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Simone Drichel

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## Introduction

# Reframing Vulnerability: “so obviously the problem...”?

*Simone Drichel*

I'm prepared for everything, I'm armed against everything, nothing will hurt me anymore. I've become invulnerable. Like Siegfried, I have bathed in dragon's blood, and no linden leaf has left a single spot of me unprotected. I'm inside this skin for the duration. I will die inside my invulnerable shell [ . . . ].

—Christoph Hein, *The Distant Lover*

### **“so obviously the problem ...”**

Discussing Freud's reflections on helplessness in “The Helpless,”<sup>1</sup> the second of four small essays on what he calls, with a nod to John Keats, our “Negative Capabilities,”<sup>2</sup> prominent British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes, “all of what we think of as our moral problems spring from the fact that we are helpless subjects. And helplessness, or our relation to it, is something Freud thinks we need to get right.” We do “the very worst things,” Phillips continues, “when we get it wrong; we start doing things like believing in God, or abiding by religious teachings, or adopting preposterous moralities. Or punishing / exploiting other people's vulnerabilities or ideologies, or believing that we are exceptional creations rather than just another species of animal” (144). Given this rather bleak scenario, the stakes in getting helplessness right could hardly be higher. But what does it mean to get helplessness right? What does it mean, even, to be helpless? And are these in fact the right questions, the right terms, in the context of a special issue on vulnerability? Is being vulnerable the same as being helpless? Or have we taken a wrong turn already, in the opening paragraph, before we have even had a chance to get under way in our consideration of vulnerability?

Adriana Cavarero, for one, may certainly object that we have. According to her, “although the scene of infancy links them and makes them coincide, ‘vulnerable’ and ‘helpless’ are not synonymous terms” (30). As infants we are both helpless and vulnerable; however, while we outgrow helplessness, we are never not vulnerable: “vulnerability is a permanent status of the human being, whereas finding oneself helpless [ . . . ] depends on circumstances” (31).<sup>3</sup> And yet Phillips, by contrast, seems to have no qualms about using the terms interchangeably: positing “invul-

nerability" as "the opposite of helplessness" (130), he implicitly equates helplessness with vulnerability and, unlike Cavarero, further proposes that we may think of helplessness not as something we grow out of but "as something we grow into," asking, "what if we thought of ourselves as getting progressively more helpless as we got older? And of helplessness as something we grow into, partly by becoming aware of it?" (156). Helplessness, in this reading at least, appears to be coterminous with vulnerability, suggesting that we are perhaps not necessarily on the wrong track if we follow Phillips a little further on his foray into understanding what it might mean to get helplessness right.

According to Freud, says Phillips, helplessness "is the most important thing about us" (140). Our helplessness is both original and constitutive: as infants we depend on our caregivers for physical and emotional survival; and although our needs and desires certainly evolve and change shape as we mature, we cannot ever be said to grow out of them.<sup>4</sup> And neither should we want to, Phillips argues; that, in fact, is the point his essay aims to demonstrate: "I want to consider in this essay," he says, "Freud's story about helplessness with a view to making a case for it; that is, as a case for helplessness as something we shouldn't want to think of ourselves as growing out of" (130). Crucially, the very fact that a case needs to be made for helplessness signals, of course, that it is more commonly thought of as a state we would very much like to grow out of—a fact Phillips himself takes as a starting point for his discussion in the first essay in the "Negative Capabilities" series, "The Horse":

Our lives are always threatening to be too much for us; what Strachey [in his introduction to Freud's *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*] calls "the accumulation of excitation" is what renders us helpless. In this picture we are always at risk of being overwhelmed by ourselves; our helplessness is our inability to master, to bind, to bear (to represent) this excitation. In this ongoing crisis of overexcitement, at least in this picture, our helplessness is so obviously the problem that it cannot be seen as the solution to anything. (121-22)

It is precisely because helplessness seems "so obviously the problem" that we wish we could grow out of it. It is "starkly what we need to defend ourselves from": the vulnerable core of us that we prefer to disavow. As a result of this defensive disavowal, Phillips suggests, "we have lost our ambivalence about our helplessness; it is described now only as something we hate, not as something we could ever love." Given this lopsided state of affairs, Phillips asks,

If it might seem naïve to write in praise of our helplessness, it is surely worth wondering, from a psychoanalytic point of view, why we experience it as a fatal flaw. Or, to put it slightly differently, why it is so difficult, in secular language, to describe our helplessness as a gift as well as a curse. (122)

Why, indeed, is it so difficult to think of helplessness as something to be embraced—desired even—rather than disavowed? Why do we fear our helplessness so much that we shrink away from something so fundamental about ourselves? I will return to these questions, and the answers Phillips proposes, in a little while; for now, I want to redirect our gaze and focus it more directly on the question of vulnerability, which, I suggest, is faced with a similar loss of ambivalence.

That vulnerability, like helplessness, is conventionally conceived of rather *non*-ambivalently has been a well-established fact in the critical literature for at least a decade. As far back as 2002, Margrit Shildrick noted that, “in western modernity at least, vulnerability is figured as a shortcoming, an impending failure” (71), where “the wholly negative notion that to be vulnerable is to be open to harm” gives rise to ideals of “impregnability” or “distinction and separation” (77, 75). Echoing Shildrick, Erinn Gilson more recently suggested that “the conventional and tacitly assumed understanding holds”—and this is a point many contributors to this special issue take as their point of departure—“that to be vulnerable is simply to be susceptible, exposed, at risk, in danger. In short, it is to be somehow weaker, defenceless and dependent, open to harm and injury” (309-10). The idea that vulnerability is “an essentially negative state tantamount to harm” is generally associated with the etymological roots of the term in the Latin *vulnus*: wound (Gilson 310). Signaling the openness to wounds and wounding, vulnerability here emerges as an unequivocal threat, and the experience of vulnerability therefore leads to efforts to transform openness into closure by creating and protecting proper—impermeable—boundaries.

This conventional understanding of vulnerability as openness and exposure to threat and violation is operative across many different contemporary political arenas, where it animates a range of biopolitical discourses of security and resilience. The experience of vulnerability, in other words, generally results in pursuits of invulnerability, where invulnerability serves the function of restoring a sense of control and mastery over a threatening environment. Erinn Gilson succinctly explains the logic at work here when she says that, “if to be vulnerable is to be weak and subject to harm, then to be invulnerable is the only way to be strong and competent. Invulnerability as a form of mastery is sought at the price of disavowing vulnerability” (314). It is not difficult to observe this dynamic in everyday political practice. Thus Judith Butler, for example, speaking directly of post-9/11 US politics, notes that “the US subject seeks to produce itself as impermeable, to define itself as protected permanently against incursion and as radically invulnerable to attack” (*Frames of War* 47). Similarly, Anthony Burke notes vis-à-vis the Australian context that

