

Vulnerability, Conscience, and Integrity

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This essay explores how vulnerability, understood not as precarity but as capacious responsiveness, much as the philosopher Judith Butler identifies it, and recognition are key moral concepts that are prior conditions for the expression of conscience. Appreciating Thomas Aquinas' argument that conscience is neither a power or a habit, but rather an act, the essay argues that Aquinas' inclination synderesis, that prompts us to the good and away from evil, functions in a way similar to vulnerability. Fundamentally, vulnerability prompts us to recognize the neighbor who needs our response.

Vulnerability Ethics

These years I am trying to develop a vulnerability ethics.¹ I have been arguing that vulnerability and recognition are the necessary preconditions for preparing for the moral life and need to be addressed even before the question of conscience comes into ethical play. I arrived at my thesis on vulnerability, recognition and conscience after facing an ongoing concern of mine. It seemed to me that in the United States we were designing ethics courses with the hope that they could have moral, formative impact on our students. We were thinking that through ethics courses we were forming their consciences and in this way we were teaching norms, values and virtues to get our students to make good judgments about ethical issues.

But I began to see that I was having little impact on whether they would be ethically responsive in the first place. For instance, I teach a course on HIV/AIDS and public health; my students learn a lot about public health ethics; but for only about half of them do they actually become more ethically disposed to be responsive in the first place.

¹ James F. Keenan, "Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism," *Melita Theologica* 68.2 (2018) 129-142; "The World at Risk: Vulnerability, Precarity and Connectedness" *Theological Studies* 81.1 (2020) 132-149 doi.org/10.1177/0040563920907633; "Rethinking Humanity's Progress in Light of COVID-19," *Asian Horizons* 14.3 (September 2020) 713-735; "Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics," *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6 (2020) 56-73; <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-00601004>; "Building Blocks for Moral Education: Vulnerability, Recognition and Conscience," David DeCosse, ed. *Conscience and Catholic Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2021). Bringing both into the University see "Vulnerable to Contingency," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40.2 (2021) 221-236. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/787428/pdf>; "The Community Colleges: Giving Them the Ethical Recognition They Deserve," *Journal of Moral Theology* 9.2 (2020) 143-164. <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18040-the-community-colleges-giving-them-the-ethical-recognition-they-deserve>

In fact, some of the students who perform best in my courses are among the least ethically responsive. They do well in discussions and on tests; they *know* the material better than others, but while they know what to do if they *had* to do something, they are not per se *inclined* to be responsive in the first place. If they had a roll in the Good Samaritan parable they would be like the priest and the Levite. Like them, they knew about the law and principles of conduct but in many instances, they do not vulnerably recognize the wounded one.

Is there something about preparing students for the moral life that precedes conscience formation? If we are forming the conscience prudentially and justly, is there something else we could do that would get them to stop and recognize the need to respond in conscience in the first place? This is the question that has guided me these years.

I began to see that we were thinking of conscience as a disposition, as something the students had, that we wanted to form. Now I am beginning to think that conscience is not a disposition at all and that Thomas Aquinas was right in saying it is not a faculty or a habit, but an act, that is something we need to do. I believe now that prior to conscience there are two steps: being vulnerable to others and actually recognizing others. The act of recognition I believe is the threshold for engaging ethical activity and once we recognize, we need conscience to actually respond. In other words, I locate vulnerability and recognition as prior to the act of conscience; vulnerability is the capacity to recognize a situation calling for a response and thus the capacity and its act of recognition prompts us to be responsive. On the dawn of responsiveness, we need in conscience to act so as to sort out how to proceed prudentially. Returning to our students then, what the non-responsive students lack is not knowledge, but vulnerability, a call to responsiveness, a call to be answerable. In short, we make appeals to conscience when we should be making appeals to their vulnerability

Before explaining what I mean on vulnerability and recognition, let me say something about Aquinas on conscience and *synderesis* and note that I think he had similar, but mostly undeveloped ideas on the topic.

In the *Pars Prima* of the *Summa*, Thomas wrote that conscience was not a faculty or a habit, but simply an act (*Summa Theologiae* I. 79. 13). According to him, when we act in conscience, we try to descend into the particulars to consider what we should prudentially do so as to act morally. In fact, in the *Prima Secunda* when he asks whether it is a sin to disobey the dictates of conscience and answers yes always (I-II. 19.5), the word he uses is “ratio,” reason.

