

2017

## Are Second Person Needs ‘Burdened Virtues’?: Exploring the Risks and Rewards of Caring

Katharine L. Wolfe

*St. Lawrence University*, [kwolfe@stlawu.edu](mailto:kwolfe@stlawu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fpq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wolfe, Katharine L.. 2017. "Are Second Person Needs ‘Burdened Virtues’?: Exploring the Risks and Rewards of Caring." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3, (3). Article 4. doi:0.5206/fpq/2017.3.4.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Philosophy Quarterly by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [tadam@uwo.ca](mailto:tadam@uwo.ca).

## Are Second-Person Needs ‘Burdened Virtues’? Exploring the Risks and Rewards of Caring<sup>1</sup>

Katharine Wolfe

### Abstract

This essay contributes to the ethics of vulnerability and to the tradition of feminist care ethics by introducing the notion of second-person needs. Employing the work of Annette Baier, who argues that we are all ‘second persons’ insofar as personhood arises through a childhood in the care of others, it draws attention to the needs that are illuminated when we approach ourselves and others as second persons, and makes a case for the moral import of second-person needs. In drawing from and critically responding to Lisa Tessman’s concept of ‘burdened virtues,’ it also adds to a growing field of ethical work on moral damage. In particular, this paper reminds readers of the benefits of the virtue of sensitivity and attention to other’s suffering, without ignoring the toll that it can extract.

**Keywords:** feminism, ethics, vulnerability, need, second-person needs, burdened virtues

In “Cartesian Persons,” Annette Baier uses the term ‘second persons’ to capture a general truth about human dependency and relational life: we are all ‘second persons’ before we are ‘first’ persons. Baier explains: “My first concept of myself is as the referent of ‘you,’ spoken by someone whom I will address as ‘you.’ . . . The second person, the pronoun of mutual address and recognition, introduces us to the first and third” (Baier 1981, 186). The ‘second person’ is the mode of address through which we approach another not as ‘he,’ ‘she,’ an object or as an ‘it,’ but as a ‘you,’ that is, as a subject in relation to ourselves. To address another in the second person is to take up a relational attitude not only to that other but also to oneself; another is a ‘you’ for me only insofar as I am also a ‘you’ for another.

---

<sup>1</sup> A draft version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the New York Society for Women in Philosophy in June 2016, where I received powerful and provocative feedback from those in attendance. I owe my gratitude to these thoughtful commentators, as well as to the insightful referees who reviewed this essay anonymously for *Feminist Philosophical Quarterly*.

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* illustrates the relational power of the second-person mode of address. By writing in the second person, Rankine moves her readers from a standpoint of detached judgment concerning microaggression and systematic racism to one of personal investment and identification:

You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written. . . . The girl is Catholic with waist-length brown hair. You can't remember her name: Mary? Catherine? You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person. Sister Evelyn never figures out your arrangement perhaps because you never turn around to copy Mary Catherine's answers. Sister Evelyn must think these two girls think a lot alike or she cares less about cheating and more about humiliation or she never actually saw you sitting there. (Rankine 2014, 5–6)

Rankine's mode of address appeals to her reader to put herself into the place of the young black girl in this Catholic schoolroom, and not to stand objectively apart from the experience in a cold, objectively evaluative posture. Further illustrating the relational nature of the second-person mode of address, Rankine is unable to use the second-person standpoint as a rhetorical device without situating herself, either implicitly or explicitly, in relationship to the addressee.

This paper argues that being second persons means having a unique set of vulnerabilities and, among these vulnerabilities, a distinctive set of needs. I call these needs 'second-person needs.' Second-person needs express those aspects of our own good that are inseparably entwined with the good of others. Second-person needs occur when others' needs for care give rise to corresponding needs of one's own to care for them. In this way, second-person needs express our deep relational interdependency: the entwining of our welfare with the welfare of others makes responsiveness to others' needs an urgent and dire part of our own good.<sup>2</sup>

Working from within the wider framework of an ethics of vulnerability

---

<sup>2</sup> I develop the concept of second-person needs as a form of vulnerability in my 2016 article, "Together in Need: Relational Selfhood, Vulnerability to Harm, and Enriching Attachments" (*Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54 (1): 129–148).

informed by feminist care ethics, this paper also responds to Lisa Tessman's alarm call regarding the moral damage done by 'burdened virtues' in oppressive climates. While virtues are typically dispositions that aid in our own flourishing, and thus have a central role in ethics understood, in the Aristotelian sense, as the art of living well, Tessman's *Burdened Virtues* (2005) argues that there are some peculiar virtues that compromise the well-being of the one who has them at the same time that they may be ethically required of us all. I argue that some second-person needs are virtuous proclivities, developed through caring relations to others and sensitivity and attention to their suffering. Yet second-person needs are also vulnerabilities that can lead to devastating harm if neglected or abused, making them seemingly paradigmatic 'burdened virtues' in Tessman's sense. This risk is amplified when the care for others that these needs express and enact is itself uncared for in turn; that is, when second-person needs and the ethical appeals they make are unacknowledged and unsupported.

Indeed, insofar as second-person needs express a deep care for others that binds one's own welfare to theirs, the term 'burdened' could perhaps not be any more appropriately applied. One of the meanings of the word 'care' refers to being in a *burdened* state of mind, one of anxiety, fear, doubt, or concern. Yet, while it is undeniably painful to have a connected sense of self in a context where there is little or no social and political support for relational investments and where suffering is widespread and rampant, I widen Tessman's lenses on how oppression can undermine flourishing by contending that it is even more devastating to one's flourishing to have oppression succeed at severing the ties to others that allow one to experience second-person needs, even in an unjust and oppressive climate, than it is to maintain these embodied forms of connectedness. Moreover, I insist that second-person needs often contribute to one's flourishing despite their risks.

