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# Analogy and narrative: caring about the forgone and repressed

Jackie Davies

*Queen's University at Kingston*

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**Title:** Analogy and narrative: caring about the forgone and repressed

**Author:** Jackie Davies

**Response to this paper by:** Christina Slade

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### ***Introduction***

Should the ethic of care preclude certain decisions about abortion? Some are convinced that contrary to the assertions of its most vocal proponents, on pain of dissolving into contradiction, it must do so. Celia Wolf-Devine argues, for example, that on this question such advocates of the feminine voice — as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings are inconsistent to the point of incoherence. On the one hand they are critical of rights discourse and the deductive mode of justice reasoning, yet — they express the sort of unqualified support for free access to abortion which has come to be regarded as a central tenet of feminist orthodoxy (1998, 161). Typified in the work of Mary Anne Warren and Judith Jarvis Thompson, this feminist orthodoxy is typically expressed and defended by appeal to rights and the fair application of principles of justice.

If this weren't inconsistent enough, Wolf-Devine notes, the feminine voice in ethics attends to the particular other, thinks in terms of responsibilities to care for others, is sensitive to our interconnectedness, and strives to preserve relationships (1997, 162). On the face of it, it would seem reasonable to expect such a voice to condemn abortion, given that abortion involves not only the violent rupture of relationship but rupture within what would seem to be the very paradigm of relationships of intimate interconnection.

Against this objection, I argue that the critique of the dominance of justice reasoning, articulated most clearly by Gilligan, does not preclude approval of the kind of abortion access policy that is defended by feminist justice reasoners. At the same time, approaching the issues raised in abortion decision making situations from the perspective of the ethic of care yields something more and different yet not inconsistent with the demands of justice reasoning. Thus we need, first, to differentiate between the critique of the dominance of justice reasoning and a wholesale rejection of justice reasoning. The latter but not the former would require an automatic rejection of feminist appeals to rights and demands for justice. Second, we need to consider the contribution of care to moral reasoning on its own terms.

The nature of this contribution can be best appreciated by considering the *approaches* to moral problems that care favours rather than attempting to determine which *decision* about abortion it ought to favour. While the ethics of care does not preclude or favour this or that decision about abortion, it does facilitate and motivate a kind of *reasoning* about abortion whose possibility and significance is often obscured by the kind of reasoning whose exclusive dominance is the object of Gilligan's critique.

In general, the ethics of care requires the reasoner to come to terms with a problem through narrative engagement with it, as opposed to coming to terms with it through the methods offered by argumentation. This idea of "coming to terms" with a moral problem is admittedly vague. It has to do with an effort to achieve a better understanding of something. Insofar as this effort engages our linguistic capacities, narratively coming to terms with a problem is a kind of reasoning. Reasoning, of course, is understood here as a broader category inclusive of but not identical with argumentation. In this broad sense, I define "reasoning" as linguistic activity aimed at increasing or improving understanding; it is aimed at making sense of things. Moral

reasoning in the narrative mode, therefore, is aimed at making moral sense of things. Making moral sense in this mode is tied up with the fact that the narrative mode of reasoning is also the one in which we construct *ourselves* in the process of making sense of our experience. Moral reasoning in the narrative mode makes sense of the world in a way that makes it livable for moral selves.<sup>1</sup>

Different methods of reasoning have different strengths and limitations. In the realm of moral reasoning, argumentation plays an indispensable role in justifying decisions and enabling us to understand the implications of our decisions and actions in light of their justifiability. Reasoning in the language of justice and justification is reasoning in the domain of policy making, the domain of decision making in the third person. It articulates objective standards against which to evaluate the character, intentions and behaviour of the generalized other, the other in the third person.<sup>2</sup> Exclusive focus on issues of justification, however, may obscure approaches to the other that enable us to at the same time make moral sense of our selves, something with which we are compelled as moral reasoners, to come to terms. Through its narrative mode, care reasoning provides us with the linguistic tools necessary for engagement in the moral nexus of relationship between the first and second persons. The meaning of narrative lies somewhere in the negotiable relationship between what I tell you and what you hear me tell.<sup>3</sup>