In the *Pars Prima*, before he writes on conscience, Thomas asked about a closely related aspect of the moral life called *synderesis*. There he argued that *synderesis* is a habit that *inclines* us to the good and murmurs at evil; this initial habit is for Thomas what eventually launches the act of conscience (*Summa Theologiae* I. 79. 12). Here, Thomas first notes that the human’s “act of reasoning...is a kind of movement.” His “*synderesis*” is a prompt, a “kind of movement” that starts us to consider that we should be responsive in pursuing the good and avoiding evil. I think of it as a capacious disposition toward the other. About this idea of movement, he writes that it has “a special natural habit, which we call *synderesis*. Whence *synderesis* is said to incite to good, and to murmur at evil, inasmuch as through first principles we proceed to discover, and judge of what we have discovered.” This prompting to discover is, I think, akin to recognition. I think, therefore, this notion of *synderesis* that “incites to good, and to murmur at evil” resonates very much with that disposition that I and others call “vulnerability,” a vulnerability that leads to a recognition of the other in need.

In fact, when Thomas moves to the next article on conscience, he acknowledges that we confuse conscience with *synderesis* but insists that conscience is an act, in fact, as subsequent or an effect of *synderesis*. This is not far from my suggestion that the act of conscience is the effect of recognizing out of vulnerability the presence of another in need. Thomas explains his terms:

Now, it is clear that all these things follow the actual application of knowledge to what we do. Wherefore, properly speaking, conscience denominates an act. But since habit is a principle of act, sometimes the name conscience is given to the first natural habit—namely, *synderesis*: thus Jerome calls *synderesis* conscience (Gloss. Ezech. 1:6); Basil, the *natural power of judgment*, and Damascene says that it is the *law of our intellect*. For it is customary for causes and effects to be called after one another. (ST I.79. 13)

Like Thomas, I want to argue that something precedes conscience that inclines us toward recognizing the neighbor in the first place. Thomas called this inclination *synderesis*. I want to explore what that something is in different, more contemporary terminology like “vulnerability,” so that we can better educate our students to be responsive, that is to vulnerably recognize those in need and then act in conscience.

Of course, I am at the beginning of this project. I do not know yet how we train students to be vulnerably responsive. I do know, however, that we do not need to be teaching them more norms from conscience for acting prudentially, that is, wisely. The problem is not that they do not know how to act, but that they should respond in the first place. Like the priest and the Levite, they cross the road and avoid the situation. Vulnerability helps educators to recognize the prompt that as Thomas suggests everyone has but not everyone allows to incline them to respond.

So as illustrate how I am thinking of **conscience**, let us return to the Good Samaritan parable: I believe neither the priest or the Levite were vulnerably disposed to the injured man and, therefore, neither recognized him as injured and in need. On the other hand, the Good Samaritan’s recognition of the man gives evidence of his vulnerability to the injured man. Then, *after* the Samaritan recognized the man as being in need, he *in conscience* went about *considering the details of what he needed to do*. Acting in conscience, he needed to address a wide array of matters that he had yet to consider: assess the man’s condition, clean the wounds, get him to a safe place, make inquiries about the appropriate person and place for him to leave the man to heal, negotiate and secure from the newly found innkeeper his oversight of the injured man, dispense with his funds, redesign his return to this particular inn and innkeeper so as to take the man with him, and then to bring him with him to his own homeland. The Good Samaritan’s conscience got a workout, but the work of his conscience only began after his vulnerable disposition *recognized* the man; the vulnerable recognition led then to the conscience question: now what do I do? And in conscience he worked out an enormous set of ethical answers to the central question of conscience, *Now what do I do?*

Before leaving Thomas it is necessary to acknowledge that Thomas wrote very little on *synderesis*, beyond what I wrote earlier. Still, when Thomas writes about the Holy Spirit, he sees the Spirit as the one who prompts us to recognize others. In his new book, *The Holy Spirit and Moral Action in Thomas Aquinas*, Jack Mahoney notes that Thomas often talked about the “prompting” of the Holy Spirit (*instinctus Spiritus Sancti*)² Prompting is not

² Jack Mahoney, *The Holy Spirit and Moral Action in Thomas Aquinas* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021) 49.

simply being led or guided, it is an internal awakening, a counsel to take heed, to act, to respond, that is, I dare suggest, to recognize.