### **Virtue and Vulnerability**

In showing that another's good can also be an integral part of one's own, second-person needs confound individualistic thinking about human welfare. These needs are a testament to a relational dimension of human flourishing in which, in the words of Alasdair MacIntyre, "goods . . . are neither mine-rather-than-others' nor others'-rather-than-mine, but instead . . . can only be mine insofar as they are those of others" (MacIntyre 1999, 119). Insofar as second-person needs express the extent to which one's own good depends on the good of others, second-person needs are also a testament to the moral capacity for care. The moral capacity for care is, as Sarah Clark Miller explains, "the distinctive ability to adopt and advance another person's ends as one's own," a capacity that, according to Miller, deserves to be esteemed just as much as the capacity for self-determination deserves to be respected (Miller 2012, 77–78). Likewise, second-person needs express what Eva

Kittay has called the virtue of care: “a disposition . . . in which ‘a shift takes place from the investment in our life situation to the situation of the other, the one in need’” (Kittay 2001, 260; quoting Gastmans, Dierckx de Casterlé, and Schotsmans 1998, 53). Because second-person needs speak to an investment in others’ well-being so profound as to cause one’s own well-being to flourish or fall together with theirs, the one who experiences them is immediately and urgently moved by the interconnections between her own good and the good of others, unable to stand passively by as others suffer.

In *Protecting the Vulnerable*, Robert Goodin overturns the contractual view of ethical obligation as arising from the commitments one makes to others. By attending to our special responsibilities towards our friends and family members, as well as others with whom we establish special relationships throughout the course of our lives, Goodwin shows that *vulnerability*, and not self-assumed obligation, is the source of our ethical responsibilities (Goodin 1985, xi). The special relationships we have with others make strong moral claims upon us, not because we have elected to enter into them voluntarily, but because our special relationships with others make them uniquely vulnerable to harm as a result of our actions or neglect. Moreover, these special relationships often make us uniquely able to answer to others’ needs, protecting them from harm and/or exploitation.

If vulnerability is the basis of ethical obligation, we, as members of a moral community able to think, sense, and feel the ethical appeal, cannot ignore the unique forms of vulnerability that arise from one’s ties to others. The concept of second-person needs highlights a very special form of relational vulnerability, the importance of which is often overlooked not only in moral theory but also in daily life and public policy making. Having second-person needs heightens one’s vulnerability in the world, thus increasing one’s risk of harm and making demands on others to respond to needs one would not otherwise have—this is one way in which ‘second personhood’ makes ethical life more onerous.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, having

---

<sup>3</sup> I believe that all second-person needs, just insofar as they are vulnerabilities to harm, make ethical demands. Yet, as Soran Reader has argued, the one responding to second-person needs is also vulnerable, in that role, to being manipulated. Thus, Reader writes, “The moral agent’s skill includes the ability to judge in some cases that the right response to a claim of need is to challenge the claim—to question whether the satisfier is really needed at all” (Reader 2007, 83). Imagine here, for instance, the need to be needed, and the sense of vulnerability it might induce when someone for whom one has been caring no longer needs us (an example suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this article), the need for a Chanel handbag, driven by a consumptive capitalist culture, or the psychological need to lord power over a third party in order to rebuild one’s ego after having been treated as subordinate

second-person needs also opens us to many of the unique rewards of relational life. Moreover, these needs are expanded and strengthened through exercising the moral capacity, nay, the *virtue*, of care. In our current world of social and economic stratification, group oppression, and rampant individualism, we have an ethical responsibility to acknowledge second-person needs and the relationships from which they emerge, to care for second-person needs as they arise in others, and, in some cases, to make ourselves even *more* vulnerable to second-person needs than we may currently be by increasing our own sensitivity, receptivity, and ‘acknowledged dependency.’

I take the term ‘acknowledged dependency’ from Alasdair MacIntyre. Acknowledging one’s dependency means recognizing that protecting the welfare of others can go hand in hand with protecting oneself, as caring for another can also be an act of self-care. Caring for another in need *because* they are in need, for MacIntyre, can also be an expression of the virtue of “just generosity” insofar as one gives to another on the basis of need, not proportional return (MacIntyre 1999, 121). Yet to be virtuous, such an act of care cannot be merely rationally deduced. Instead, it must also be motivated by an affective entwinement of one’s own good with that of another: one must be pained by another’s distress. Such distress indicates the presence of a second-person need.

When other-regarding interests are intimately entwined with self-regarding ones, they are often discounted as unethical. Yet second-person needs defy any easy division between the good of the self and the good of others by challenging the self’s boundaries. While one might suspect that the strongest second-person needs will always be concerned with the welfare of those who are most near and dear to us, the testimonies of many Holocaust rescuers, collected in Gay Block and Malka Drucker’s *The Rescuers*, prove otherwise. Ermine Orsi testifies: “What I did during the war came naturally; because I had lost my mother I identified with the children who had sustained loss” (Block and Drucker 1992, 122). And Helene Jacobs:

I remember seeing soldiers everywhere, and feeling offended that they were a part of my world. I feel there is no difference between the self and the world, and the Nazis made it impossible for me to keep my world intact. . . . I am often asked how I had the strength to stand so firmly, in the face of such

---

oneself. Conversely, however, a morally appropriate response to another’s need cannot be paternalistic, unilaterally determining another’s needs and imposing that judgment without regard for the other’s protestations. As Reader explains, “The moral agent must . . . steer a fine course between the Scylla of manipulation and the Charybdis of paternalism” (84).

risk, on the side of the persecuted Jews. My answer is that I followed my drive for self-preservation. (150)

Jacobs adds, “Even if many among us did not notice it at all and did not want to notice . . . it directly concerned us, even if it was not directed against us” (149).