“security is imagined on the basis of a bounded and vulnerable identity in perpetual opposition to an outside—an Other—whose character and claims threaten its integrity and safety” (4). Whether it is the violent US response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the name of “homeland security” or Australia’s choice, also in 2001, to address a pervasive “fear of invasion” by means of a Border Protection Bill,<sup>5</sup> the shoring up and defense of identity against putative threats from the outside presents itself as the favored political response to the experience of vulnerability. “We now see that the national border was more permeable than we thought,” Butler comments, and “[o]ur general response is anxiety, rage; a radical desire for security, a shoring-up of the borders against what is perceived as alien” (*Precarious Life* 39). Further, and importantly, this “radical desire for security” comes to justify just about any degree of retaliatory violence in the name of self-defense, with the result that vulnerability comes to be inextricably caught up in a short-circuit of violence, where the fear that one’s own vulnerability—openness to wounding—will lead to the experience of violation is warded off by pre-emptory or retaliatory violence against the other who may (or may not) violate and wound. Driven by a mythic pursuit of invulnerability, an impermeability where no further wounding would ever need to be feared, the growing obsession with security we have witnessed worldwide in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11 is hence all-too-clearly animated by a straightforwardly negative understanding of vulnerability as exposure to incursion and harm: an exposure that is experienced as so threatening to the vulnerable self that the only possible response appears to be its defensive—and, if necessary, violent—shielding.

**“Something exceeds the frame ...”**

Curiously, in this defensive erection of shielding boundaries, borders, or frames between a vulnerable self and a purportedly violent other, vulnerability has become locked—in a quasi-performative gesture—within what Judith Butler refers to, in a recent book of the same title, as the “frames of war,” which for her are “ways of selectively carving up experience as essential to the conduct of war” (26). Making a distinction between apprehension and intelligibility, Butler suggests that a life which “falls outside the frame furnished by the norm” is condemned to a kind of shadowy existence “as a relentless double whose ontology cannot be secured.” Lacking ontological status, such a life outside the frame can be apprehended but not recognized: “it is living, but not a life” (*Frames of War* 8). A frame, she suggests, sets the normative arena for what is intelligible or knowable: it “seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen” (*ibid.* 10). That this act of framing is hardly a neutral exercise be-

comes clear when she also reminds us that “the frame tends to function, even in a minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image”: it highlights certain ways of reading an image while foreclosing others. Further, Butler suggests that this “sense that the frame implicitly guides the interpretation has some resonance with the idea of the frame as a false accusation.” Reminding us that “‘to be framed’ is a complex phrase in English: a picture is framed, but so too is a criminal (by the police) or an innocent person (by someone nefarious, often the police), so that to be framed is to be set up, or to have evidence planted against one that ultimately ‘proves’ one’s guilt” (ibid. 8), she suggests that there are powerful interests at work behind any given framing.

What I am proposing here, in suggesting that vulnerability has become caught within the field of vision opened up, and sustained, by our current “frames of war,” is that the concept has been “framed”—in both senses of the word—as “the problem.” As (wrongfully accused) culprit, vulnerability is being associated, rather too quickly and exclusively, with openness to wounding and violence, and therefore with the need for impermeable, shielding boundaries. It has become trapped, in other words, in a “frame of war” that guides our interpretation of what vulnerability means, allowing us to see only certain aspects of vulnerability and foreclosing others. The aspects that we are led to see frame vulnerability unilaterally as “the problem” to be solved: being vulnerable means—apparently without a shadow of a doubt—being open to harm; in other words, it is not doubt but “the specter of violence [that] casts a shadow” over our understanding of vulnerability (Murphy 65). Problematically, this short-circuited understanding of vulnerability, which tethers it with such seductive ease to violence, both a violence experienced and a violence perpetrated in righteous self-defense,<sup>6</sup> makes it all but impossible to imagine what shadowy “living”—an existence “whose ontology cannot be secured”—the term might have on the other side of the normative frame.

What is the work that is to be done with vulnerability, then? If it is, like helplessness, in the established discourse at least, “so obviously the problem that it cannot be seen as the solution to anything,” how can we free it from “the shackles of everyday interpretation” (Butler, *Frames of War* 51) and restore what Ann Murphy calls the term’s “ambivalent potentiality” (86)? Where might this potentiality lie? And how do we come to apprehend it? For Butler, whom I am loosely (i.e., methodologically) following in my thoughts here, the shadowy outside of the frame—the precarious living that is not recognizable as a life—becomes apprehensible not so much through the production of new frames as through their circulation and reiteration. The critical task that emerges for her in response to the existing “frames of war” is not simply to offer new frames and new

content as alternatives; instead, it is to “frame the frame” so as to call it into question and lay bare the ontological im/possibilities produced by the act of framing. As she suggests,

to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. The frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things. (*Frames of War* 9)

Importantly, she is suggesting that, rather like the defense response to vulnerability—which seeks to create *closure* to wounding through an impermeable shell that shores up identity—the frame can never maintain this ontological closure: just like “there’s no way of securing vulnerability against incursion” (Bell 147), there is a “certain leakage or contamination [that] makes this process [of framing] more fallible than it might at first appear” (*Frames of War* 9). This leakage or contamination comes about because the frame “depends upon the conditions of reproducibility in order to succeed” (ibid. 10). In other words—and here Butler demonstrates a point of fundamental continuity between her early work on gender and performativity and her more recent work on responsibility and vulnerability—what is at work here is the logic of iterability. Frames, she says, “are subject to an iterable structure—they can only circulate by virtue of their reproducibility, and that very reproducibility introduces a structural risk for the identity of the frame itself.” This structural risk lies in the fact that the frame needs to be perpetually re-instantiated to function as a frame, thereby breaking with itself and repeatedly risking itself:

The frame breaks with itself in order to reproduce itself, and its reproduction becomes the site where a politically consequential break is possible. Thus, the frame functions normatively, but it can, depending on the specific mode of circulation, call certain fields of normativity into question. Such frames structure modes of recognition, especially during times of war, but their limits and their contingency become subject to exposure and critical intervention as well. (ibid. 24)

In other words, despite its power to endow (and foreclose) meaning, the frame is reliant on being perpetually *reframed* and therefore never immune to its own potential undoing.

What I am proposing here is that the framing of vulnerability is currently at precisely such a breaking point where it becomes “subject to exposure and critical intervention”—and if this special issue on vulnerability has perhaps but one purpose, it is to contribute to, elaborate upon, and add complexity to this critical intervention: a critical intervention that may allow for vulnerability’s shadowy other to become apprehensible. In other words, my premise here is that, framed within the “frames of war,”



vulnerability, like helplessness, has lost its “ambivalent potentiality”; this is a loss, furthermore, which the contributions gathered here seek to redress, making the shared ethos of this special issue one that is perhaps best described as that of restoring ambivalence to vulnerability. Although the individual approaches and critical pathways through the discussion are certainly distinct, what we may assume as a shared point of departure is the project of what Murphy so trenchantly calls “a reimagining of vulnerability in which the specter of violence no longer dominates.” Such a “reimagining of vulnerability,” or reframing of the framing of vulnerability, is vital because, as Murphy observes, “In contemporary theory” (and not just there, I would hasten to add) “the relationship between violence and vulnerability is overdetermined such that vulnerability’s ambivalent potentiality is obscured by a rhetoric that overwhelmingly associates vulnerability with the likelihood of violence” (86).