Elsewhere, In his *Commentary on Romans* Thomas also writes that “The Holy Spirit does not just teach us what we ought to be done by enlightening our mind on what we should do; he also inclines our desires to act rightly.”³ Mahoney notes how Thomas asserts that “in every action of the spiritual person, it is the initiative of the Holy Spirit which is the source and the principle of the action and that God’s children are truly acted upon” though in such a way that “they themselves act.”⁴ Noting the principle which Thomas regularly observes that “no habit proceeds to act spontaneously; it needs to be aroused by some agent,” Mahoney suggests we are prompted by the counsel of the Spirit opening our eyes to the other.⁵

I think of that vulnerable inclination, what Thomas calls *synderesis*, that tendency “that inclines us to the good and murmurs at evil” is what the Spirit prompts: it inclines us to act vulnerably and with recognition.

Before leaving Aquinas let me acknowledge that by introducing now the Holy Spirit in Thomas’ thought, it leads us with even more questions about how we can teach vulnerability and such promptings to recognition. But what it does do, at least for the argument that I am proposing here, it reiterates again that Thomas saw that conscience is not the start of the moral life. The moral life begins with the inclination to the other needing somehow to be first prompted and that is what we in education need to attend to if we want our students to be responsive in conscience.

So now let me explain what I mean by vulnerability and recognition.

Vulnerability and Recognition

Like many others, when I first thought of vulnerability, I considered it singularly as being wounded, weak, at sea, as primarily a condition that raises in others alarm and concern. Then I recognized that the word “vulnerable” does not mean “having been wounded,” but rather “being able to be wounded.” More importantly, from the writings of the philosopher, Judith Butler, I began to see vulnerability as less about being wounded and more about being what I call capaciously responsive.

Butler realizes that too many people think of vulnerability as primarily being in an unstable context, but she wants us to understand that all of us as human beings are vulnerable to one another; however, she describes when one is at risk as being in “precarity.” She notes: “Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency.”⁶

In a very fine book, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, Erinn C. Gilson considers the implications of a reductively negative view of vulnerability as being in need, being precarious, or even being wounded. She argues rightly that if vulnerability is only the object of concern and *not* the very condition for responsiveness, then when we are in precarity, we would be inevitably looking for moral

³ Ibid., 83-83, See *In Rom 8, lect. 1*.

⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁵ Ibid., 68. See *De Virtutibus 1. ad 14*.

⁶ Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26./2 (2012): 134-151, at 148; See also her *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2004).

responsiveness from someone who is anything but vulnerable, that is, those who “occupy the role of the invulnerable” one.⁷

Butler insists on how foundational vulnerability is. She writes: “Ethical obligation not only depends upon our vulnerability to the claims of others but establishes us as creatures who are fundamentally defined by that ethical relation.”⁸ Vulnerability is what defines and establishes us as capable of being moral among one another. As such, our vulnerability precedes everything else that we can say about ourselves.

Again, emphasizing the priority of vulnerability, she contends: “This ethical relation is not a virtue that I have or exercise; it is prior to any individual sense of self. It is not as discrete individuals that we honor this ethical relation. I am already bound to you, and this is what it means to be the self I am, receptive to you in ways that I cannot fully predict or control.”⁹

She acknowledges that our vulnerability is woundable and adds: “This is also, clearly, the condition of my injurability as well, and in this way my answerability and my injurability are bound up with one another. In other words, you may frighten me and threaten me, but my obligation to you must remain firm.”¹⁰ I am answerable to you and therein I am injurable or woundable, as I prefer to say. But it is our answerability that vulnerability first signifies, or as the theological ethicist Charles Mathewes writes: “Vulnerability seems better understood as a description of our openness than our woundable-ness; the way we are porous to what is not self.”¹¹

Vulnerability essentially is what most qualifies ourselves as being bound to and among others and this, we shall see, is what prompts our recognition of the other. In fact, the act of recognition reciprocates and affirms our vulnerability.

Butler returns to the priority of vulnerability, this notion that “I am *already* bound to you” that is prior even to the moan from another in need. She writes: “You call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness.”¹² Our vulnerability is our answerability; like *synderesis* it incites and prompts us to recognize, to respond, to communicate, in short, to what in the Christian tradition we call love.

