all of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making.” (11) On this account personal identity is co-constituted through the participation of others that have produced the narratives that make up personal identity. As a result of being “embedded within and constituted by relationships and relationality” (12) the relationship between the response of the other and the constitution of personal identity functions such that any interaction between self and other demands a response.

The co-constitution of autonomy in relation with the other is illustrative of the kind of indeterminate and vulnerable relationship that co-constitutes identity as a whole according to both Somers and Levinas. In her discussion of autonomy in the first chapter of *Vulnerability*, Mackenzie claims that autonomy has a status component that is critical to its constitution. That is to say, a person cannot be autonomous without others confirming that autonomous status. She argues, “because this status dimension of autonomy is constituted intersubjectively in social relations of recognition, it is vulnerable to other’s failures, or refusals to grant us appropriate recognition in a range of different spheres.” (13) In order to be an autonomous individual, one must be considered an autonomous individual by others in the community. For instance, if a woman considers herself to be an autonomous individual but her community does not, she will be restricted from engaging in the kinds of actions that those who are considered autonomous in her community are

able to engage in. In a community where riding a bike is an important option, if women are prevented from riding bikes then their autonomy is thwarted.

Even more insidious than such attacks on practical freedom is the way that refusing to recognize an individual's autonomy restricts a person from developing autonomy at all. Without recognition as an autonomous individual from others, it is not possible for a person to develop any semblance of autonomy at all. For instance, consider the survivalist who is intent on making herself perfectly self-sufficient and autonomous. She grows her own food, chops her own firewood and crafts her own tools. Even in this case the survivalist will require a vast support network that allows her to live as she does. If she is chopping wood for a fireplace she may have needed others to build that fireplace. In any case she needed the person who discovered fire, and the person who taught her how to build a fire, and the knowledge of woodcutting techniques that also comes from others. As a condition of the possibility of autonomy a network of material and immaterial resources that are supplied by other people is required. Furthermore, the survivalist requires that her choice of how to live be respected by others. If people that are trying to convince her to live a different kind of lifestyle are constantly attacking her, then she will be unable to live an autonomous life. In other words, without recognition as autonomous the survivalist cannot be autonomous. Thus, if one is only recognized as a non-autonomous being then one is only able to be a non-autonomous being.

The status dimension of autonomy is not the only aspect of personal identity that is "constituted intersubjectively in social relations of recognition." (14) It is the case that a foundational component of a person's identity as a whole is constituted in terms of social relations of recognition. The manner in which others respond to me makes me who I am. MacKenzie sums up a relational view of identity constitution when she writes, "the internalization of non- or misrecognition can corrode the self-affective attitudes of self-respect, self-trust and self-esteem that underpin one's sense of oneself as an autonomous agent." (15) Proper recognition, that is an adequate response to my vulnerability, does more than found my sense of myself as an autonomous agent; it underpins my sense of myself entirely.

Given the relationality of personal identity, the vulnerability of the other absolutely requires a response. Levinas claims, "subjectivity is... a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the one-

for-the-others.” (16) Any response to the other’s vulnerability, even no response, provides a response to the vulnerable other because it is in my response (or non response) to the vulnerable other that my personal identity becomes determinate. Consider the following example, I see others as indeterminate, vulnerable, enduring personal identities, and as a result I am able to reflect on myself in terms of enduring personal identity. When I am faced with a vulnerable and enduring personal identity my response affects the way I understand my own personal identity. My response to the vulnerable other affects my understanding of my personal identity. My response to the vulnerabilities of others will be incorporated into the narrative of personal identity that I have for myself. For example, I can coherently maintain my personal identity as the kind of person who helps someone in need, only if when faced with that vulnerability I respond with compassion. Thus, every time I am faced with any vulnerable other a response is solicited and a response is given, and this interaction plays a foundational role in my personal identity.