Given how tightly intertwined vulnerability and violence have become, it all but seems that, at least in the case of the framing of vulnerability, and Butler’s argument to the contrary, the frame manages to contain “the scene it was meant to limn” perfectly well, revealing no “limits” or “contingencies” from where a different scenario might become apparent (*Frames of War* 9). However, although it is certainly the case that hegemonic iterations have been and continue to be—in fact, continue with increasing fervor during our post-9/11 “times of war”—highly effective in aligning vulnerability with violence, without allowing us to apprehend different modes and meanings of the term, other iterations of vulnerability have, in fact, also emerged alongside those that are narrowly controlled by the “frames of war.” These other iterations, offered particularly from within feminist philosophy, have attended to what “the orchestrating designs of the authority who sought to control the frame” could not recognize (*ibid.* 12), namely that, as Gilson puts it, “Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us” (310). Curiously, perhaps, in these feminist iterations, vulnerability has become dissociated from violence and is instead being framed, especially in Butler’s work, which I will sketch in somewhat greater detail below, as the condition of possibility for an ethics of non-violence. Spearheaded by Shildrick’s landmark study *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, whose express purpose was “to reconfigure vulnerability, not as an intrinsic quality of an existing subject, but as an inalienable condition of becoming” (85), and which linked such reconfigured vulnerability to “an ethics of risk” (86), a number of important works have appeared, collectively inviting new modes of thinking about, or reframing, vulnerability. Most directly responsible for ushering in what she calls “the ‘return’ to vulnerability in contemporary feminist theory” are unquestionably the thinkers Murphy lists, and whose



contributions she briefly discusses (67): Debra Bergoffen, Judith Butler, Adriana Cavarero, Rosalyn Diprose, and Kelly Oliver; however, others, in particular scholars invoking a Levinasian philosophy—I am thinking here especially of Tina Chanter, Diane Perpich, and Ewa Ziarek—have also contributed to this general reconfiguration of vulnerability along ethical lines that has taken place alongside of and simultaneously with hegemonic “framings” that align vulnerability with violence: a reconfiguration that allows us to see what may be enabling about vulnerability and thereby moves us towards a restoration of the concept’s “ambivalent potentiality.” It is only with its ambivalent potentiality restored, I suggest, that we can even begin to hope to have a chance of getting helplessness (or vulnerability) *right*—where getting it right means being able to adopt a position where we no longer compulsively, fearfully, “do the very worst things.”

With a view to restoring this ambivalent potentiality—and recalling Adam Phillips’s point that “we have lost our ambivalence about our helplessness; it is described now only as something we hate, not as something we could ever love” (122)—I would like to move my discussion towards the aspects of vulnerability that we may be able to “love”: not in any naïve sort of way that would position vulnerability as some kind of redemptive cure for our contemporary woes, but simply as a way of bringing into view that “something” which “exceeds the frame” and “troubles our sense of reality” (Butler, *Frames of War* 9). The point here is to draw attention to the other side of the vulnerability coin, to the fact that there are, after all, as Cavarero reminds us—and it is of course a point that is frequently repeated across the spectrum of feminist reframings of vulnerability—“two poles of the essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability: wounding and caring,” and that “as vulnerable, exposed to the other, the singular body is irremediably open to *both* responses” (20, emphases added). In other words, I propose to “make a case” for vulnerability here much in the way Phillips makes a case for helplessness: to reframe the frame so that vulnerability can no longer be framed quite so categorically as “the problem”: a problem that then only an attempt at invulnerability can solve. Allow me therefore to return to Phillips’s discussion once more to trace what he believes there is to “love” about helplessness, before engaging more fully with Butler’s contribution.

### “in praise of our helplessness”

Returning our anxiously averted gaze to a wound we would prefer to disavow, Phillips writes “in praise of our helplessness” so as to remind us why helplessness is ultimately *not* “starkly what we need to defend ourselves from” (122). Clearly, given the degree to which helplessness presents itself “as a fatal flaw,” this is not an easy task. Phillips’s first step

is therefore to try to understand what has led to this unilateral devaluation, asking, "What would make us so averse to what is so original about us?" Freud, he suggests, "has a fairly obvious answer to this question: helplessness becomes persecution, is made into a problem, by being insufficiently responded to." Helplessness becomes a problem, in other words, when we experience ourselves as desiring beings—which we do most acutely when our desires are frustrated: "If the hungry infant's needs are not at least recognized, if not always actually met; if the sexually desiring adult finds no object attentive to her desire, helplessness becomes intolerable; something has to be done with it (it might be turned into omnipotence, say, or bitter scornful, mocking behaviour, which may be the same thing)" (138). This last line points towards the "something" that is usually done with the wound inflicted by the experience of unbearable helplessness in the face of a desire-frustrating environment: a flight into imaginary omnipotence and self-sufficiency. And, on the surface, this narcissistic solution, like the perfect crime, is as elegant as its logic is compelling: if, as Serge Viderman notes, "The hell of the narcissist is the tyranny of his need for others" (cited in Phillips 124, 130), then this "tyranny" can be held at bay if the need for others is disavowed. Or, to put this in slightly different terms, if it is one's desires that make one dependent on the availability of a benign relational environment, and render one vulnerable to the experience of unbearable helplessness if such a benign relational environment cannot be ascertained, then the renunciation of desire (and hence need for relationality) conveniently removes the risk of helplessness, promising safety instead.

And yet, as with most fantasies of perfect solutions (or crimes), there is a fly in the ointment. In fact, Phillips suggests that the narcissistic flight into "the lure of self-sufficiency, [. . .] the illusion of being everything to oneself" (130), is only one of two solutions to the "problem" of helplessness, and the "bad one" at that:

There are, let us say, two solutions that Freud proposes to our original human helplessness: a good one and a bad one. In the good one, helplessness is the precondition for satisfaction—the only way to the experience of satisfaction; and by the same token the only way to morality. In the bad one, the experience of satisfaction is replaced by the experience of feeling protected. (142-43)

What could possibly be bad about the experience of feeling protected? Phillips suggests that there is something utterly miscued about the bad solution. Quite understandably, the experience of helplessness "issues in the wish to be protected from the experience of helplessness, not to feel it too acutely." The problem here is, however, that "Helplessness is not recognized, so to speak, as a predisposition towards sensuous satisfaction; it is as though someone has said, 'I need a drink,' and another person has

replied, 'It is not a drink that you really need; you need your thirst to be made safe,' or as though someone has said, 'I'm hungry,' and the other person has replied, 'No, you're terrified'" (143). Protection, in other words, is the solution to the wrong problem: it responds to the terror experienced in the face of an unmet desire, rather than to the unmet desire itself. It thereby "solves" only the secondary effect of the original problem and—crucially—misses the opportunity, by addressing this original problem, to move us "towards sensuous satisfaction."