⁷ Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2014) at 35. In fact, she advertises her book as a corrective to the discourse: “The meaning of vulnerability is commonly taken for granted and it is assumed that vulnerability is almost exclusively negative, equated with weakness, dependency, powerlessness, deficiency and passivity. This reductively negative view leads to problematic implications, imperiling ethical responsiveness to vulnerability, and so prevents the concept from possessing the normative value many theorists wish it to have. When vulnerability is regarded as weakness and, concomitantly, invulnerability is prized, attentiveness to one’s own vulnerability and ethical response to vulnerable others remain out of reach goals.” At p. i.

⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) 110; See also her *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

⁹ Butler, *Notes* 110.

¹⁰ Butler *Notes* 110.

¹¹ Charles Mathewes, “Vulnerability and Political Theology,” Heikke Springhart and Günther Thomas, eds., *Exploring Vulnerability* (Bristol, CT.: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017, p. 165-184, at 168.

¹² *Ibid.*, 110. See also Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Still there are questions here. From Lisa Tessman effectively comes the question whether everyone is as able to be vulnerable to the other *and* like Hille Haker, she asks whether everyone should be as vulnerable to the other.¹³ Indeed these are questions that ethicists are rightly answering.¹⁴ For instance, in the U.S., the Latina theologian, Neomi De Anda, introduces the difference between chosen and *forced* vulnerability and Amanda Osheim argues that privilege is the denial of vulnerability.¹⁵

Though I enjoy much of Judith Butler for developing a virtue ethics of vulnerability and though like most of us I depend on Axel Honneth (and to some extent) Nancy Fraser on recognition, I most depend on Hille Haker for her theological, critical engagement of both.

This only started about five years ago, because it was only then that I began developing a vulnerability ethics. Much earlier Haker noted the influence of Levinas in contemporary theological work on vulnerability and raised the issue: “What becomes important for the concept of the moral self, however, is that from the ethical perspective of ‘giving an account of oneself,’ both the narrative and the failure of the narrative are addressed toward the other.”¹⁶

At that point she introduced the significance of narrative in order to fill out the exchange. “The role of narrative goes far beyond being a constitutive part of self-identity. The self—who is indeed, as Butler and Ricœur claimed, dependent on the narratives of others, as well as on self-narratives, to develop or uphold an identity over time—is likewise dependent on narrative as a moral self, questioning moral convictions and visions of the ‘other’ from the point of view of the self as sameness.”¹⁷ These narratives though require an account not only of the self to others, but of the self to oneself, and those self-reflexive narratives do not, as Haker wisely remarks, always get resolved. On the contrary, the “deeply reflexive narratives” highlight that invariably there is no final resolution.¹⁸ In short, these narratives reveal more a dilemma than a solution.

More recently in *Towards a Critical Political Ethics: Catholic Ethics and Social Challenges*, Haker develops the area of “vulnerable agency” in which she further develops both Levinas and Butler and incorporates a moral self, now not only in a self-reflexive narrative but as clearly having moral agency within it. She writes, implicitly presupposing that shaped by vulnerability we are first answerable, but that our agency *subsequently*

¹³ Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Keenan, “Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6 (2020) 56-73, at 73. Among such accounts, see the essays in Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Among such accounts, see the essays in Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Neomi De Anda, “Spirit of Community: Forced Vulnerability, the Little Details as realized hope and Lament as prophetic protest,” Response at Holy Spirit Lecture, Duquesne University (October 5, 2021). *ibid.* See another Amanda C. Osheim who raised up privilege as “the denial of vulnerability,” in her response, “Vulnerable as Christ: Privilege and the Kenotic Marks of the Church.”

¹⁶ Hille Haker, “The Fragility of the Moral Self,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 97(4), 359-381, at 366. doi:10.1017/S0017816004000756

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹⁸ She writes: “Thus, what is expressed through the medium of narrative is the impossibility of overcoming the tension between speaking and keeping silent, between agency and non-agency (by way of passivity or suffering), between being oneself and another, between fragility and sovereignty, between forgetting and memory, and finally between life and death.” *Ibid.* 380.

shapes that answerability: "Vulnerability encompasses the radical ambiguity of human relations. We do not 'naturally' develop into agents; rather, we are addressed and shaped by others *as* (potential, actual, or former) *agents*, in order to *see* ourselves *as* agents, beings who are able to act on one's own account. Vulnerability refers as much to the social constitution of the self as to the general affectability of human beings."¹⁹ In sum, she writes: "In any action we take the risk to affect the other and be affected by them, and morally speaking, we aim to affect others (and be affected) in a positive way."²⁰

I like this move very much. To remedy the overlooking of the self as agent, she integrates a notion of autonomy into this vulnerable context. She concludes, "The ethics of vulnerable agency embraces autonomy, but it understands it and reinterprets it, in part, as the capacity to open up to the other, in part as the capability to respond to the other, including in the right to say no to the other's demands or desires."²¹

This agency in a vulnerable context then takes account of one's freedom and one's burdens but is still shaped and constituted as moral because it is first vulnerable, before, if you will, being agential or autonomous. Haker's proposals take us further than anyone I know into making vulnerability more attainable and expressible for ordinary life. Vulnerability is still prior to all, but we need agency to decide whether and how we should recognize and respond.