To engage in narrative activity as a form of moral reasoning is to cognitively approach a moral situation by constructing a story around it or by reading the situation as one would read a story.<sup>4</sup> Narrative activity is particularly well suited to representing certain features of moral experience which are inevitably repressed by moral argumentation. Narrative can sustain the sort of moral ambivalence, tension and perhaps even contradiction that would threaten the cogency of a moral argument.<sup>5</sup>

Taking narrative as a mode of moral reasoning provides an alternative to what care theorists characterize as the deductive or mathematical quality of justice reasoning. It also, provides a different perspective from which to consider the nature of analogical argumentation. From this perspective, I believe, analogical argumentation appears as a hybrid form of reasoning. Though necessary to its persuasive purposes, there is a tendency for moral philosophers to minimize to some extent the narrative features of analogical reasoning. This tendency is perhaps motivated by avoidance of the taint of rhetoric and a desire for such reasoning to be recognized as

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<sup>1</sup> Hekman draws on Gilligan to argue that “morality is not just one of many language games that subjects pursue. It is central to the constitution of the subject itself and provides the grounding for the fundamental elements of subjectivity”(1995, 71). For a further taste of the extensive interdisciplinary literature on the role of narrative in the construction of self, see also Bruner, 1990, Bruner 1995, and Goldberg 1993.

<sup>2</sup> See Benhabib (1987) for an exploration of the difference between moral theorizing from the perspective of the generalized versus the concrete "other".

<sup>3</sup> My amplification of narrative ethics of care includes Buberian echoes. See Buber, 1984; and for a recent exploration of the significance of the narrative dimensions of Buber's thought, see Kepnes, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Ricoeur, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Kepnes (1992) points out that Frank Kermode provides approaches to narrative that theorize it in terms of both its sense-making capacity and its ability to sustain enigma, the former in *The Sense of An Ending*, while *The Genesis of Secrecy* lays greater emphasis on narratives enigmatic and paradoxical qualities.

legitimate in virtue of resemblance to the less woolly modes to which it is related.<sup>6</sup> But repression is not the same as elimination and obscuring the potential to generate fallacy is not the same as achieving cogency. These days when I think of hybrids I think of things like genetically modified foods. This perhaps influences my ambivalence about analogical reasoning, about whether it can be a mode of moral reasoning whose conclusions can be safely relied upon or whether it's more like some kind of intellectual Frankenfood. Maybe what I want in the end is something like clearer labeling. That is, I don't think there is anything to be gained in terms of achieving cogency by obscuring narrative characteristics of analogy, characteristics which make cogency harder to assess. Obscuring narrative characteristics, I contend is more likely to generate fallacy. At the same time, it is likely to obscure the ways in which this form of moral reasoning contributes to a better understanding of moral experience.

Rather than continuing the discussion in abstraction, I'll return now to some examples of moral reasoning that focus on abortion as a site of moral conflict, with a view to considering the implications of the narrative features of this reasoning.

### ***Thomson's violinist***

I'll begin with one of the approaches to justifying abortion, in at least some cases, that is taken by Judith Jarvis Thomson. In particular I'll focus on that part of the argument she builds on her well-known dying violinist analogy. Thomson sets up the analogy by asking the reader to imagine that "You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist.(1997, 76). It turns out that this unconscious violinist is famous and that he suffers a fatal kidney ailment. You, the reader are the only person with the right blood type to save the violinist's life as long as his circulatory system remains plugged into yours for nine months, when all the life threatening poisons will have been removed from his body. The attending physician sympathetically explains how you came to be in this predicament, that is, that you were kidnapped and involuntarily hooked up to the violinist by members of the Society for Music Lovers intent on saving the violinist's life.

The function of this analogy is to enable the argument that abortion can be justified *even* if fetal personhood is conceded. The analogy is structured so that the analogue for the fetus, namely the violinist, is recognized uncontroversially as a person--a born, fully grown, talented, highly trained, cultured and much valued member of a human community. At the same time, the analogy is structured so that the personhood of the analogue for a pregnant woman is also highlighted. This person is you the reader, whose identity as a possessor of prior goals, plans and rights is highlighted by having them represented as dramatically violated by kidnappers who interfere with your bodily integrity and your future. It is not insignificant that the analogy is constructed in a way that allows for a male reader to identify just as easily as a female reader with the kidnap victim.