Moreover, while the risks for the rescuers were great, so too were the rewards. As Johtje Vos reports, “If someone heard us talk today with some of those we saved, they would think we were being nostalgic, remembering a beautiful time. But there was something beautiful in it, because we were standing together, for whatever reason, totally together” (83). Similarly, Semmy Riekert observes:

We had many good things during the war. One thing we had that still exists, and that we have nowhere else with other people, is that all of us who worked together feel we belong together. I think now, why do I feel so well after coming home from being with people from the Resistance? Even if they do things I don’t like now, still I feel good because I trusted them with my life, and they trusted me. It’s a bond. . . . You have been one body. If you heard that one was caught it felt like your arm was cut off. (77)

### **Vulnerability’s Demands**

In his recent Dewey Lecture, Edward Casey used the concept of second-person needs that I have developed in my work to describe his complex life-long relationship to his sister, Connie, who suffered from schizophrenia, while connecting it to the psychological practice of accompaniment: “A measure of how much I owe to my sister is the fact that her recent and sudden death left me bereft in a very special way: it made me realize how much I had come to need *her*—out of my own need to accompany her in her desperate life” (Casey 2016, 84). In the field of psychosocial psychology, to ‘accompany’ another means to forego the safety of one’s separateness, and to share in another’s “fate for a while” (Farmer 2013, 234; quoted in Watkins 2015, 326). As Mary Watkins explains, “accompaniment demands our capacity and willingness to experience the pain and struggle of those we accompany” (327). Speaking to accompaniment’s social and political relevance, she writes:

Too often when individuals and communities experience extremely difficult situations, others turn away with a blind eye. The initial insult is redoubled by others’ absence, by their failures of acknowledgment, empathy, and compassion. Accompaniment can be a needed antidote to the injuries caused by others’ passive bystanding or active denial of the human suffering in their midst. While accompaniment cannot wipe away the pain born of traumatic

injuries—individual or collective—it can begin to set into motion needed processes of psychic and social restoration. The one who accompanies turns toward rather than away from those suffering. The accompanier sees and acknowledges seeing what others turn away from. The accompanier brings his presence to what is difficult, allowing it to affect him, to matter to him, to alter his course. (330)

As Casey captures, having second-person needs, which express a deep entwinement between one's own good and the good of others, is one embodied way in which we accompany others throughout their trials in lives, and in which we share in their fate for a while. Bound by the need to stand beside his sister through her trials, Casey writes of Connie:

Being part of her troubled life gave me an education of its own, fully as valuable as my extensive formal education in philosophy itself. It was an education in the range of suffering on the part of those diagnosed as psychotic or schizophrenic. The suffering was not only mental; it extended to every domain of life, physical (obesity is rampant among this population due to the side-effects of antipsychotic drugs) and economic (most are living on a skimpy SSI check of less than \$1000 a month). And it included abusive treatment at the hands of uncaring caretakers. (84)

Connie's vulnerabilities as one suffering from the mental, physical, economic, and interpersonal hardships that plague the mentally ill in the contemporary US are certainly different from those of the caring brother who accompanied her through these trials. Yet Casey's second-person vulnerabilities—the vulnerabilities of one caring for a schizophrenic sister—are themselves a source of ethical demands, demands that call out to the larger interpersonal community for response. Just as Casey accompanies Connie, others are called upon to accompany him through the trials and tribulations that arise as he travels this precarious course together with his sister, for, as Eva Kittay argues in *Love's Labor*, all persons are entitled "to a socially supported situation in which one can give care without the caregiving becoming a liability to one's own well-being" (Kittay 1999, 66). Moreover, it is such social support that enables the caregiver to perform the work of care well.

Indeed, if vulnerability is the very basis of our sense of ethical imperatives, no vulnerability—second-person or otherwise—can be devoid of an ethical charge. Yet an ethics of vulnerability must be attentive not only to the harms done by failures to meet certain needs but also to the tolls extracted from those that attend to the needs of others. While having certain relational needs go unsatisfied can be utterly devastating, *answering* other such needs can be just as detrimental.

Responding to other's needs can become especially dangerous when relationships of responsibility are asymmetrical, with one party dehumanizing the other by exploiting his or her care to maintain an unjust relationship. A relational approach to need must be attuned to the vulnerabilities of those who extend care as well as those in need of it. While the ethical force of vulnerability is undeniable, *who* should respond to it and *how* they should respond are things that must be carefully weighed.

Kittay argues that both how one comes to be specially positioned to meet certain needs and how these needs arise matter to assessing one's ethical responsibilities to respond to them, especially if answering some needs undermines one's own moral worth (1999, 54–55). Kittay points out, for instance, that one can become especially well positioned to meet the needs of others through injustice and oppression, and that injustice and oppression can give rise to exploitative needs. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Miss Butler, the last surviving member of a family whose wealth was acquired through slavery, chooses to commit suicide rather than live a life in which the privileges slavery afforded her are lost. Having servants numbered among these privileges. In her psychological inability to endure life without such privileges, which eventually leads to her suicide, Miss Butler shows a deep vulnerability to harm and a genuine need for the service of others, yet to treat this need as one to which a response is morally obligatory on the part of those best situated to answer it—the servants she and her family have long exploited—would be perverse. Thus, Kittay argues that “[a] critical understanding of needs requires not only a sensitivity to the neediness of another and an understanding of how another may be vulnerable to one's own actions, but also a knowledge of when fulfilling those needs would morally diminish oneself or the other” (58).