Finally, to close on vulnerability, I want to note that Linda Hogan of Trinity College Dublin, like Haker, highlights vulnerability's social significance. In 2018 in Sarajevo, at the close of the third international conference of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC), Hogan, the co-chair of CTEWC, gave the final plenary proposing an ethics of vulnerability for a divided world, describing "vulnerability as a way of being, as the ground of our relationality, and as the mode of social engagement."²²

She asks, "Can this existential experience of vulnerability be deployed in the service of a politics that unites rather than divides? This depends on whether this recognition of vulnerability can generate a new kind of conversation: about how we act in the world; about our ethical obligations towards each other; about how to oppose the conditions under which some lives are more vulnerable than others."²³

She concludes: "Mutual dependence, shared vulnerability, these are elements of human experience that have rarely featured in the ways in which politics is constructed or ethical theories are framed. Indeed, much of our politics and ethics seems to be intent on foreclosing this recognition. And yet shared vulnerability and mutual dependence may be precisely the qualities that have a resonance with the individuals and communities worldwide who are struggling to find the grounds for the hope of shared future in a world divided."²⁴

¹⁹ Hille Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics: Catholic Ethics and Social Challenges* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2020) 138-139.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²² Hogan, Linda: "Vulnerability: An Ethic for a Divided World," in James F. Keenan, Kristin Heyer and Andrea Vicini, (ed.): *Building Bridges in Sarajevo: The Plenary Papers of Sarajevo 2018*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019, p. 216.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-20.

Along with others,²⁵ Hogan amply shows how vulnerability could well animate the discourse regarding how we encounter human dignity across the world.²⁶

Recognition

From the feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, I learned that the experience of mutual recognition in infancy provides a constitutive foundation of the personal and social realization of the good life, the moral life.²⁷ I think that her work in exploring how young children encounter mutual recognition might be a source for inviting students to recognize and consider their own capacity for vulnerability. By helping them see that mutual recognition is a part of growing into moral agency, we might be able to explore how to teach them to be attentive to the very stirrings, promptings or inclinations of vulnerability.

Still, rather than entering into that later investigation, here we need to explore the theological meaning of recognition and again it is Haker who provides, what I think is the theological and moral urgency of the issue when she reflects not on recognizing but, rather, on the experience of being recognized. She writes: "It is through recognition---or, more precisely, through the experience of being recognized by others---that the self is enabled to keep the *tension* between sameness and uniqueness or one's otherness in balance."²⁸ Then she asks the question, "Why does recognition matter so much?"²⁹ After reflecting on the spectrum of the three-fold meanings of recognition as awakening, identification and acknowledgment, she highlights the power of recognition, when it is given and when it is withheld or positively refused and here again she advances recognition discourse by looking at not its benefits but the way it is used to harm: "The evaluations and self-evaluations constitute one's standing in the eyes of others and oneself, and it is through acts of misrecognition as well as through systemic forms of misrecognition that foster denigrative gestures and/or acts that persons are morally harmed."³⁰ I think her emphasis on the refusal to recognize is a way of understanding how recognition can be weaponized and in fact, this is what is experienced by those most in need of recognition.

Last year in an article, entitled, "Recognition and Responsibility," Haker rightly noted "While the concept of responsibility is a cornerstone of Christian ethics, recognition theory still lacks a thorough theological-ethical analysis."³¹ In response to the lack of theological ethical engagement with recognition theory, she proposes a consideration of

²⁵ See Vincent Leclercq, AA, *Blessed are the Vulnerable: Reaching out to Those with AIDS* (New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2010).

²⁶ Indeed Hogan is one who has offered a significant and hope-filled apology for a human rights discourse, animated by the language of human dignity. Insisting that our expectations ought to be more modest and realistic, she suggests in her work that human rights discourse can amply support our work to achieve greater equity universally. For her, vulnerability, human dignity, and human rights are mutually engaging and illuminating. Linda Hogan, *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015.