Thomson sets up the moral dilemma as a perceived conflict between one person's possible right to life and another person's clear right to self-determination. To motivate the conflict we

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<sup>6</sup> Less "woolly" or less soft, of course also often means less feminine. For a discussion of the relatively low status of rhetoric and its associations with the feminine see Poster, 1998. For a discussion of the repression of the feminine in Aristotle's view of instructive drama, see Curran, 1998.

need to read "[right to life" here, of course, as shorthand for "[right to have one's life saved by anyone in a position to save it". After careful consideration of the violinist analogy and various related analogies, Thomson establishes the principle that while saving a life is undeniably a good thing, no one has a right to have their life saved by anyone unless you have voluntarily granted them that right. There is no default right to have one's life saved, however. It follows from this both that failing to save a life is not unjust and that it would be unjust to force a person to save someone else.

What is striking in this is how the violinist analogy yields the "right to be saved" principle that is essential to Thomson's argument. She assumes reader identification with the kidnap victim and relies on this to generate a particular moral intuition about the situation. Anticipating your response as a reader to the hypothetical possibility that you are denied the right to be unplugged from the violinist, she observes, "I imagine you would regard this as outrageous."<sup>7</sup> Now, if Thomson is right about what our intuitions would be, and these intuitions are morally decisive, it follows that refusing to save the life of a person whom you and only you are in a position to save is morally justifiable. By analogy (except in cases where a woman has somehow granted a fetus the right to use her body) abortion is justifiable *even* if we believe that the fetus is a person.

Thomson's answer to certain objections about the limits of this analogical argument is worth repeating here. You might want to object that the violinist analogy is an analogy for decision making about abortion only in cases of rape, given that many people who otherwise oppose abortion are willing to make an *exception* for rape cases. In Thomson's argument, the analogue for the pregnant woman enters an involuntary relationship with the fetal analogue. However, as Thomson notes, what her analogies demonstrate is that persons do not have a general right to have their lives saved, so the competing right to self-determination (in fact the only actual right in play here) cannot be trumped by it.

Presenting the analogue for the pregnant woman as someone whose competing rights to self-determination have been violated, like those of a kidnap or rape victim, is not meant to show that rights to life are diminished only when they conflict with the rights to self-determination of a person whose rights to self-determination have *already* been violated. Rather, it is meant to highlight how seriously we normally take rights to self-determination even when they have not already been violated. Thus, if a fetus, like any other person has a value that would make saving it a good thing, this does not generate a right to have its life saved or sustained at the cost of someone else's right to self-determination. That is, though our sense of outrage over a violation of a right to self-determination (e.g. through kidnapping or rape) highlights the value we accord rights to self-determination and while rights to self-determination, of course, persist even after violation, they are not generated by prior violation. A rape or kidnap victim's right to self-determination is not generated by their victimization. Thus non-victims also have rights to self-determination.

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<sup>7</sup> At this point Thomson has stretched the analogy even further so that you would face a lifetime of being unable to unplug yourself from the violinist. She assumes, reasonable I think, that if it would be wrong to require you to be plugged into the violinist for a lifetime against your will, it would be wrong to require you to be submit to even nine months of such a sentence.

I am convinced of a certain merit in Thomson's approach here. If in the case of fetal life created through rape, the value of fetal life (assumed for the sake of argument to be equivalent to the value of a person's life) does not generate a right to be saved or sustained by anyone who has not granted a special right to this, then the value of fetal life cannot be taken as sufficient to ever generate such a right.<sup>8</sup> What I find less convincing, however is the way in which the analogy is intended to demonstrate that the value of a person's life does not generate a right to be saved. Thomson's demonstration of this point depends on the strength of the sense of outrage she anticipates will be evoked by the analogy on behalf of the kidnap victim facing further threats to self-determination.

The problem here is that in practice the analogy evokes other, conflicting responses as well. In particular it evokes a powerful concern for the welfare of the violinist and a sense that there would be something very wrong in refusing to meet his life and death needs.