This miscued response is what it means, in a nutshell, to get helplessness wrong. "Our fundamental response to our own helplessness," Phillips suggests, "is to create an enchanted world, a world of gods, a world in which we seek protection from our helplessness, but not engagement with it" (144). In other words, to get helplessness wrong is to exchange the world of sensuous satisfaction with flights of fantasy—an exchange that "can lure us into a nihilistic pact: if you give up on the experience of satisfaction, you can be protected" (149). Given that "we do the very worst things when we get helplessness wrong"—and we only need to recall here some of the atrocities the post-9/11 world has witnessed as an outgrowth of the "delirium of compulsive protection-seeking" (Phillips 149)—it should not surprise that the effects of this "nihilistic pact" are nothing short of catastrophic; in fact, it is here, in this "nihilistic pact," that we find the crucible for the potent conjunction between helplessness (or vulnerability) and violence. For one thing, in his careful consideration of Freud's *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*, Phillips notes the way in which morality becomes "bound up with helplessness" for Freud (137). Because the helpless infant can only hope to have her needs met by "extraneous help," the "extremely important secondary function" of the infant's cry—cry for help—according to Freud, is that "of bringing about an understanding with other people; and the original helplessness of human beings is thus the primal source of moral motives" (cited in Phillips 133-34). In other words, and importantly, helplessness *has to be experienced* "in order to become a moral creature":

Helplessness is the precondition for human bonds, for exchange; you have to be a helpless subject in order to be helped, in order to be understood, in order to become a moral creature. And so, by the same token, if you can't experience helplessness you are precluded from these fundamental human experiences. (Phillips 139)

What this means is that if helplessness is disavowed, the development of an inherent, ego-syntonic (rather than merely conventional) morality cannot take place. If an integral morality is intertwined with helplessness, then any morality that begins—as Western moral philosophies generally do—from a purportedly self-sufficient, autonomous ego rather than from

a self helplessly oriented towards others, towards relationality, results in what Butler calls “moral narcissism,” which is intrinsically linked to the assumption of self-preservation “as an ultimate moral value.” She argues: “if self-assertion becomes the assertion of the self at the expense of any consideration of the world, of consequence, and, indeed, of others, then it feeds a ‘moral narcissism’ whose pleasure resides in its ability to transcend the concrete world that conditions its actions and is affected by them” (*Giving an Account* 105). Such morality is doomed, for Butler as much as for Phillips:

we could begin to see that much of our discontent with morality, much of our sense, when it exists, that morality is alien rather than integral, a foreign body foisted on us to deprive us of our real satisfaction, comes from the ways in which we can use morality to deny, abolish, refuse, disparage, trivialize and punish our original helplessness. Or to put it the other way round: any morality that does not affirm, desire and value helplessness is merely punitive. (Phillips 138)

And if we add to this already shaky morality Phillips’s previous point—that in defending against helplessness we are depriving ourselves of our means of satisfaction—the picture becomes even grimmer, for frustrated satisfaction inevitably cultivates violence: “if frustration makes us aggressive and we turn against our own satisfaction, we are cultivating our violence by disavowing our helplessness” (144).

Getting helplessness wrong, then, means fleeing from and defending against the very relationality that, to be sure, is always a potential source of pain and wounding, but that is also the condition of possibility for pleasure and satisfaction, and ultimately for ethical life. Without helplessness—and this is the core of Phillips’s argument—we deprive ourselves of the conditions of possibility of satisfaction. And not only is life without even the possibility of satisfaction ultimately “futile” (151); it is also a life filled with endlessly increasing cycles of violence because, in denying ourselves desire and satisfaction, we nurture our frustrations and end up doing “the very worst things.”

### **“the very worst things”**

While the implicit echoes and reverberation between Phillips’s account of helplessness and the contemporary framing of vulnerability as the problem to be overcome are undoubtedly sufficiently apparent without being spelled out in detail here, it is perhaps this last point that deserves some closer attention, for it impresses upon us the relevance of Phillips’s psychoanalytic reflections for our proposed reframing of vulnerability. As I suggested earlier, in the popular imagination vulnerability’s “animating ambiguity” has been “overdetermined by its relationship to violence” (Murphy 87): it has become so enchained to violence that it cannot but

appear as “the problem” we need to solve, ideally through the pursuit of invulnerability—the assumption being that, “if it wasn’t for this helplessness we would not suffer in the way we do” (Phillips 129). What Phillips’s analysis demonstrates is that, by contrast, it is the very framing of helplessness (or, in our case, vulnerability) as a problem that locks us into a “nihilistic pact,” where we pay for our (illusion of) protection not just with the loss of a full libidinal investment in life but also with an exacerbation of violence. What would be necessary to break the chains that tie vulnerability so tightly to violence is therefore an understanding that our compulsive investment in “defense” both deprives us of the sources of life and locks us into the very cycle of violence from which we then compulsively seek protection. And such an understanding is only possible if we no longer consider helplessness purely as something we “hate” about ourselves—a “curse” we must disavow at all cost—but also as something we can welcome as a “gift.” In other words, it is only possible if we can restore “vulnerability’s ambivalent potentiality” (Murphy 86).

One may object, of course, that Phillips’s focus on the individual desiring subject, the helpless infant turned towards a desire-frustrating relational environment, is a universe away from “the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from those events” we associate with September 11, 2001 (Butler, *Precarious Life* xi), and on one level this is certainly true: “Nations,” Butler acknowledges in “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” an essay that draws heavily on the tools afforded by psychoanalysis to analyse the US response to 9/11, “are not the same as individual psyches.” She adds, however, that “both can be described as ‘subjects,’ albeit of different orders,” and her account of the vulnerable-turned-violent US “subject” in the wake of 9/11 indeed bears a striking resemblance to Phillips’s helpless infantile subject seeking refuge in narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence and self-sufficient mastery:

In recent months, a subject has been instated at the national level, a sovereign and extra-legal subject, a violent and self-centered subject; its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multi-lateral relations, its ties to the international community. It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure [. . .]. (*Precarious Life* 41)

These “narcissistic and grandiose fantasies must be lost and mourned,” Butler insists, and “[f]rom the subsequent experience of loss and fragility [. . .] the possibility of making different kinds of ties emerge” (*Precarious Life* 40). These “different kinds of ties” are ultimately the basis of what Butler describes as an ethics of non-violence: an ethics, once again, that bears much resemblance with what Phillips—via Freud—sees as the kind

of ego-syntonic morality that emerges from our helplessness: from the fact that as helpless subjects we necessarily turn towards relationality.