This does not mean, however, that one cannot still feel ethically moved by a need like Miss Butler's, nor that such a sense of ethical motivation is a sign of moral ineptitude. In Morrison's novel, *Circe*, the last remaining servant to Miss Butler, lingers out of satisfaction in bearing witness to the degeneration of her estate, not care for her former master. In contrast, however, in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, a slave carries home his mortally wounded 'master,' injured fighting in defense of slavery in the Civil War. Balancing his sense of responsibility with his sense of justice, he exclaims: “Marster Johnny dying and he can't get home by hisself. I'll carry him home to his Maw where he can die in peace, but I sho ain't staying there” (Walker 2016, 222; quoted in Kittay 60). While considerations of justice must amend a vulnerability-based approach to ethics in order to protect us against any requirements to abase ourselves, even those needs that can only be met through our own moral degradation can still make ethical appeals. In “Two Dogmas of Moral Theory?”, Kittay writes:

I . . . deny the legitimacy of moral requirements that I have to care for someone when I am placed in that position through deeply unjust situations insofar as the person in that position is part of the unjust structure. But I do recognize that there can be a human being to human being relationship even in the condition of slavery, and that I can be called to respond to the person under my care qua another human being, rather than qua the oppressor who coerces my care. In such a situation, I may also have other obligations, not the least of which is an obligation to myself. Looked at this way, some situations of coerced care can issue in conflicting obligations in which there is a moral remainder no matter what I do. (Kittay 2016, 3)

The impetus for Kittay is not on denying the importance of forms of vulnerabilities that arise because of injustice, but rather on shifting our focus. The inclusion of considerations of justice within the mantle of a vulnerability-based approach to ethics requires just such a shift, a shift that draws our attention *towards the one called to respond*. Many vulnerabilities demand that one prioritize the needs of others over one's independent projects and goals, a demand that is part and parcel of their ethical force. But, explains Kittay, "the obligation owed to a person who must defer her own interests and projects is that her responsibilities to another not be unjustly thrust upon her. To disregard such an obligation is to treat her as someone of lesser moral worth than either the person she cares for or those who placed her in the obliging position" (1999, 65). This edict protects our connection-based equality, ensuring that we can give care without caregiving compromising our own well-being. When society fails to honor this appeal, it undermines the very core of a vulnerability-based ethics, for "the sanctity of the relation that makes possible all human connection is violated" (69).

### **Eudaimonistic Judgments**

Approaching second-person needs from the perspective of virtue ethics, we see an effect they have on one's whole person that might otherwise go overlooked. That second-person vulnerabilities can be lived, and not just objectively characterized, as needs speaks to the power of these vulnerabilities to form dispositions that compel one to act contrary to one's momentary desires or rational choices and to act instead in accordance with one's deeper relational ties and ethical dispositions. While second-person vulnerabilities are thus no different from first person ones in their potential to make ethical appeals, we here begin to see an additional ethical dimension of second-person needs. Developing certain second-person needs is a largely overlooked part of cultivating one's ethical character, albeit one that entails both risks and rewards.

In her work on the emotions, itself a subject of critique in Tessman's

*Burdened Virtues*, Martha Nussbaum argues that feeling compassion as well as other emotions such as love and grief entails an implicit “eudaimonistic judgment.”<sup>4</sup> A eudaimonistic judgment is a judgment that is concerned with one’s own flourishing (2001, 31). In the case of compassion, she explains, this judgment “places the suffering person or persons among the important parts of the life of the person who feels the emotion. It says ‘They count for me: they are among my most important goals and projects’” (2008, 10). In this respect, compassion defies impartiality; there is no compassion without *me* in it.

Nussbaum insists, however, that “Eudaimonism is not egoism” (2008, 10). The one who is *eudaimonistic* in her emotional life is not one who defends her own interests against others but who “make[s] herself vulnerable in the person of another” (2001, 319). The eudaimonistic judgment that underpins compassion is one that recognizes the interconnectedness of self and other by identifying another’s suffering as an impediment to one’s own flourishing, not one that reduces another’s good to a mere means of achieving one’s own ends. The partiality of this judgment does not make it an immoral one, although it does make it localized: compassion, like both love and grief, looks out upon the world from the perspective of one’s own life, and finds the world seen from that perspective blighted by others’ suffering.

In *Upheavals of Thought*, a work written in response to the death of her mother, Nussbaum unfolds these points through reflection on her own grief. She writes:

What inspires grief is the death of someone beloved, someone who has been an important part of one’s own life. . . . What makes the emotion center around this particular mother, among all the wonderful people and mothers in the world, is that she is *my* mother, a part of my life. . . . The notion of *loss* that is central to grief itself has this double aspect: it alludes to the value of the person who has left or died, but it alludes as well to that person’s relation to the perspective of the mourner. (2001, 31)

Nussbaum’s concept of a eudaimonistic judgment here captures the entwinement between one’s own good and the good of others that allows for second-person needs. It also captures the role that personal investments in another’s welfare play in this entwinement. For Nussbaum, it is only when someone is given a place of importance in relation to one’s own life that her well-being and one’s own can run

---

<sup>4</sup> Since it is the political implications of Nussbaum’s claims regarding compassion—and not the ethical ones—that most concern Tessman, Tessman’s objections to Nussbaum are not addressed here.

together. This goes beyond granting others dignity and intrinsic worth to include recognizing their value “as constituents of a life that is my life and not someone else’s” (32).

Nussbaum’s attention to the *eudaimonistic* ties that must bind one’s own good to the lives of others in order that the feeling of love, of compassion, or of grief occur can serve to better illuminate the virtue in many second-person needs as well as their ethical import. When the constitutive entwinement between one’s own welfare and the good of others breaks through one’s previous complacency with the imperative force of a demand that would improve the lot of those to whom we feel ourselves tied, protecting one’s own good together with theirs, one is moved by second-person needs. Second-person needs such as this demand that one not be a bystander to another’s harm, as such harm also threatens to shake the foundations of one’s own world.

If the virtues are those excellences of character that allow for a flourishing human life, determining what these virtues are requires considering what flourishing looks like for beings that need each other. The incredible moral and relational capacity to care for others so deeply that their good becomes a constitutive part of one’s own welfare is one of the virtues of dependent beings such as ourselves. Second-person needs enact this virtue when they assure that one’s own good cannot be maintained without also assuring the well-being of others.