I have been very struck by the extent to which this response is evoked, not only in my own reading of the Thomson article, but in the response of students who encounter it in introductory moral issues courses.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately this response can get in the way of a reader "getting" some of the very valuable insights achievable through Thomson's analogy. When this happens there is a strong temptation to say to students who worry about the violinist, that their response is just an emotional response, that it is irrelevant to the most important philosophical issues at hand. At best, the significance of the response might be explained away as representing desirable preferences or laudable impulses that might occur in such a situation but which do not tell you how you are morally obligated. As Thomson herself puts it, it is not morally incumbent upon you to accede to the situation, and stay plugged in to the violinist. "No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness" (1997, 76). But, she is clear that saving the violinist is not a moral obligation and to suggest otherwise would be "outrageous"(1997, 76).

It is important to emphasize that I don't think the sympathetic response that I and many of my students have felt for the violinist is proof of a moral obligation to save him. On the other hand, it is not as irrelevant a response as Thomson's comments suggest. On the contrary, it is highly important moral data. It is at least as important as the sense of outrage that, with Thomson, I feel on behalf of someone suffering threats to self-determination. Yet, how is Thomson's sense of outrage as a piece of moral information supposed to demonstrate the reasonableness of claiming a right to self determination against the unreasonable claim of a right to be saved, unless this sense of outrage is regarded as more than an emotional response? Thomson seems to want it to function in that way, that is, as the vehicle through which we import into the argument the principle that it is unjust to require someone to save another who has no specially and voluntarily granted right to be saved. But this is an illicit question-begging move. The comparative status of the rights claims is precisely what is at issue. We do not solve

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<sup>8</sup> Thomson does not imply that a fetus could not acquire a right to life, or even that some fetuses could acquire this right at conception, but just that it wouldn't follow from the value of fetal life alone, whether or not it is regarded as a person. Rather it would acquire the right, (or even be conceived with it) if the circumstances of its conception or continued gestation were consistent with the view that the pregnant woman in that particular case had voluntarily conferred on the fetus a right to the sustenance of her body. To achieve this more than the fact of the fetus's valuable existence is required.

<sup>9</sup> Curiously, students' willingness to admit to these responses seems, in my experience, to diminish in proportion to the number of their years of post-secondary education.

the problem by giving priority to your sense of outrage about violation of rights to self-determination over an observer's sense of outrage about your refusal to save a life you are uniquely situated to save.

The appeal Thomson makes to moral intuition is not suspect here because it favours self-determination over saving lives. A similarly suspect question begging move can be made, and has been made in print, for example by Peter Singer, in *favour* of an obligation to save lives. Singer, like Thomson, relies on analogy to make this move. In his article, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," he asks us to picture the situation of a person walking past a shallow pond in which a child is drowning. "I ought to wade in and pull the child out," says Singer. "This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing" (1998, 218) The drowning child analogy is used by Singer in support of his general moral principle that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (1998, 217). While Singer offers the analogy ostensibly to illustrate how applying the general principle would look in a particular case, it functions in his argument as evidence for the legitimacy of the principle itself.

Singer's description of the morally relevant facts in this case is intended to lend itself to a very simple utilitarian calculation, but there is much more going on here than an appeal to utilitarianism. Singer's description of the situation is worded so that we need only weigh the disutility of getting one's clothes muddy against the utility of saving a child's life. Significantly, Singer does not mention the general disutility of having one's own plans for oneself be subordinated to the demands on oneself generated by someone else's needs. Presumably the value of saving a person's life is so much greater than fulfilling one's prior plans that the priority of the former over the latter need not even be mentioned. This might be a legitimate oversight if the question of the priority of life and death needs of others over one's own less vital needs was not precisely the issue in question as John Arthur, for example, points out in his reply to Singer.

There is little controversy that faced with the opportunity to save the life of a drowning child at little cost to oneself, one would feel compelled to try and save the child and would feel that there is something seriously morally wrong with anyone who refused to do so. What is controversial is whether this constitutes a demonstration of Singer's more general principle, namely and whether failure to respect this principle would constitute injustice. In addition to the problem of establishing objective standards for measuring moral significance, a problem faced by utilitarians in general, Singer's principle rests on the controversial assumption that no special weight adheres to the fact that my needs and preferences are my own.