**“different kinds of ties”**

Of all the thinkers engaged in the recent “‘return’ to vulnerability” (Murphy 67), it is undoubtedly Butler herself who has offered us the most sustained and influential reframing of the concept by making it the basis for an ethics of *non*-violence based on an ontology of corporeal interdependence. For her, “the ontology of the body serves as a point of departure for [. . .] a rethinking of responsibility [. . .] precisely because, in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition” (*Frames of War* 33). Starting with *Precarious Life* in 2004 and *Giving an Account of Oneself* in 2005, such a rethinking of responsibility has been the central preoccupation of Butler’s work over the last decade. And although it takes on a somewhat different inflection with each subsequent articulation, her main point, the one she repeats over and over again, to which she returns in different guises, and that carries the weight of all further theoretical elaborations, is one she—like Emmanuel Levinas<sup>7</sup>—borrows from Paul Celan’s poem “Lob der Ferne” (“Praise of Distance”), which states, with beautiful poetic simplicity, “Ich bin du, wenn ich ich bin” (“I am you, when I am I”).<sup>8</sup> For Butler, what this comes to mean is “*I am my relation to you*” (*Giving an Account* 81, emphasis in original). The degree of the entanglement that is assumed here between the “I” and the “you”—“ties or bonds that compose us”—perhaps reveals itself most clearly in mourning; in other words, at the point where the “I” loses the “you” and becomes irrevocably transformed, so that the “I” does not just lose the “you” but loses itself as well:

It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who “am” I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think that I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related. (*Precarious Life* 22, emphasis in original)

What this means is that the tie or relation between the “I” and the “you” is what brings the “I” into existence, just as surely as it has the power to undo it—but, importantly, this is a good thing. As she says, “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.” We can be “undone” by each other only because we are also “composed”

of each other; in other words—and here it pays to bear in mind Phillips’s point that it is desire that orients us towards others—“[t]his seems so clearly the case with grief, but it can be so only because it was already the case with desire” (*Precarious Life* 23). What happens in either case, grief or desire, is that the tie which entangles us—both creates and undoes us—takes root at the heart of the “I,” imploding the idea that either the “I” or the “you” can be a fully bounded being. Or, in Butler’s impassioned words, “One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel” (*Precarious Life* 23-24).

The assumptions feeding this basic, but important, point—that “*I am my relation to you*”—are derived from psychoanalysis, in particular from object relations theory. Thus Butler notes, for example, that “Winnicott describes the ego as a relational process” and posits “the primacy of relationality to any bounded sense of self” (*Giving an Account* 58). The “I,” as it emerges in object relations theory, is therefore “not an entity or substance, but an array of relations and processes, implicated in the world of primary caregivers in ways that constitute its very definition” (*ibid.* 59). It is in this sense, then, that the “I” is composed of its various entanglements with others; it only emerges in response to and as a result of these primary entanglements with others: entanglements without which it would not survive (and hence come to be an “I”). The “I,” for Butler, attests to “a primary impingement, a primary way in which I am, prior to acquiring an ‘I,’ a being who has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep” (*ibid.* 69-70). Further, these impingements, she says, drawing on both Jean Laplanche and Levinas, leave enigmatic traces—signs of the various adult others in relation to and with whom the “I” has emerged, and which are frequently inscrutable and overwhelming for the infant—at the heart of the “I.” Because these traces are enigmatic, they are irretrievable and therefore endow the “I” with an opacity to itself that can never be undone but that instead speaks of an originary relationality that identifies “the Other at the inception of the ‘me’” (*ibid.* 98).<sup>9</sup> This originary relationality, in which “the ‘I,’ regardless of its claims to mastery, will never get over having been given over from the start” (*ibid.* 77), allows Butler to make the “I” the site of an important “convergence,” as she calls it: “if in the inaugural moments of the “I” I am implicated by the other’s address and demand, then there is some convergence between the ethical scene and the psychoanalytical scene that establishes the intersubjective conditions of my own emergence, individuation, and survivability” (59).

It is probably not too much of an overstatement to suggest—as indeed I shall risk suggesting here—that just about everything in Butler’s



subsequent work relies on this “convergence” as a point of departure. In a move that both is and, in most fundamental ways, is *not* Levinasian,<sup>10</sup> Butler “knots” this primary relationality that ensues—for Butler as much as for Phillips—from the infant’s vulnerable, helpless orientation towards others, an orientation that brings the “I” of the infant into being (or, rather, into perpetual becoming),<sup>11</sup> to ethical responsibility. As she says, in a passage that channels Levinas and, I believe, speaks of her own theoretical convictions:

I cannot disavow my relation to the Other, regardless of what the Other does, regardless of what I might will. Indeed, responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other. (ibid. 91)

This “unwilled susceptibility,” the helplessness with which the dependent infant turns towards her caregivers so that they may help her survive, is the vulnerability through which the “I” becomes an “I”; without it, the infant would never come to be an “I.” The “I” thus owes its very existence to its vulnerability, a vulnerability it cannot wish away without undoing its own conditions of emergence and ongoing existence. Thus Butler says, “That we are impinged upon primarily and against our will is the sign of a vulnerability and a beholdenness that we cannot will away. We can defend against it only by prizing the asociality of the subject over and against a difficult and intractable, even sometimes unbearable relationality” (ibid. 100).

What can make relationality unbearable are situations in which, as we saw in Phillips’s account, the helpless infant turns towards her caregivers and no care is given: her infantile needs and desires are painfully thwarted; just as it can become unbearable, as we saw with regard to vulnerability, when the constitutive openness to wounding is exploited and actual harm is inflicted. In both cases, the needed and hoped-for “care”—as the other pole of the “essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability” (Cavarero 20)—that the “I” requires to live fails to materialize. Thus exposed, desiring care and receiving something unbearably other than care, the “I” is understandably tempted to defend against this vulnerability that sees it so dreadfully exposed. However—and this is the crucial point that is so easily forgotten in the narcissistic pursuits of invulnerability that so frequently ensue—because the “I” owes its very existence to its “unwilled susceptibility,” the asociality that is prized as a narcissistic defense against this painful side of the vulnerability coin ends up cutting off the “I” from its life source. “Could it be,” Butler therefore invites us to consider in her most recent book, *Parting Ways*, “that self-defense leads not to self-preservation but to self-destruction?” She elaborates,

Since there is no self without a boundary, and that boundary is always a site of multiple relations, there is no self without its relations. If the self seeks to defend itself against this very insight, then it denies the way in which it is, by definition, bound up with others. And, through this denial, that self becomes imperiled, living in a world in which the only options are to be destroyed or to destroy. (98)

The injunction against the kind of “self-defense” that posits vulnerability as “the problem” that then only invulnerability, the retreat into an a-relational fortress ego, can solve once again becomes most acutely apparent at the point of loss. Grief, Butler suggests, “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order” (*Precarious Life* 22). It does this, she says,

first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation. (ibid. 22-23)

The logic at work here is that, because we cannot easily argue against a relationality that makes us who we are, we also cannot easily argue against ethical responsibility: this is the result—a result of vital importance—of the “convergence between the ethical scene and the psychoanalytical scene” that Butler assumes. Relying heavily on Levinas in her conception of “the ethical scene,” Butler suggests that the “I” comes into being through the address by the other. The “I” is thus, at heart, a “me”: the accusative case taking precedence over the nominative. Vulnerability, our “unwilled susceptibility,” thereby becomes that which *at once* exposes us to violence *and* demands of us “a certain practice of nonviolence” (*Giving an Account* 64).