### **Burdened Virtues**

Identifying certain forms of second-person needs as an expression of virtue begins a conversation with Lisa Tessman’s *Burdened Virtues*. In this insightful and provocative book, Tessman troubles easy assumptions about the good life by attending to the effects of oppression on virtuous dispositions. One of the dispositions that oppression burdens, according to Tessman, is “sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering,” something that must be present in order that second-person needs can arise (Tessman 2005, 84). In a world marred as ours is by immense amounts of preventable suffering caused by systematic injustice, Tessman questions whether it is possible for anyone to flourish while also caring for the suffering of others. She argues that although the trait of sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering is a fundamental moral virtue and remains so in the context of oppression, where it becomes all the more incessantly demanded, it hinders one’s own flourishing rather than promotes it because one cannot attend to other’s suffering without experiencing pain. Moreover, insofar as the current climate of rampant injustice and oppression calls for the ceaseless exercise of this sensitivity, this virtue paradoxically undermines—even *decimates*—the self.

Tessman begins her inquiry into this burdened virtue with a reflection on her own heightened sensitivity to the suffering of other's following the birth of her daughter. Tessman writes:

Immediately after my daughter was born, I began to experience—and still do though it has become blunted and much less constant—an excess of sensitivity to other's suffering. It was the fall of 2000, and an(other) intifada was starting up in Israel/Palestine; every night on the news there were scenes of Palestinian boys and young men being shot at, then bombed, by the Israeli Defense Force, and even more detailed portrayals of the Israelis who were killed or wounded. Watching it was anguishing; every person, especially but not only the young among them, was somebody's child, somebody's baby. I held my own newborn baby, Yuval, and envisioned in tiny flashes the terrifying and unbearable possibility that somebody might hurt her. With every new report of an injury or death I moved to imagining myself as that parent, losing my baby. All that loss! The level of pain was unfathomable. (81)

Tessman's reflection captures how the experience of caring for an intimate other can trigger a deepening of care for others at a much greater remove from one's intimate circle. Sara Ruddick has also commented on the expansive reach of care as experienced by mothers, beginning in an intimate relationship to a child and growing outward. She writes: "Keeping the world safe is human work and in no way the special responsibility of mothers. Yet I am not surprised when a mother testifies that her love requires a commitment to world protection nearly as demanding as the feeding, holding, and nursing of her infant," for the welfare of any infant ultimately depends on safeguarding the world (Ruddick 1989, 81). Moving beyond the strictly maternal paradigm, Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun, recounts a similar experience undergone by one of her students:

The father of a two-year-old talks about turning on the television and unexpectedly seeing the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. He watched as the fireman carried the limp and bloody bodies of toddlers from the ruins of the day-care center on the building's first floor. He says that in the past he was able to distance himself from other people's suffering. But since he's become a father, things have changed. He feels as if each of those children were his child. He feels the grief of all the parents as his own grief. (Chödrön 2000, 86)

Each of these testimonies, including Tessman's, speaks to the capacity for a wide-reaching sense of ethical responsibility to grow out of intimate experiences of caring for others. Reflecting on such experiences through the framework of Buddhist philosophy, Chödrön writes: "This kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, is the discovery of our soft spot, the discovery of *bodhichitta*. *Bodhichitta* is a Sanskrit word that means 'noble or awakened heart.' It is said to be present in all things. Just as butter is inherent in milk and oil is inherent in a sesame seed, this soft spot is inherent in you and me" (86). Care awakens the ethical heart.

Tessman argues, however, that a heightened sensitivity to other's suffering can be an overwhelming burden in our current world, one that is potentially devastating to one's own flourishing. In the passage above, she describes her enhanced sensitivity to violence and the loss of life after the birth of her daughter as an excess of sensitivity, language that marks it as a painful extreme rather than a happy Aristotelian median. She also describes such an excessive sensitivity as having to contend with an "unfathomable" amount of pain in the world today, illustrating the hardship that such sensitivity can entail for anyone whose life it colors.

While indifference to other's suffering "is morally horrifying" to Tessman, she argues that excessive sensitivity, such as that exemplified by her own experiences following her daughter's birth, "is psychically unsustainable" in our contemporary world (83). Thus, it seems that some limits must be placed on this sensitivity in order that one's own life not be undone. Nonetheless, where and when to draw these limits, and where and when to limit ethical responsibility to actively attend to the suffering of others is not clear (84). In the words of Sandra Bartky, a source of inspiration for Tessman: "On what basis can I offer myself to some sufferings and deny myself to others? And given the persuasiveness of suffering and the multitude of forms such suffering may take, how can I keep myself from getting so spent emotionally that I burn out and so turn out to be useless as a political agent?" (Bartky 1997, 180).

In a world where preventable human suffering were less rampant, there might be a simple solution to this ethical dilemma. One could be sensitive to every instance of suffering and actively attend to it without becoming, in Tessman's words, "so immersed in the boundless pain of others—and so exhausted with the efforts of ameliorating that pain—that no piece of the self is left free to experience joy or to flourish" (85). But this is not our world. In our world, with its grotesque abundance of remediable injustices such as oppression, economic exploitation, and more, even moderate sensitivity to injustice threatens to destroy the one who has it while anything less than perfect sensitivity and attention to other's suffering remains morally unsatisfying. "Suppose . . . that I open myself compassionately to a moderate number of those who are suffering," writes Tessman. "I feel with them

their hardships and the mistreatments they bear, and I am moved to intervene and struggle against the injustices that cause them to suffer” (85). As I focus my sensitivity and attention on the suffering of a limited population, I encounter enough pain here alone to overwhelm me with anguish at the same time that I coldly and condemnably turn my back on the suffering of countless others. According to Tessman, anyone who strives for virtue in the realm of sensitivity and attention to others suffering will thus be at once both too indifferent and too anguished, as the virtue of caring for others and the necessity of caring for oneself are rent apart by pervasive injustice and oppression (85). This precarious tightrope walk between indifference and anguish cannot be ignored if we are to name all forms of violence done to the human community through global injustice and oppression.