### **PART 3: A JUSTIFICATION FOR ADEQUATELY RESPONDING TO THE VULNERABILITY OF THE OTHER**

I began by showing that what is at the heart of vulnerability is fundamental indeterminacy. I am vulnerable to that which I know not what, and that which I know not what could be harmful or inadequate to my needs. Furthermore, my own resiliency to transgression is indeterminate until I have been transgressed. As a result I cannot be sure of all of the ways in which I am vulnerable and the degree to which I am vulnerable. I went on to show that my vulnerability in the face of the other is the result of two things, the other’s fundamental indeterminacy, and the demand for a response that flows from the relational co-constitution of personal identity. Given a relational account of personal identity the other’s response to my vulnerability founds my personal identity. If my personal identity is secured by the other, and the personal identity of the other can be secured by me, and the other can only secure my personal identity if she has a secure identity herself, then it makes sense for me to support the other’s identity through an adequate response to her vulnerability so that she is capable of supporting my personal identity. If we value our identities we require an adequate response from others, and they require an adequate response from us.



Just as my personal identity is co-constituted by the others that respond to me, I also play the role as the other who responds to a given self. As such it is not simply the case that the other constitutes my personal identity. I also constitute the other's personal identity. In my introduction to this project I began with the question, what justifies the requirement of an adequate response to the vulnerability of the other? And it is here that the justification for an adequate response becomes clear.

**Premise 1:** We value our own personal identities.

**Premise 2:** If we value our own personal identities then we require responsibility from others.

**Premise 3:** The other cannot respond adequately to my vulnerability unless her own personal identity is assured.

**Premise 4:** If I respond adequately to the other then her own personal identity will be assured.

**Conclusion:** I ought to respond adequately to the vulnerability of others if for no other reason than it puts them in a position to be able to ensure my personal identity.

I take premise one, that we value our own personal identities, to be fairly self-evident. Particularly in our modern, western culture maintaining a sense of oneself as a coherent identifiable individual, expressing that sense, and having those around you confirm your sense of personal identity holds incredible weight. People travel to find themselves. They seek out therapists who can help them to get a better sense of their personal identities. They express themselves in art and fashion, and surround themselves with people who take them up as they wish to be taken up. However, a critic might argue for the possibility of destroying one's personal identity and the potential of a sort of freedom that comes with that. In response to this objection I would like to suggest a division between the notion of "no-self" that crops up in many Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions including Taoism and Buddhism, and an identity that has been shattered as a result of inadequate or harmful responses from others. In his article on selfhood and identity in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism David Ho introduces the reader to the notion of no-self through the master Chang-tzu, "In Chang-tzu, regarded as a mystic of unmatched brilliance in China, we find an explicit negation of the centrality of the self: 'The perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no achievement; the true sage has no name'." (17) This positive version of shedding personal identity is quite different than a personal iden-

tity that has been shattered as a result of inadequate or harmful responses from others. Selflessness in this sense is not achieved by having others shatter your identity, but by “developing an attitude that leads to acceptance of both life and death.” (18). That is to say, the person seeking selflessness takes action to rid themselves of their sense of personal identity. On the other hand, those who do not work to disrupt their own identities, but have their identities shattered by others, are no longer able to freely choose to rid themselves of their personal identities, nor can they respond to those others, all they can do is simply react. The difference between response and reaction will become clear in my defense of premise three.

I defend premise two part one and two of this article. I am vulnerable to the other because they represent a powerful fundamental indeterminacy. I do not know how the other is going to respond to me, and they have the power to respond to me inadequately. Given that my identity is relationally co-constituted, an inadequate or harmful response has the power to potentially disrupt my sense of identity. The outcome of a potentially harmful or inadequate response will depend on both the response itself, and the resilience of my identity in the face of a non-supportive response. For instance, if I have a secure sense of my identity as an accomplished academic and a colleague treats me in a condescending way, this might have very little impact on my sense of personal identity because my identity is resilient. However, if I am just beginning my career as an academic and my sense of myself as an accomplished academic is not very resilient, then condescending behavior from a colleague might severely disrupt my identity. Therefore, if I value my personal identity, then it will often be the case that I require an adequate response from others in order to maintain it.