### “a certain practice of nonviolence”

What might such a practice of nonviolence look like? Or, to rephrase the question in Butler’s own words, “What might it mean to make an ethic from the region of the unwilled?” She suggests that it “might mean that one does not foreclose upon that primary exposure to the Other, that one does not try to transform the unwilled into the willed, but, rather, to take the very unbearable of exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality and risk” (ibid. 100).

It is important to tread carefully here in order to understand what is at stake: what Butler is and is not claiming in making “a common vulnerability” the foundation of an ethics of non-violence. In her thoughtful discussion of Butler’s critique of violence, Murphy raises the question of just where the normative force of this ethics might lie, suggesting, as I have here, that vulnerability can just as easily—in fact, more easily—“promote all manner of violence” as it can lead to non-violence:

Butler claims that the fact of embodied vulnerability can become the basis for nonmilitaristic political solutions and indeed may even serve as the provocation for a politics of nonviolence. But consider that attending to one's vulnerability can also promote all manner of violence, a point Butler likewise acknowledges.<sup>12</sup> What is left unsaid is how, exactly, mindfulness of vulnerability can become the basis for *any* politics. (74)

The problem Murphy raises here—and Rosalyn Diprose renews this charge in her contribution to this special issue—is that “it remains unclear what norms would be at play in an attempt to derive a substantive ethics (or politics) from a constitutive and primordial exposure to others” (ibid.). To put the problem more pointedly: given that we know that, within the modes of interpretation provided by the current “frames of war,” vulnerability is hopelessly glued to violence, how can we claim that an acknowledgement of “a common vulnerability” can serve as a provocation for *non-violence*? How do we get from vulnerability to non-violence, rather than, as is more commonly the case, to violence? Just where, to restate my earlier question regarding what seems to be at stake here, does the normative force of Butler’s intervention lie?

Butler herself emphasizes that she is not “positing a new basis for humanism” (*Precarious Life* 42); in fact, she specifies in a recent essay that her “point is not to rehabilitate humanism but, rather, to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity” (“Precarious Life” 148). What she has in mind here is the following: “When any of us are affected by the sufferings of others, it is not only that we put ourselves in their place or that they usurp our own place; perhaps it is the moment in which a certain chiasmic link comes to the fore and I become somehow implicated in lives that are clearly not the same as my own” (ibid. 149). In other words, it is not a matter of somehow magically becoming “beautiful souls” in response to our recognition of a shared condition of “unwilled susceptibility”; Butler is fully aware that those ties that compose us can be “antagonistic ties, wretched bonds, raging and mournful modes of connectedness” (ibid.): modes of connectedness that will incite our aggression and provoke an impulse to renunciate relationality and shore up a fantasized solitary boundedness. So the normative force of her contribution does not lie in prescribing some kind of outline of a new ethics that would be based on an understanding of our shared condition of vulnerability. Instead, what she has in mind when she says that the “recognition of a shared precariousness introduces strong normative commitments of equality” has to do with the normative force of the frames through which precariousness becomes recognizable (*Frames of War* 28-29). Butler’s extended claim—one she will make more insistently and forcefully in the work that follows on from *Precarious Life* and *Giving an Account of Oneself*—is that what the reminder of “a common

vulnerability” alerts us to and, as ethically interpellated subjects, makes us responsible for, is, in the first instance, what she calls “the differential allocation of precarity” (*Frames of War* 3). Her argument, in brief, is that, framed by the “frames of war,” only certain lives become recognizable as lives; that is, only certain lives can make “a claim of non-violence” on us (ibid. 165). The logic here is that, if the “I” emerges as responsible in relation to a “you,” this “you” has to first of all be apprehensible: “The ethical question of whether or not to do violence emerges only in relation to the ‘you’ who figures as the potential object of my injury. But if there is no ‘you,’ or the ‘you’ cannot be heard or seen, then there is no ethical relation” (ibid. 181). It is for this reason, then, that it becomes necessary to “call into question this frame by which injurability is falsely and unequally distributed” (ibid. 182). In this unequal distribution only some lives are recognized as lives: as the “you” that could issue the claim of non-violence to the “I.” The calling into question and reframing of the frame thus emerges as the condition of possibility for the claim of non-violence to even be able to register: “If the injunction to non-violence is to avoid becoming meaningless” (as it would be, for example, if all it entailed was lofty appeals to become “beautiful souls”), “it must be allied with a critical intervention apropos the norms that differentiate between those lives that count as livable and grievable and those that do not” (ibid. 180). This, as Murphy rightly emphasizes, is ultimately where the “normative force” of Butler’s argument lies: “Butler’s argument is one that finds its ethical claim not in the figure of precariousness itself, but in the injustice of its differential and selective allocation. The normative force of Butler’s invocation of precariousness amounts to a call for greater attentiveness to this differential allocation of vulnerability and the mechanisms that both produce and veil these inequities” (82).

The questioning of the frame—the realm of normativity—that currently precludes some lives from being recognized as lives is thus a vital first step towards allowing the claim that the other may make upon me to even reach me, and this can only happen if vulnerability is framed no longer unilaterally as “the problem” to be mastered and overcome, but also as that which constitutes me: in other words, if vulnerability’s “ambivalent potentiality” is restored. Once we understand that vulnerability is not “starkly what we need to defend ourselves from” (Phillips 122), and that, in fact, the “defense” against vulnerability reproduces the very cycles of violence from which we seek protection, an ethics of non-violence may indeed emerge from our “unwilled susceptibility.” Arriving at such an understanding, and securing it, of course becomes most pressing and most difficult at times when our own vulnerability is exposed and exploited: when we are wounded. When we are wounded,

we are provoked to rush to the defense. What Butler's intervention urges us to register is that the wound not only issues an invitation to rush to the defense and respond with (violent) pursuits of invulnerability but also testifies to our responsibility:

I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the Other; if I do, I have taken myself out of the relational bind that frames the problem of responsibility from the start. (*Precarious Life* 46)

Inasmuch as the current "frames of war" foreclose this other side of vulnerability, the side that speaks to the relational bind that is the site of "convergence between the ethical scene and the psychoanalytical scene," they allow us to remain deaf and blind to our entanglements and therefore to that which constitutes us as much as to our ethical responsibility. In an impassioned plea, Butler urges us to understand that who "we" are is always tied up with others, that "I am you, if I am," and that "we" are therefore inextricably implicated in each other's lives:

We can be alive or dead to the suffering of others—they can be dead or alive to us. But it is only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that "here" is already an elsewhere, and necessarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in ways that let us know the transport and the constraint of what we might still call ethics. (*"Precarious Life"* 150)

### **"capable of being in uncertainties"**

What is necessary for a life informed by the ethical relation is perhaps two things. In the first instance, we must take seriously Butler's reminder of the iterable nature of the frame. This is important because the iteration of the frame both interrupts received understandings and opens up "other possibilities for apprehension":