Further, while Tessman’s analysis stresses the heightened conflict between sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering and one’s own flourishing that arises in the context of global injustice, she doubts whether this disposition can make a seamless contribution to human flourishing in *any* climate. Tessman questions the potential for any “inherently painful disposition” to ever be a component of a flourishing human life, and any degree of sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering will always entail pain (90). As she writes, “Sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering involves taking on others’ pain, being pained by their pain; one’s actual felt pain is part of the response to the other that constitutes the morally recommended responsive action” (93). Indeed, it is because having this disposition cannot but detract from one’s own flourishing for Tessman that demanding an excess of it is a way in which oppression harms those who live in its midst (95).

Tessman does recognize that the exercise of some virtues demands that one risk the hardship of suffering pain—courage, for instance, often involves putting oneself in harm’s way. Moreover, part of the merit of these virtues lies in the willingness to face the pain they entail, something that it is much harder to do than it is to cultivate dispositions that only allow for pleasure. Yet she insists that this special merit does not keep these virtues from potentially detracting from one’s own flourishing. The disposition of sensitivity to others’ suffering may be virtuous, and so too may be having certain second-person needs. Yet these dispositions, according to Tessman, are likely to detract from a flourishing life rather than contribute to it, particularly if they are “especially in demand,” as is the case in the current world order of rampant human suffering due to injustice and oppression (94).

The disjunctive relationship between sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering and a flourishing life, together with the relentless demand for this disposition in the context of oppression, makes it a paradigmatic burdened virtue for Tessman: one of those “traits that make a contribution to human flourishing—if

they succeed in doing so at all—*only* because they enable survival of or resistance to oppression . . . , while in other ways they detract from the bearer’s well-being, in some cases so deeply that their bearer may be said to lead a wretched life” (96). Tessman argues that the struggle for liberation from oppression requires sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering. However, taking this virtue upon oneself weighs one down with pain, with anguish, and with the losses that come from self-sacrifice.

Experiencing second-person needs is an especially heightened form of sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering, for having second-person needs means that one’s own welfare is so intimately coupled with that of others that one will not only be pained by their pain, but may also be utterly devastated by it. Insofar as these needs must be coupled with pain or, at the very least, with its prospect, it would thus seem that they are counterproductive to one’s flourishing. Yet although Tessman presents sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering as a threat to one’s own well-being, it is not at all clear that a human life—the life of a social animal—can flourish *without* sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering even if having this disposition is a cause of psychic disruption, pain, and agony that one might otherwise avoid. To lack in this sensitivity or to be unmoved by it is to fail to authentically acknowledge one’s self-constitutive ties to others and to impoverish one’s life by stripping it of the relational connections that give it much of its meaning and that allow for many of its most precious joys, even if these connections can also cause pain.

In focusing on pain, Tessman is seeing only a part of the effect that sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering has on those who experience it. Sensitivity and attention to others’ suffering is an ethical disposition that can grow out of more immediate, interpersonal relations of care, of which second-person needs are an especially deep expression. Caring deeply enough about others to have these needs means that one’s well-being has come to depend on theirs. This interdependency allows for others’ joys—and not just their pains—to be redoubled in one’s own, and for one’s own life to be enriched through others’ triumphs. While second-person needs intensify the pain that others’ suffering causes, the joys they also bring to our life may make this cost worthwhile. As Pema Chödrön writes:

We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering we are being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, and more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. This separation becomes like a prison for us, a prison that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears and to caring only for the people nearest to us. Curiously enough, if we primarily try and shield ourselves from discomfort, we suffer. . . . Unwise people think only of themselves, and the result is confusion and pain. Wise selfish people know that the best thing they can do

for themselves is to be there for others. As a result, they experience joy. (Chödrön 2000, 88)

Insofar as we are the kinds of animals that depend on one another, caring for others is not fundamentally at odds with caring for ourselves; instead, it can be one of the deepest forms of our own self-care. Certainly, our affective ties to others make us vulnerable in the world in ways that we would not be otherwise, and making others' ends our own makes us susceptible to being harmed ourselves when others are harmed. Moreover, there may be times when we are forced to sever our ties to others in order to protect ourselves, but this detachment is often also self-devastating because our bonds to others are a part of our own good, and not just an empty liability to harm.

### **The Devastation of Disaffection**

Reflecting on Tessman's account of the "burdened virtue" of sensitivity and attention to others' suffering, the virtue that so clearly underpins the ability to experience second-person needs, I am repeatedly struck by the vast demand for this virtue in the current climate of global injustice and widespread oppression that it reveals. After all, as she emphasizes, for someone to be coldly indifferent to *any* instance of human suffering is morally abhorrent. Tessman's work also brilliantly exposes the harm oppression does to those who are sensitive and attentive to others' suffering by populating our world with an endless amount of that suffering, never letting us rest safely in the pleasures that our caring connections to others bring for the constant onslaught of violence against either those near and dear to ourselves or those distant others to whose pain our intimate bonds can heighten our own sensitivity. So too am I struck by the potential risk Tessman alerts us to for one's own life to be devastated by second-person forms of vulnerability in a world where the suffering of others is incessant. Yet even in such a bleak and hostile external climate, to be disaffected by others' suffering must be recognized as a form of *eudaimonistic* loss and not merely an ethical failure. As Nussbaum's concept of *eudaimonistic* judgments helps to capture, second-person needs are able to arise because, as relational animals, human beings are the kinds of beings whose flourishing depends on the flourishing of others. Our self-constitutive investments of care in the welfare of others give rise to some of our deepest vulnerabilities to harm just because we are relational selves.