In premise three I claim that the other cannot appropriately respond to my vulnerability, and thus secure my personal identity, unless her own personal identity is secured. In order for the other to adequately respond to my vulnerability in a way that supports my identity she must be capable of responding. A person without a coherent identity is unable to respond adequately because someone who does not have the foundational support of secure identity of her own cannot support my identity.

Consider the following example: Stacy is delivering a talk at a conference. The audience of this conference consists of some people who have a secure sense of personal identity and some people who have an insecure

sense of personal identity. After her talk Stacy is approached by Rebecca and Maka, they both thank her for her talk and tell her that she has done an excellent job. Over the course of the rest of the conference Stacy notices that Maka maintains a coherent personal identity throughout the conference, she likes some papers and dislikes others. Maka changes her mind about some papers but only after being given compelling reasons to do so. On the other hand Rebecca's personal identity is much less coherent; she likes every paper when she is talking to the author, but when she is with a group that dislikes one of the papers she changes her mind. Rather than having opinions, ideas or even mannerisms of her own she simply reflects those of whomever she happens to be with. When Stacy is considering her identity as an excellent writer and she reflects on the comments she received at the conference it is my contention that Maka's comments adequately respond to Stacy's vulnerability, and support her identity, while Rebecca's comments do not. Rebecca's incoherent identity means that she is not in a position to adequately respond to Stacy's vulnerability because Rebecca does not have a coherent identity to provide the foundation from which she can adequately respond.

This is not to say that in order to adequately respond to the vulnerability of the other in a way that supports her personal identity in every case it is required that the other must agree with the way that the self conceives of her identity. Maka could choose not to support Stacy's personal identity as an excellent writer and instead respond to her in a way that throws into question this component of Stacy's identity. However, even this response is adequate because it still supports Stacy's identity more generally. Maka could respond to Stacy's identity in a way that offers Stacy a reinterpretation of her identity, but in order to reinterpret Stacy's identity Maka must recognize and respond to Stacy's identity as it stands. However, Rebecca's disapproval of Stacy's paper is just as inadequate a response to Stacy's vulnerability as her acceptance of Stacy's paper, because there is no meaningful foundation from which Rebecca can respond to Stacy, rather she simply reacts to Stacy. It is my contention that in order for the other to respond adequately to my vulnerability, and thus found my personal identity, she must have a reasonably secure personal identity as a condition of the possibility of having a meaningful response.

Premise four is simply the reverse of the relationship that I illustrate in premise two. As an other relating with a self that has a relational iden-

tity, that self is vulnerable to my response. If I respond adequately to the other's vulnerability I support her identity, just as she supports my identity when she responds adequately to my vulnerability.

Thus, it is my conclusion that I am justified in requiring an adequate response to the vulnerable other because this is the only way that I can protect my own personal identity. If I support the identity of the other, then the other can choose to support my identity. If I do not support the identity of the other then there is no possible way that the other can support my identity. Any secure personal identity is capable of responding adequately to the vulnerability of any other identity. But without a secure personal identity, which requires that support of other secure personal identities, it is not possible for an insecure personal identity to respond adequately to any other identity. My personal identity is of value to me, so I ought to adequately respond to the vulnerable other.

Part one of this article presents and defends the fundamental indeterminacy of vulnerability. Part two illustrates the foundational relationship between responses to indeterminate vulnerability and personal identity. Finally, part three uses the relationship between indeterminate vulnerability and personal identity to provide a justification for why we are obligated to respond adequately to the vulnerable other. Namely, we ought to respond adequately to the vulnerability of others because assuring the other's identity is the condition of the possibility of my own identity.

## NOTES

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