What happens when a frame breaks with itself is that a taken-for-granted reality is called into question, exposing the orchestrating designs of the authority who sought to control the frame. [. . .] As frames break from themselves in order to install themselves, other possibilities for apprehension emerge. (*Frames of War* 12)

What this means is that we are called upon, in the first instance, to perform what Butler, with Walter Benjamin, calls the act of "reaching for the emergency brake" (cited in *Frames of War* 184). This act "is one that seeks to forestall the apparent inexorability of a reiterated set of acts that postures as the motor of history itself" (*Frames of War* 184); in the context of this present discussion, it seeks to interrupt the smooth operation of a logic that is blind and deaf to other meanings of vulnerability

outside those provided by the “shackles of everyday interpretation” that tie vulnerability to violence. Butler thus urges us to slow down, to bear with our vulnerability a little, without immediately rushing to the defense. “The way we respond to injury may offer a chance to elaborate an ethical perspective and even become human,” she suggests (*Giving an Account* 101); but to be able to become aware of this chance, we need to take a moment to consider a thought that is habitually foreclosed: “What might it mean to undergo violation, to insist upon *not* resolving grief and staunching vulnerability too quickly through a turn to violence, and to practice, as an experiment in living otherwise, nonviolence in an empathically nonreciprocal response?” (ibid. 100).<sup>13</sup>

Slowing down enough to become aware of potential openings in the frame may then enable us, in a second “moment,” to apperceive possibilities for coming to see our vulnerability differently. It is here that Butler posits relationality as a new “framework (the work of a new frame) for the consideration of those affects invariably articulated within the political field: fear and rage, desire and loss, love and hatred” (*Frames of War* 184). What comes into view when we perceive those affects through the prism of relationality is that we cannot rush to the narcissistic defense of inviolability without, in fact, doing violence to ourselves: ourselves as relational and ethical beings. In seeking to defend ourselves, we—perversely—come to violate ourselves, or, to put this differently, what we preserve in “self-preservation” is what makes the self “inhuman” rather than human:

One seeks to preserve oneself against the injuriousness of the other, but if one were successful at walling oneself off from injury, one would become inhuman. In this sense, we make a mistake when we take “self-preservation” to be the essence of the human, unless we accordingly claim that the “inhuman” is constitutive of the human. (*Giving an Account* 103)

What makes us human, by contrast, is precisely that we are able to be “confounded” by each other. Noting that the “topographies have shifted,” Butler tells us that the border that was once believed to delimit and bound now confounds identity “in what may well become a very auspicious direction.” And yet, the “disorientation and loss” inscribed in such confounded identity is also a “gain,” and is what allows us perpetually to come into being, as she suggests in the moving and poetic concluding paragraph of “Violence, Mourning, Politics”:

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you,” by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know. (*Precarious Life* 49)

Resonating closely with Phillips's reminder that by defending against our helplessness we are in fact defending against a full libidinal investment in life, Butler here presents us with the disastrous consequences of our wish "to be wholly perspicacious beings": "we would be the kind of beings who, by definition, could not be in love, blind and blinded, vulnerable to devastation, subject to enthrallment" (*Giving an Account* 102). Nothing less than the loss of our aliveness is the price we pay for "invulnerability."

Having slowed down enough and resisted the immediate urge to flee the scene of vulnerability, we thus reacquaint ourselves with what according to Freud "is the most important thing about us" (Phillips 140). What we learn, when we engage with our "unwilled susceptibility" instead of disavowing it, is that vulnerability, like helplessness, is no longer quite "so obviously the problem that it cannot be the solution to anything." In other words, what we learn is to be able to remain—anxiously, uncomfortably, but sticking it out nonetheless—in the space of vulnerability's "ambivalent potentiality." To be sure, vulnerability is no new magic wand that could promise us the certain transformation of contemporary scenes of war into utopian everlasting scenes of non-violence: a new substantive ethics is indeed not to be derived from an acknowledgement of our shared precariousness. That would be asking too much. Perhaps the best we can hope for, at least for now, is to instill a little uncertainty where there was all too much certainty before. Thus, when Gilson says that "Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable us*," meaning to draw attention to vulnerability as a "condition of potential"—a potential she locates in its "openness to being affected and affecting in turn" (310)—then we certainly need to take note of the promise of goodness she sees in such interaffectivity. And yet perhaps we need to reach further still: reach beyond the sense of certainty that is being conjured in this *enabling* aspect of vulnerability. Perhaps where vulnerability's ability ultimately lies is not in the promise of a "cure," pure and simple, but in the promise of an ambivalent gift. This gift—a term which, incidentally, in German means "poison"—is ambivalent precisely because it cannot promise us a cure; instead, it is, to speak with Derrida, a *pharmakon*: cure *and* poison. In this ambivalence, vulnerability is marked by a constitutive doubleness: we cannot know in advance whether it will bring us satisfaction or violation.

What we may want to recall, in this context, is that Phillips framed his essay on helplessness within a loose gathering of four essays headed "Negative Capabilities." According to Keats's famous definition, negative capability means being "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (I: 193-94). "To be negatively capable," Li Ou explains in her recent book-length exploration of Keats's concept, "is to be open to the actual vastness and complexity experience, and one cannot possess this openness unless one can abandon



the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge, safely guarding the self's identity, for a more truthful view of the world which is necessarily more disturbing or even agonizing for the self" (2). While I would not want to hang my hat on a dubious distinction between "doctrinaire knowledge" and "truth" here, it is perhaps worth bearing with Ou's gloss, if only to note the ironies it throws up for our discussion of vulnerability. For one thing, it seems perhaps particularly bizarre that vulnerability, a term which, in fact, connotes "to be open to," has become so *closed* in meaning that it is now virtually coterminous with openness to harm only, rather than "to the actual vastness and complexity of experience." Further, it appears more than a little perverse that the closed certainty of this openness to harm should be less "disturbing or even agonizing for the self" than the openness of uncertainty would be, and yet the very persistence of this closed meaning of course suggests as much.

Perhaps what this special issue enacts is thus its own kind of version of the Benjaminian "reaching for the emergency brake": taking on the challenge of reframing the closed meaning of vulnerability, and reframing it in a way that embraces rather than defends against its constitutional openness. What is at stake is something at once simple and fundamental: the challenge to reframe a negative state as a negative *capability*. In other words, if helplessness, or *vulnerability*, is released from its conventional framing as "an essentially negative state tantamount to harm" (Gilson 310), and is instead understood, following Phillips's framing, as a *negative capability*, then what we might find is that "the actual vastness and complexity of experience" reopens for us. Further, while facing this vastness and complexity may well be "disturbing or even agonizing for the self," we might find that we surprise ourselves with our own capability in the face of this disturbance: that is to say, we might find that our capability lies, just as it did for Keats, in dwelling in uncertainty: the uncertainty of not knowing in advance who or what may come to impinge upon us, and the uncertainty that comes from not immediately rushing to the defense and shoring up the self. For, that much is certain, it is the defense, the flight from vulnerability's "ambivalent potentiality" into the certainty that vulnerability can mean one thing and one thing only—openness to wounding—that, as we have seen, surely imperils the self.