Neither Thomson's nor Singer's analogies are adequate to the argumentational task to which they are applied. I suspect this results from certain features of analogical moral argumentation more generally, but I won't pursue that suspicion right now. My claim here is simply that, read as part of the arguments Thomson and Singer present, the analogies beg the question. At the same time, their analogies make valuable contributions to our efforts as moral reasoners to come to terms with significant moral problems. Though they fail to support the more general principles their authors take them to support, and thus fail to justify the sorts of actions and

policies they want to see implemented<sup>10</sup>, these analogies play an important role in engaging and developing our moral understanding of the subjects they address.

They draw our attention to features of specific kinds of moral situations which they recognize as under-emphasized or ignored in the prevailing discourse on the subject. Singer reminds us that we are in a relationship of being able to help save people faced with starvation. The relationship generated by their need and our ability to meet it is analogous to the relationship between the drowning child and the passerby. To the extent that the analogy is effective it brings to conscious awareness an important aspect of the moral sense to be made of the situation, namely the morally compelling quality of such a relationship. To be in such a relationship and to be aware that you were in such a relationship and yet to insist on refusing to help the needy other just because such refusal is permissible makes little moral sense. Of course it is not difficult to repress awareness of such relationship when the other is in a distant land, geographically, socially and politically located where his voice fades into background noise. So Singer argues against the temptation to minimize awareness of being in such a relationship and thus evade the burdens that would issue from the moral compulsion generated by such awareness. More controversially, he takes for granted what should follow from such awareness, ignoring the possibility of some other morally compelling force overriding it.

Singer's analogy draws our attention to something to which many of us need our attention drawn. The mistake of Singer's argument, however, is to take his representation of the relationship as its essence, the essence which, when abstracted as moral principle is available for deployment in argument. Singer's representation of the moral situation is not false; it is incomplete. This occurs not because he deliberately suppresses information but as a result of the inescapable tendency of narrative to organize description in *particular* ways rather than from the sort of disinterested universal viewpoint that moral principles are generally taken to reflect.

The story Singer tells about a relationship of need and care emphasizes certain features of such a relationship in a way that obscures other features which may play a more significant role in other instances, and which ought to be taken into consideration in the context of a general argument.

By contrast, Thomson's violinist story draws our attention to a feature of moral relationships that is minimized in Singer's analogy and is minimized in socially dominant stories about women faced with unwanted pregnancy. Thomson's analogy reminds us of how highly we rate the cost of helping a needy other when we recognize that the potential helper is a fully fledged person with a perfectly respectable interest in self-determination.

It is noteworthy that Thomson achieves this by degendering the character who is in a position to save a life but whose freedom to choose or refuse to do so is threatened. She thereby constructs the analogy for denied access to abortion so that it can be imagined as a situation that might be faced by a man. In so doing she provides access to useful resources with which to try to come to terms with what it would mean to be denied access to abortion. These resources are the socially dominant stories about what it means to be a person, stories that feminists have

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that I think these policies cannot be justified, just that the analogical arguments used are inadequate to the task. Thomson for example, has more success with her argument that it is inconsistent and unjust to require a level of moral responsiveness of women with respect to fetuses than is expected of anyone else towards people in dire need of life and death assistance.



argued express men's experience within liberal patriarchal societies (Lloyd, 1984; Jaggar, 1983; Pateman, 1986).

Incidentally, I mean patriarchal here in the sense of fraternal patriarchy outlined by Carol Pateman in *The Sexual Contract*. Of course, as Charles Mills has pointed out, in *The Racial Contract*, because liberal patriarchy was built also on white supremacist European colonialism, stories of personhood are not only gendered but also racially specific. Though the hero of these stories claims universality, and typically his gender or race seems incidental if it is even mentioned, we know he is not a woman and he is not Black, not a non-European "native". Such people as those are always specified by their differences, so the lack of mention of specific gender or race in this context signals dominant gender and race by default.

The value of autonomy and self-determination figures prominently in liberal patriarchy's culturally dominant personhood stories. By constructing a story about access to abortion so that it resonates with these values, Thomson reminds us of the power of those values to help us make moral sense of the situations we face. Her strategy also highlights the importance of making sense of the situation in a way that preserves these values something to which we can appeal to make moral sense of things even if "we" are normally excluded within this genre of moral stories.