²⁷ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done to: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

²⁸ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 143.

²⁹ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 143.

³⁰ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 144.

³¹ Haker, "Recognition and Responsibility," *Religions* 2021, 12(7), 467; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070467>

the murder of Abel by Cain in Genesis 4:1-16,³² which she calls “the paradigmatic story of morality told as part of the narrative of the origins of humans and the history of their faith.”

She describes the famous narrative in this way: “The story depicts Cain’s desire to be recognized by God, spelling out the tragic consequences of misunderstanding God’s love and demands. Cain becomes as much the symbol of the desire for recognition as for the failure of responsibility. Being marked *and* put under God’s protection in one symbol, Cain survives his moral failure, just as the people of God survive all following failures and mistakes despite all the catastrophes that pile up over the course of history.”³³ Through Haker we see Cain’s terror in the face of never being recognized as human and his relief in finding in God’s own mark a way that he and his people will survive and grow.

Through the fear of not being recognized, what Haker calls misrecognition, we see the true power of recognition. Still, so as to appreciate what this misrecognition actually entails, I return to Butler again, but this time to her comments on the concept of grievability. Here she writes: “The most individual question of morality---how do I live this life that is mine?---is bound up with biopolitical questions distilled in forms such as these: Whose lives matter? Whose lives do not matter as lives, are not recognizable as living, or count only ambiguously as alive?”³⁴ In short “whose lives are grievable and whose are not?”

Butler talks about how we individually and collectively live out the matter of grievability in powerful and prophetic terms. She writes: “The biopolitical management of the un-grievable proves crucial to approaching the question, how do I lead this life.” Terrifyingly, Butler reflects on the person who understands themselves as not grievable. This, of course, is Cain’s terror. He fears that his life (and inevitable death) is not grievable and therefore does not matter. Butler notes: “this question becomes most acute for someone, anyone, who already understands him- or herself to be a dispensable sort of being, one who registers at an affective and corporeal level that his or her life is *not* worth safeguarding, protecting, and valuing.”³⁵ She adds, “If it turns out that I have no certainty that I will have food or shelter, or that no social network or institution would catch me if I fall, then I could come to belong to the un-grievable.”³⁶

Powerfully Butler sums up her argument about how social structures effectively make the determination of the un-grievable.

The reason that someone will not be grieved for, or have already been established as one who is not to be grieved for, is that there is no present structure of support that will sustain that life, which implies that it is devalued, not worth supporting and protecting as a life by dominant schemes of value. The very future of my life depends upon that condition of support, so if I am not supported, then my life is established as tenuous, precarious, and in that sense not worthy to be protected from injury or loss, and so not grievable. If only a grievable life can be valued, and valued through time, then only a grievable life will be eligible for social and economic support, housing, health care, employment, rights of political expression, forms of social recognition, and the conditions for political agency (*Handlungsfähigkeit*). One must, as it were, be grievable before one is lost, before any question of being neglected or abandoned, and

³² Writing on Cain and Abel, Haker refers to Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. (London: Athlone Press, 1990.) LaCocque, Andre. 2015. *Onslaught against Innocence: Cain, Abel and the Yabwist*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co; Vermeulen, Karolien. 2014. Mind the Gap: Ambiguity in the Story of Cain and Abel. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133: 29–42.

³³ Haker, “Recognition and Responsibility.”

³⁴ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 196.

³⁵ Butler, *Notes*, 196-7.

³⁶ Butler, *Notes*, 197.

one must be able to live a life knowing that the loss of this life that I am would be mourned and so every measure will be taken to forestall this loss.³⁷

I think Butler's concept of the social demarcation of those whose lives are grievable and those whose lives are not, helps us to realize the social impact of mutual recognition.

Before we move to the question of social structures that make, in part, these determinations, I wish to propose a brief concrete meditation on the misrecognized or the unrecognizable so as to see the actual import of these categories. Here I turn to the actual public murder of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. The murder was committed by a police officer with other officers assisting over the period of 9 minutes and 29 seconds of having a knee pressed down on Floyd's throat as he died uttering "I can't breathe."³⁸ That death that white supremacists tried to let pass as unrecognizable provided the social instruction by the Black Lives Matter movement for all Americans to kneel in grief for the same 9 minutes and 29 seconds as a counter practice not only to George Floyd's death but so as to recognize all the murders and lynchings of Black Americans over the past 400 years.