Reframed as negative capability, vulnerability leads us away from the "moral narcissism" that sees us doing "the very worst things"; what it offers us, instead, is the ambivalent gift of moral uncertainty: a gift in which we find, according to Murphy, "the provocation for responsibility" (83). And it is precisely to such a "provocation for responsibility" that the nine essays gathered in this special issue respond. Enacting the kind of

reframing of vulnerability for which this editorial introduction has made a case, the issue opens, appropriately enough, with two essays (Simmons and Drichel) that draw on deconstruction to make the existing frame tremble. These essays loosen the “shackles of everyday interpretation” that tie vulnerability so readily to violence, and thereby create the conditions of possibility for different notions of vulnerability to emerge. With the scene set for an engagement with, rather than defensive disavowal of, vulnerability, the group of five essays which follows (E. Ziarek, Boon, Jenkins, Faulkner and Stringer) offer just such an engagement: extending the disturbance of the frame to the images encountered within the frame, they argue for the need to attend to such disturbances, and present us with new and previously obscured scenes of vulnerability. And finally—and as if to lend poignancy to Butler’s argument that “to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn” (*Frames of War* 9)—the issue closes with two essays (K. Ziarek and Diprose) which demonstrate that, even in the reframing of vulnerability, something inevitably “exceeds the frame.” In reflecting on possibilities and limitations in the “new” politics and practices of vulnerability, these essays at once close this issue’s frame of vulnerability and point beyond it, thereby challenging us to remain perpetually attentive to the blind spots and occlusions that are inevitably produced by any frame.

*University of Otago*

### Notes

1. I would like to thank Wendy Parkins for alerting me to this essay in the context of an altogether different conversation.
2. The other three essays in the “Negative Capabilities” series are “The Horse” (I), “The Perfectionist” (III), and “The Lost” (IV).
3. She further argues that in helplessness the “scene is entirely tilted toward unilateral violence,” whereas vulnerability points to a constitutional openness to the ambivalence of “wounding and caring.” In her words, “The human being is vulnerable as a singular body exposed to wounding. There is not, however, anything necessary about the *vulnus* (wound) embedded in the term ‘vulnerable,’ only the potential for a wound to occur at any time, in contingent circumstances.” In helplessness, by contrast, there is no ambivalence or tension for her; instead, the situation is characterized by defenselessness: “As its etymology suggests, the ‘helpless one’ (*l’inermé*, literally ‘the unarmed one’) is he who does not bear arms and thus cannot harm, kill, or wound. But in everyday usage, rather than this incapacity to take the offensive, the term ‘helpless’ tends to designate a person who, attacked by an armed other, has no arms with which to defend himself” (30). It is because, as adults, we are only on occasion defenseless that helplessness is original but not constitutive for Cavarero: infants are originally defenseless, but this state of helplessness is one we grow out of. Vulnerability, on the other hand, is with us for life. Phillips, as we will see, does not draw this distinction: for him (following Freud), helplessness is both original and constitutive.

4. Phillips writes that “by linking the hungry infant with the desiring sexual adult Freud is more than intimating not merely an original helplessness, but an enduring or constitutive helplessness” (136).
5. The conservative Howard Government introduced the Border Protection Bill within a few days of the 2001 *Tampa* incident. This incident, which saw the Norwegian freighter MV *Tampa*—carrying 438 refugees rescued from a distressed fishing vessel in international waters—be denied entry into Australian waters, constituted a watershed moment in Australian politics which significantly influenced the outcome of the 2001 general election. Even a week before the *Tampa* incident polls suggested John Howard was going to lose the election to Labor Leader Kim Beazley. Fuelling anxiety of an imminent refugee invasion, and making the populist slogan “we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come” his mantra for the election campaign, Howard made a miraculous recovery and won the election on the promise of an uncompromising enforcement of border protection. And in an uncomfortable echo of these events, newly reinstated Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd shamelessly copied the strategy that had proved so successful for his political opponents in 2001. Announcing in July this year that “all asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat will be sent to Papua New Guinea for processing and resettlement and none will be allowed to stay in the country,” Rudd delivered what Lenore Taylor, in *The Guardian*, called “a draconian pre-election message that Australia’s borders are closed to refugees.” Anticipated election success in Australia, it appears, continues to hinge on the firmness of the nation’s borders.
6. As Joanna Fax reminded us only recently, in an analysis of what she calls “vulnerability discourse” in relation to Tea Party rhetoric, “populist discourse on the Right has frequently profited from fantasies of its own vulnerability: fixations on the expansion and protection of national borders, isolationist policies, and the languages of eugenics and miscegenation profess a logic that pits a purely ideal inner sphere of a national body against contamination from foreign elements” (331). And it is precisely because of the problematic way in which “vulnerability remains open and available to multiple political agendas” (Fax 331), that Julian Reid, for one, in a polemical piece that takes Butler’s *Frames of War* to task, has argued for the necessity of overcoming, rather than embracing, our vulnerability: “The future of the Left depends, I believe, on a reinvestment in the hubristic fantasy of a subject that can transcend its vulnerabilities, destroy their sources, and free itself from them” (775).
7. Levinas uses the line (in the original German) as an epigraph to “Substitution,” the central chapter of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.
8. In Butler’s version, this becomes “I am you, / If I am.” (Cf. Butler, *Giving an Account* 65)
9. I use the term “relationality” here to capture, albeit inadequately, something that in fact calls for “another language,” something that cannot capture what Butler struggles to describe as “a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being for another or by virtue of another.” “It won’t even do,” she says, “to say that I am promoting a relational view of the self over an autonomous one or trying to redescribe autonomy in terms of relationality. Despite my affinity for the term relationality, we may need another language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well” (*Precarious Life* 24).
10. Levinas, as we know, was profoundly hostile to psychoanalysis, and, as Butler rightly reminds us, his account of how the “I” is inaugurated in the accusative, as a “me,” and therefore in relation to an ethical demand placed upon the “I,” is not tied to a developmental understanding of subject formation: “Levinas’s references to subject formation do not refer to a childhood [. . .] and is [sic] given no diachronic exposition; the condition is, rather, understood as synchronic and infinitely recurring” (*Giving an Account* 90).
11. Butler makes this important distinction in “Violence, Mourning, Politics”: “To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is.

- It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other" (*Precarious Life* 44).
12. See, for example, Butler's comment in *Frames of War* that "To avow injurability does not in any way guarantee a politics of non-violence" (178).
  13. In the closing pages of *Precarious Life*, she similarly suggests that experiences that may ensue from suffering can function as "resources," but that these can only be apprehended as such if we can bear with and tolerate the experiences of pain and suffering rather than "'resolve' them too quickly": "Suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not 'resolve' them too quickly; they can move us beyond and against the vocation of the paranoid victim who regenerates infinitely the justifications for war" (*Precarious Life* 149-50).

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