Singer's story amplifies a different value in virtue of its similarity to another genre, namely rescue stories. In this genre, human vulnerability is best represented in the cry of a child. Inclination, capacity and responsibility to perform the rescue is represented in the actions of a self-less mother-figure or by a heroic male figure whose selfhood is so secure and abundant that he can easily afford to do what is needed to save the day. On either scenario conflict simply does not arise between the obligations generated by the needs of the vulnerable and the responsibilities (to self or to others) of the rescuer.

Both Singer's and Thomson's analogies are constructed so as to bring them into relation with values that are typically not brought to bear on the kinds of problems they are addressing. The problem lies in how the success of the arguments they build on the foundations provided by these values depends on repressing the destabilizing force of the other stories and values with which they also resonate.

In this respect Thomson's analogy is particularly striking. You don't have to probe very deeply at all to find the elements within it that resonate with both sets of conflicting values: the right to self determination versus the responsibility to rescue someone whose life you are in a unique position to save.

The cries of Singer's drowning child resonate more loudly than anything else, so loudly that they tend to drown out other possible considerations. In Thomson's analogy, however, while the legitimate interests of the kidnap victim are amplified, the moral significance of the needs of the unconscious violinist is not altogether muted. Indeed it is because they are not wholly muted that Thomson's analogy does a good job of representing the predicament of a woman who experiences abortion decision making as decision making about sustaining or severing a human relationship.

Incidentally I don't think sustaining or terminating pregnancy has to be experienced as decision making about sustaining or severing a human relationship, just that it can be experienced this way.

Where Thomson fails is in responding to the pregnant woman's predicament with nothing better than a question begging argument that gives significance to one of the moral responses predictably evoked by her analogy by suppressing the significance of others. She does not adequately address the fact that, to many, refusal to meet the violinist's vital needs appears as evidence of baffling moral deafness.

This does not mean that Thomson's effort to engage in moral reasoning about abortion is without value. To properly realize the value of her reasoning requires recognizing some thing. Our understanding of the plight of a woman facing an unwanted pregnancy is not resolved but rather is complicated by Thomson's achievement, i.e. by reminding us of the personhood of the pregnant woman and how this should raise concerns for us about her rights to self-determination. Rather than resolving the moral problem, Thomson's representation of it intensifies the need to bring further resources to bear in renewed efforts to come to terms with it.

To underscore this claim I shall turn now to an analogy modeled after Thomson's violinist which I think is best read, against the author's intentions, as heightening our awareness of the complexity of the problem it addresses rather than resolving it.

### ***Catch a Falling Person***

In a paper entitled "Cosmopolitan Respect and Patriotic Concern." Richard W. Miller explores the question of what is morally owed to the needy foreigner, in contrast to what is owed to the needy compatriot. Part of his argument is powered by an analogy which, to confirm his account of its implications, he explicitly compares with Thomson's violinist analogy.

Miller's analogy is meant to reflect and reinforce the view that one is not required to "[take] on more than one's fair share of world-improvement," so that "grave self-sacrifice is not required, even if it is productive of great good"(1998, 209).

The analogy is this:

I see a full-size adult fall, headfirst, out of a tenth-story window. No one else is nearby. Because of my deep knowledge of ballistics and anatomy, I know that if I rush to catch him, I will save his life, by cushioning his fall and keeping his head from striking the sidewalk. But if I cushion his fall, I am very likely to break some bones, which will heal, perhaps painfully and incompletely, in the course of several months.(1998, 209)

Like Thomson, Miller concludes that you are not required to save this life. Moreover, he adds, the person who dies in consequence should affirm the legitimacy of your choice. According to Miller the unplugged violinist and the uncaught victim of gravity should not and would not take your failure to save their lives as an expression of disrespect for the value of their lives. Your moral self-respect is bolstered, Miller believes, by reassuring yourself that "Even if there is no question that the cost of helping to me would be much less than the cost of hurtling toward the sidewalk, I can do my fair share in making the world a better place while turning down this chance for world improvement" (209).

This is where I have trouble. As I read Miller's analogy and his remarkably dispassionate discussion of it I find myself reacting to the plight of the fall victim here even more powerfully than I did on behalf of the fatally ill violinist, which was already powerful enough to disrupt easy acceptance of Thomson's conclusion. I suspect the difference has a lot to do with the fact that the violinist is unconscious. Though I may read off his pain wracked body the impact of my

decision to unplug him, he likely won't call out to me in quite the way as would someone who is acutely conscious of me as all that stands between him and a grisly death at only a few moments remove.