The history of lynching is instructive for understanding grievability. In 2015 Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative released a study "that detailed over 4,400 documented racial terror lynchings of Black people in America between 1877 and 1950." In June 2020, EJI reported "during the 12-year period of Reconstruction (1865-1877) at least 2,000 Black women, men, and children were victims of racial terror lynchings."³⁹ Not only were these deaths not grieved, their murders were horrendously celebrated with white men, white women and white children participating. Against that social culture, the Black Lives Matter movement insisted that white culture be taught how to grieve the death of George Floyd, by kneeling for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, by uttering "I can't breathe," and by remembering the name of George Floyd and all those others murdered in the United States.

Black Lives Matter is a way of teaching white Americans to acknowledge that George Floyd mattered, that he was and is grievable. As were Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and all other Black Americans killed by white American supremacists. Black Lives Matter calls us to remember their names, their lives, and their deaths as grievable. The movement prompts us to recognize how these people died and how until this moment, we could simply overlook these killings, without taking note. BLM is a social movement summoning white America to a mutual recognition of Black America. That due recognition is theirs and always was theirs.⁴⁰

Here then we see recognition as not simply a personal summons but a social one and on that insight I want to conclude this essay.

³⁷ Butler, *Notes*, 197-8.

³⁸ Elliott McLaughlin, "Three videos piece together the final moments of George Floyd's life," *CNN* (June 23, 2020) <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/us/george-floyd-three-videos-minneapolis/index.html>

³⁹ Equal Justice Initiative, "Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence after the Civil War" <https://eji.org/report/reconstruction-in-america/>;

⁴⁰ Keenan, "The Color Line, Race and Caste: Structures of Domination and the Ethics of Recognition," *Theological Studies*, 82.1 (2021) 69-94; On other needs for recognition, Keenan, "The Community Colleges: Giving Them the Ethical Recognition They Deserve," *Journal Of Moral Theology* 9.2 (2020) 143-164 <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18040-the-community-colleges-giving-them-the-ethical-recognition-they-deserve>; Keenan, "Vulnerability, Hierarchicalism, and Recognition," Philip McCosker, Luigi Gioia, and Travis LaCouter, ed *Clericalism and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming)..

The question of cultures insulating us from the need to recognize our neighbor was raised in the United States nearly ninety years ago by one of the most famous Protestant American ethicists, Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1932 Niebuhr warned ethicists that they lacked “an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations.”⁴¹ There, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, he insisted that we do not see “the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior.”⁴² In many ways we go on teaching today nearly ninety years later failing to heed the forces that empower “the inequalities of privilege (that) are greater than could possibly be defended rationally.”⁴³ It is in the interests of such forces that we continue to fail to recognize those whose inequities pay the price of our privilege.

More recently Isabel Wilkerson, in her magnificent *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, argues that Americans need to recognize racism is a caste system. Throughout her influential work she provokes the reader to see how our society keeps us from seeing the structures that frame American racism. To awaken us from our compliance with these structures, she proposes the image of a “wordless usher,” whose flashlight keeps our gaze focused, not letting our eyes avert to any recognition that caste itself is guiding us to look only at what caste wants us to recognize. She writes:

As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of castes is not about feeling or morality. It is about power - which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources, about which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, and about who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority and assumptions of competence - who is accorded these and who is not.⁴⁴

Wilkerson defines caste as “the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy.”⁴⁵ In short, her wordless usher, the white supremacist culture that many Americans still live within, guide the way we see reality and how we distinguish human lives as grievable or ungrivable.

Early in her work she explains how caste can help us understand how race is structured in my country, the United States. “Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a four-hundred-year-old social order. Looking at caste is like holding the country’s X-ray up to the light.”⁴⁶ She sums up the compelling way they correlate: “Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin.”⁴⁷

⁴¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) xxxiv.

⁴² Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, xxxiv.

⁴³ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 117.

⁴⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* (New York: Random House, 2020), 17-18.

⁴⁵ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 70.

⁴⁶ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 17.

⁴⁷ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 19.