Yet, for the same reasons, to have one's ability to attend to the needs of others systematically restricted by oppressive social or political systems is one of the most heinous harms that a human being can be made to suffer. Caring for others is vital to our own flourishing; it is a constitutive part of a healthy relational life—a life that is tied to others in anguish but also in joy. Inevitably, second-person needs

introduce a unique form of vulnerability into our lives through the connection-based harms to which they expose us. However, they are also a profound expression of the constitutive connections of care to others that make a human life more than an empty shell.

Indeed, it may be those who have been targeted by the machinations of systems of social violence that are most attuned to the immense value in such relational connections, having intimately experienced the traumatic decimation of the relational and ethical self that can result from assaults on second-person forms of vulnerability and need. Testimonies such as that of Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, reveal that a life can be devastatingly blighted by the systematic diminishment of the ability to sustain both caring and ethical connections to others just as much—if not more—than it is harmed by sustaining these connections despite the pain entailed. Reflecting on the rash of suicides that followed liberation from the camps and the feeling of shame to which many survivors attested prior to taking their own lives, Levi writes:

Few survivors feel guilty about having deliberately damaged, robbed, or beaten a companion. Those who did so . . . block out the memory. By contrast, however, almost everybody feels guilty of having omitted to offer help. . . . The demand for solidarity, for a human word, advice, even a listening ear, was permanent and universal but rarely satisfied. There was no time, space, privacy, patience, strength; most often, the person to whom the request was addressed found himself in his turn in a state of need, entitled to comfort. (Levi 1998, 78)

It is a deep and devastating *eudaimonistic* loss to not be able to build, maintain, or honestly acknowledge the constitutive ties to others that make the good of one person a vital component of the good of others, something that especially severe forms of oppression attempt to wrench away from their subjects through the exploitation and abuse of one's needs. Through Levi's testimony, we are able to witness the appalling social violence that occurs when one's ability to care for others is systematically assaulted as a means of undermining one's humanity, an assault on the firmament of the ethical self that many of those interned in the Holocaust camps were forced to endure.

Lisa Guenther's recent book, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, names such violence as a form of 'social death,' a concept first developed by Orlando Patterson in a study of slavery. Social death decimates one's intersubjective life through systematic acts of oppression that target the connection-based existence of the relational self. As Guenther explains, Patterson argues that the slave system—a paradigm example of a system geared towards the

social death of its subjects—sought to reduce the multivalent web of social relationships giving human life meaning to a single relationship of domination: the relationship to one’s master. In Guenther’s words, “This reduction not only circumscribes the slave’s personal freedom and exposes them to radical domination by the master, since they are no longer protected by a network of kin who would intercede on their behalf, it also bans slaves *from interceding on behalf of others*” (Guenther 2013, xxii; emphasis added).

One of the most devastatingly painful parts of the total assault on the intersubjective dimensions of selfhood that results in social death is its attack on the ability to come to the aid of those for whom one most cares, an attack which is often also an assault on one’s deepest second-person needs. The violence of this assault is captured in the words of a former American slave, Mr. Reed:

The most barbarous thing I saw with these eyes—I lay on my bed and study about it now—I had a sister, my older sister, she was fooling with a clock and broke it, and my old master taken her and tied a rope around her neck—just enough to keep it from choking her—and tied her up in the back yard and whipped her I don’t know how long. There stood mother, there stood father, and there stood all the children and none could come to her rescue. (Rawick 1972; quoted in Guenther xxii)

The assault on the precious capacity “to respond to the others who matter most” is one of the most effective maneuvers of the systematic violence that aims to exact social death (xxiii). In Guenther’s analysis, this assault is the lynchpin of a system that “seeks to undermine . . . social, ethical, and political subjectivity . . . at the very sight of its emergence”, that is, in self-constitutive connections of care (xxiii).

The *eudaimonistic* connections between self and others that Nussbaum’s work on the emotions captures—the same connections that lie at the heart of the capacity to experience second-person needs—reveal the danger in experiencing another’s welfare as a constitutive part of one’s own good in climates that assault the deep connections of relational life and the unique second-person vulnerabilities they entail. *Eudaimonistic* connections, as the word itself implies, play a vital role in human flourishing yet can simultaneously expose us to the agonizing pain of having the suffering of others tear our own lives apart; although without these constitutive ties to others our lives would be deeply impoverished, it is also because of these constitutive ties that another’s suffering can be the source of one’s own life-shattering agony and another’s death, as was that of Nussbaum’s mother for Nussbaum, the cause of “a gaping hole in [one’s] own life” (Nussbaum 2001, 82). Tessman is certainly right that it is painful to maintain a connected sense of self in the context of oppression. Yet it may be more painful still to have oppression

succeed at severing one's ties to others than to continue to care, and to be moved by second-person needs, even in oppressive climates. It was, after all, oppression's victories against his relational and moral personhood, and not the painful persistence of these dimensions of his personhood despite the Holocaust camps' horrific assaults against them, that left Primo Levi deeply haunted and ultimately unable to go on in his own life. As he writes, "When it was all over, the awareness emerged that we had not done anything, or not enough, against the system into which we had been absorbed" (Levi 1988, 76). Yet despite the limitations of her negative take on how caring for others affects one's own good, Tessman's work helps us to see what this last line from Levi suggests: that maintaining the intimate connections to others that allow for their welfare to be a constitutive part of one's own good is indeed a crucial virtue for those committed to liberatory struggles, for maintaining these investments is an immeasurably powerful act of resistance against oppressive systems that target the ethical self.

Further, Tessman's attention to the moral damage caring persons endure in oppressive climates can be taken up in order to strengthen the case for our ethical and political responsibilities towards those who experience second-person needs and vulnerabilities. Together with the capacity to care for others so intimately as to make their good a constitutive part of one's own flourishing comes the additional second-person need to have this precious moral ability supported by one's larger social and political community. Without this support, the virtue of caring for others so deeply as to tether one's own welfare to theirs can have devastating costs. As Kittay insists, every caretaker "is entitled not to a reciprocity from the charge herself, but to a relationship that sustains her as she sustains her charge"—a principle of social cooperation that she names *doulia*, after "the postpartum caregiver (a *doula*) who assists the new mother as the mother cares for the infant" (Kittay 1999, 68).

