

Erinn Gilson

The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice

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Erin Gilson's discussion of vulnerability is a comprehensive and insightful analysis of an ethical perspective that has been the focus of many contemporary discussions of ethics. She reviews the recent literature on vulnerability with particular attention to feminist contributions. She concludes with a set of prescriptions outlining where future discussions should go. Her work constitutes a significant contribution to this literature.

At the center of Gilson's analysis is her thesis that vulnerability is fundamental, pervasive, and shared. It is defined by openness and the fact that one is affected in ways that one cannot control. She argues that if vulnerability means being susceptible to pain, it follows that we have an ethical obligation to diminish vulnerability. The focus of her work is how we think, talk, and feel about vulnerability as a feature of life that merits ethical concern.

Gilson begins her analysis with the assertion that the principal error of most discussions of vulnerability is a wholly negative definition of the concept. Her means of challenging this erroneous definition is to expose the ideal of invulnerability and its dichotomous relationship to vulnerability. This is where feminist critiques are particularly useful. Exposing the masculinist ideal of invulnerability has a long history in feminist theory. Feminist analysis thus opens the way for a more positive definition of vulnerability and the ethical implications of such a definition.

Two recent accounts of vulnerability occupy Gilson's attention in the first part of the book, those of Alasdair MacIntyre and Robert Goodin. For Gilson, MacIntyre's account is valuable in that it focuses on embodiment, a key element in the ethics of vulnerability. But Gilson argues that ultimately he fails to detach vulnerability from its connection to the negative connotations of weakness and suffering. Robert Goodin's account has a similar liability. Although Goodin links vulnerability and responsibility in useful ways, he also defines vulnerability in terms of dependency. In both cases Gilson argues that the negative definition of vulnerability prevents an adequate understanding of responsibility for others that must be the center of the ethics of vulnerability.

To rectify this, Gilson turns to feminist discussions of vulnerability, particularly that of Judith Butler. Butler's work on vulnerability is the focus of her recent work on ethics. The significant advantage of Butler's account, Gilson claims, is that it presents a more complicated picture of the relationship between vulnerability and normativity. For Butler, we are vulnerable because we are

beings who are what we are because of our relations with others. Furthermore, those relations are structured and constrained by the normative dimensions of our lives. For Butler, vulnerability is closely connected to the precariousness that defines human life. Although Gilson embraces Butler's account as an improvement over previous discussions, she asserts that precariousness is narrower than vulnerability. She also criticizes Butler for being too abstract, for failing to account for the practical aspects of vulnerability.

In the next section of the book Gilson links her discussion of vulnerability to two topics that are at the forefront of contemporary ethics: the epistemology of ignorance and what she calls entrepreneurial subjectivity. The first discussion works very effectively. The epistemology of ignorance is closely tied to the pursuit of invulnerability and the denial of vulnerability. The norm of invulnerability that informs much of the epistemology of ignorance leads to many varieties of oppression. It is the unacknowledged status of invulnerability that makes it particularly pernicious. This section of the book constitutes a significant contribution to contemporary ethical discussions. Linking two important aspects of ethical analysis provides insights that are not available to discussions of either topic singly.

The discussion of entrepreneurial subjectivity and risk is less successful. Gilson's thesis is that entrepreneurial subjectivity results in individuals becoming increasingly averse to vulnerability, and the responsibility for risk is privatized. Gilson's question is how the disposition toward risk cultivated in a neo-liberal context facilitates abnegation of responsibility in relation to vulnerability. Entrepreneurial subjects, she asserts, must both court and avoid risks.

The most valuable aspect of this discussion is Gilson's analysis of the privatization of risk and how this prevents us from acknowledging vulnerability. Her example of personal health is particularly insightful. We tend to define personal health as a private matter. Thinness and obesity, in particular, are defined as the personal responsibility of the individual. What is left out of this equation is a consideration of the structural conditions of our society that either make possible or prevent the availability of healthy foods and the pursuit of a healthy life-style. The prevalence of junk food is a major cause of much ill health in our society. This is a structural consideration over which many individuals have little control.

The problem with this section is that Gilson does not sufficiently clarify the connection between entrepreneurial subjectivity, risk, and vulnerability. In a long discussion of Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, for example, Gilson loses her way. She fails to make entirely clear the nature of the connection between disciplinary power, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and vulnerability. It seems in this section that Gilson is trying to fit everything under the rubric of vulnerability whether it fits or not.

The argument picks up, however, in the final section, "Rethinking Vulnerability." Turning to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, and H el ene Cixous, Gilson proposes a definition of vulnerability that definitely rejects the negative definition. She advances a conception of vulnerability as openness to the world as a primordial and constitutive form of relationship. Two themes emerge here: first, that we do not all live our vulnerability in the same way, and, second, that vulnerability and ambiguity emerge in experience. Although she does not state it explicitly, these discussions act as a counter to the excessive abstractness of Butler's account. Vulnerability is brought down to the practices of life, practices that are diverse among persons.

The last chapter takes on one of the thorniest issues in feminism: pornography. Gilson's goal is to move beyond the stalemate in feminist discussions between the pro-sex and anti-porn positions. Her discussion is complicated and largely effective. On one hand she makes a strong case that the anti-porn camp identifies femaleness with vulnerability and thus deprives women of agency. The pro-sex feminists, on the other hand, attribute too much autonomy to women in asserting that women can choose their sexuality. They ignore the powerful forces that constitute sexuality and its pleasures for women. Overall she makes the point that sexuality is a unique instance of vulnerability for women. It exemplifies the ambiguity of vulnerability in a particularly intense way. She concludes that this is why the issue of pornography is so difficult for feminists even though the sex wars have cooled.

That Gilson's analysis of the ethics of vulnerability is a valuable contribution to contemporary discussions of ethics is without question. Her argument is clear and forceful. She brings the issue of vulnerability to the forefront of contemporary ethics. Her emphasis on the feminist contribution to this literature, furthermore, is especially significant. She makes a convincing argument for the centrality of feminist thought to discussions of vulnerability in particular and contemporary ethics in general. She challenges the marginalization that characterizes feminist ethical thought by providing an alternative conception.

But two questions remain. First, although vulnerability is without doubt central to ethical thought, neither Gilson nor the other theorists of vulnerability offer a convincing argument as to why it is more central than any other perspective. Vulnerability is a valuable lens through which to view ethics, but is it the best or only lens? Many other perspectives have been suggested in equally compelling terms as the one and only proper ethical perspective. Most notably for feminists, care ethics has made a similar claim of importance. What is lacking here is an irrefutable argument that establishes vulnerability as superior to the other alternatives.

The second, and related, question is whether we should attempt to define the *one* ethical perspective that trumps all the others. Is seeking the one true ethics the best way to approach ethical questions? Perhaps a better approach would be to tailor ethical perspectives to particular ethical problems. That vulnerability is an extremely valuable perspective is obvious, particularly in the contemporary world. Does this rule out the possibility that in some ethical circumstances another perspective might be more useful? My point is that attempting to subsume all human ethical situations into one framework may not be the most productive approach. Perhaps we should stop trying to find the one true ethics and focus instead on a variety of ethics.