She proposes that we consider how early caste was formed. The arrival of the slave ships in 1619 helps us to see that “before there was a United States of America, there was a caste system, born in colonial Virginia.”⁴⁸ Against the Blackness of the American slave, “the general white population... was hardening into a single caste.”⁴⁹ The impact of slavery was not simply “a dark chapter in the country’s history.”⁵⁰ Nor was it “merely an unfortunate thing that happened to black people.”⁵¹ Rather, slavery “was an American innovation, an American institution created by and for the elites of the dominant caste and enforced by poorer members of the dominant caste.”⁵² Its impact was ferocious: “the vast majority of African-Americans who lived in this land in the first 246 years of what is now the United States lived under the terror of people who had absolute power over their bodies and their very breath, subject to people who faced no sanction for any atrocity they could conjure.”⁵³ She added, “Slavery so perverted the balance of power that it made the degradation of the subordinate caste seem normal and righteous.”⁵⁴

Whiteness developed for the sake of caste. Europeans, before coming to America, were Italian, German, French, English, Serb, Swede, and Russian. When they arrived in America, they became identified as “white” and “were fused together...solely...to strengthen the dominant caste in the hierarchy.”⁵⁵ As white, they learned that “hostility toward the lowest caste became part of the initiation rite into citizenship.”⁵⁶ Through caste, immigrants became white supremacists.⁵⁷

Wilkerson notes that caste is, she writes, “not necessarily personal.” Rather, caste is constituted by “patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things.”⁵⁸ It a word, in the United States caste is familiar, “the investment in keeping the hierarchy as it is in order to maintain your own ranking, advantage, privilege, or to keep yourself above others or keep others beneath you.”⁵⁹

The power of these arguments by Niebuhr and Wilkerson is that they remind us how prevalent the forces are that keep us from reverting our gaze and discovering a mutual recognition in the other whose conditions we are socially trained to ignore. Recognition is therefore the act that liberates the vulnerability of both the agent and the other in the face of the distorting power of the castes or social systems that structure our lives.

As Haker and Honneth noted, by misrecognition or disrespect, we see those who are not recognized and generally they are not individuals but collectives, organized by race, tribe, ethnicity, class, caste, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Similarly for Butler too the ungrievable are not preeminently singular persons but collectives again. Social structures

⁴⁸ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 41.

⁴⁹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 42.

⁵⁰ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 43.

⁵¹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 44.

⁵² Wilkerson, *Caste*, 44.

⁵³ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 47.

⁵⁴ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 47.

⁵⁵ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 49.

⁵⁶ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 50.

⁵⁷ Throughout her work, though there is no space here to engage it, Wilkerson discusses the middle caste, e.g., at 52, “slavery built the man-made chasm between blacks and whites that forces the middle castes... and new immigrants of African descent to navigate within what began as a bipolar hierarchy.” Helpfully, see Ki Joo Choi, *Disciplined by Race: Theological Ethics and the Problem of Asian American Identity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019).

⁵⁸ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 70.

⁵⁹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 70.

like those created by capitalism or by a slave market helped to manage us and in particular to distinguish those who count as recognizable or grievable from those who do not.

Conclusion

We began this essay on the problematic that in teaching our students to be morally upright we have depended too much on the norms of conscience rather than on matters that prompt us to act morally responsively in the first place. That investigation led us first back to Thomas Aquinas who reminded us that conscience is an act that needs to be prompted by what he called, *synderesis*, the disposition in us that inclines us to do good and avoid evil. Following Aquinas we found in the writings of Butler and Haker the development of human vulnerability as our capacity to be morally responsive, a responsiveness that leads us first to recognizing another or others as having been misrecognized, or overlooked, or worse as discardable as Pope Francis calls them or ungrivable as Butler suggests. This connection between vulnerability and recognition helps us see how much of human nature depends on recognition, and yet, how often our cultures keep us from recognizing those whose condition so desperately need to be so recognized. And yet, it is by looking not at how individuals act, but rather how collectives are influenced that we see the true nature of this problematic. From Niebuhr and Wilkerson, we could see the ways that culture guides our gaze to recognize or not others. By concluding on the matter of race and caste in the United States I think we can see that in any of our cultures there are social structures that make the original question with which I began this essay all the more urgent. For I believe that in many instances the failure to recognize is not that some have not yet considered the other as grievable, but rather that social influences have already dimmed in many any interest in the need to recognize others in the first place. Until we heed the warnings of Niebuhr, Wilkerson and the others, we might think all that is needed is for us to teach more norms of conscience, when actually we let go unchecked those social influences that condition many to look at the other in need as not a human but rather like Cain, but without even the mark.

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