### **Coda: Further Questions**

The testimonies of both Reed and Levi also reveal that the very precious relational ability to experience another's good as a constitutive part of one's own flourishing is often the prime target of systems of violence that seek to destroy the social self. Still, as Tessman suggests, for those whose lives are most affected by systematic oppression, the prospective harms to which some second-person needs expose one may be too high a cost to pay for the meaningful human connections to which they attest. For this reason, being able to be vulnerable in the connection-based ways that second-person needs entail may be a luxury that not everyone can afford. If this is so, how could it be just to make maintaining, and even cultivating, second-person needs an ethical obligation, as seems to be implied in suggesting these needs can be virtuous dispositions? Certainly, some of those targeted by the

machinations of systems of social death have found the strength necessary to maintain non-oppressive relational ties, a profound act of resistance in the service of liberation. But is doing so something that can be ethically *required*?

A second question is whether cultivating second-person needs might be much more generally a form of privilege in contemporary times, something reserved for those whose lives are relatively unscathed by global forms of injustice and oppression? Is maintaining and developing these connection-based needs a kind of “bourgeois morality,” to take a term from Marx, which only those whom First World privilege has sheltered from bearing the unbearable pain of being a daily witness to the decimation of other’s lives through poverty, hunger, or illness can afford to maintain? In a recent discussion I had with students on the ethics of vulnerability, one of them spoke of her experience volunteering in a hospital in the Philippines the previous summer. She had been struck by a climate of apathy in the hospital, something that she eventually came to attribute to the extreme lack of resources and its effect on the medical staff’s ability to care for their patients. While alarming, such disaffection can be a crucial coping mechanism for those who are the targets of the gross social and economic injustices of global capitalism and rampant neoliberalism, injustices which often cripple the capacity to translate one’s care for others into effective action to remediate their suffering. Should those who truncate their affective care for others in order to be able to go on, day after day, performing the labor of care in a context where global injustice has effectively tied their hands be chastised for it?

These ethical issues cannot be adequately addressed without a wide-angled, globally mindful approach to the problem. Yet only a relational approach is able to see the moral damage done to those whose abilities to care for others are impaired as a global failure in both care and ethical responsibility. Anytime one is able to respond to another’s ethically demanding needs and fails, that failure is a moral one. The *need to care for others* is one such ethically obligating need, a need we all share as second persons. In naming this harm, we make it possible to begin the work of ameliorating, on both the local and the global level, the moral damage done by having one’s capacity to care for others impaired by injustice and oppression.

For some, such disaffection may be a survival strategy, a means by which one preserves just enough of one’s emotional, ethical, and relational resources each day to be able to extend care to those who need it most from them. For others, disaffection is a method of preserving one’s privileges, deadening one’s receptivity to the needs of others and willfully entertaining the conceit that one’s own privileges cannot be “located on the same map as [others’] suffering” (Sontag 2003, 103). The two cannot be treated as ethically comparable. Yet regardless of the reasons for it, a life severed from affective ties to others, and thus short on compassion, love, and the bonds of personal investment in others’ lives that allow

one to grieve over their deaths as well as rejoice in their successes, can hardly be described as a flourishing one.

### Works Cited

- Baier, Annette. 1981. "Cartesian Persons." *Philosophia* 10 (3–4): 169–188.
- Bartky, Sandra. 1997. "Sympathy and Solidarity: On a Tightrope with Scheler." In *Feminists Rethink the Self*, edited by Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Block, Gay and Malka Drucker. 1992. *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers.
- Casey, Edward. 2016. "A Life in Philosophy in Several Stages." *Proceedings and Addresses of the APA* 90:71–89.
- Chödrön, Pema. 2000. *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Boston: Shambala.
- Farmer, Paul. 2013. *To Repair the World: Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gastmans, Chris, Bernadette Dierckx de Casterlé, and Paul Schotsmans. 1998. "Nursing Considered as Moral Practice: A Philosophical-Ethical Interpretation of Nursing." *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 8:43–69.
- Goodin, Robert E. 1985 *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Guenther, Lisa. 2013. *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Kittay, Eva. 1999. *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. "When Caring Is Just and Justice Is Caring: Justice and Mental Retardation." *Public Culture* 13 (3): 557–579. doi:10.1215/08992363-13-3-557.
- . 2016. "Two Dogmas of Moral Theory? Comments on Lisa Tessman's *Moral Failure*." *Feminist Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1): 1–11. doi:10.5206/fpq/2016.1.3.
- Levi, Primo. 1988. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Vintage Books.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1999. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Miller, Sarah Clark. 2012. *The Ethics of Need: Agency, Dignity, and Obligation*. New York: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2001. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- . 2008. "Compassion: Human and Animal." Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, Special Lecture 4, July. <http://idsk.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/SL-4.pdf>.
- Rankine, Claudia. 2014. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
- Rawick, George. 1972. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Reader, Soran. 2007. *Needs and Moral Necessity*. New York: Routledge.
- Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.
- Tessman, Lisa. 2005. *Burdened Virtues: Virtues Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walker, Margaret. 2016. *Jubilee*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Watkins, Mary. 2015. "Psychosocial Accompaniment." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3 (1): 324–341. doi:10.5964/jspp.v3i1.103.

KATHARINE WOLFE is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. Her recent work focuses on feminist approaches to ethics, existentialism and phenomenology, and issues in bioethics. Recent publications include "Together in Need: Relational Selfhood, Vulnerability to Harm, and Enriching Attachments" (*Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54 (1): 129–148) and "Mutual Dependency and the Ethics of Home Birth" (<http://impactethics.ca/2014/05/13/mutual-dependency-and-the-ethics-of-home-birth>).