You might well object that it would be very wrong of me to value more highly the person who is capable of making a loud personal appeal to me. So it would. While the squeaky wheel in fact often does get the grease, acknowledgment of this fact is insufficient salve for the neglected wheel quietly rusting away. But my point is not that the needy person whose cries for help I hear is more deserving of or has a greater right to my assistance. Rather, the case of ignoring the cries of the person hurtling to his death, illustrate more vividly that part of what is at stake in refusing to provide aid that is ignored in both Thomson's and Miller's discussions. What they ignore, most remarkably in Miller's case, is the impact on the decision maker of decision-making in the face of such a moral dilemma.

On the one hand he might face months of recovery from his injuries and perhaps a lifetime with some degree of physical disability or chronic pain. On the other hand he would face months or perhaps even a lifetime dealing with the psychologically shattering impact of witnessing at close hand a horrible death he could have prevented. I assume such an experience *would* be shattering for anyone with ordinary capacities for empathy. It would be reasonable, I think, to suspect some sort of pathology<sup>11</sup> on the part of someone who shrugged off the experience to return to the job of fulfilling his quota of world-improving actions in a way that accords better with his previously determined priorities.

Both Miller and Thomson present the choice faced here as a choice between on the one hand benefiting another through personal sacrifice and, on the other hand, giving priority to your own interests over those of the other. Neither examine the possibility that a decision to refuse to help the other may be a decision which will entail serious costs to oneself as well as the other. Both of their accounts underplay the significance of consciously playing a causal role in someone else's death. Though it may certainly be true that requiring you to help the other would be even more damaging, and it may provide some comfort to acknowledge that you were not required to save the other, this does not resolve the experience of moral conflict without remainder.

Pointing out the costs involved in refusing to help someone in life-threatening danger is not intended by me as an appeal to utilitarianism or enlightened self-interest to prove that there is an obligation to provide aid. Sometimes faced with the choice it would make more sense to choose to save the life, sometimes not. But that is not the focus of my concern here. My point is simply that, *either* way, there will be significant costs and these costs are *morally* significant. It is a mistake to focus our moral problem solving skills exclusively on the question of which choices are permissible, or which is best among the permissible choices. We need also to find ways to address the context of our choices taking *all* their fallout as indicative of the moral context from which they issue. Specifically, as care theorists emphasize, they issue from relationally as the context of moral identity.

We can't begin to address the context of difficult choices if the methods we use to justify specific choices depend on obscuring the meaning of relationality. Both Thomson's and Miller's analogies do that, albeit in telling ways. Relationality is not completely erased from their

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, such pathology may in fact exist pervasively in certain cultural contexts. I take what is often called "compassion fatigue" these days as an example of this.

reasoning but to find it you must read between the lines. To communicate more clearly what I mean by relationality as what I take care theorists to be adverting to, I now turn briefly to an example of more consistently narrative reasoning about certain problems which bear a family resemblance to those addressed by Thomson, Singer and Miller.

### ***Kindred***

In her historical science fictional novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler tells the story of a Black American woman who in 1976 finds herself repeatedly pulled back in time by an ancestor's calls for help. The first time Dana is summoned by Rufus, he is a small child in imminent danger of drowning. There is something about the strength of his need and his connection to Dana that whenever Rufus's life is threatened he involuntarily wrenches her back through time to an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Maryland plantation to save him. This ancestor is the son of the plantation owner and eventually himself the owner of the plantation and all its slaves. Each time she goes back there Dana remains stuck in her ancestral history until she is jolted forward again by a threat to her own life.

The whole experience takes its toll on Dana in ways that go beyond the obvious consequences of being Black in the *ante-bellum* South. Her safety is threatened and her personal integrity strained almost to breaking point by sustaining her connection to Rufus. But abandoning him could also be catastrophic. This is especially true prior to the conception of Dana's ancestress Hagar, the baby Rufus fathers on Alice his enslaved mistress. But that is not all that keeps Dana tied to Rufus. She cares about this man whom she first encountered as a vulnerable child. She is bound also by a flickering vision of Rufus's humanity and the responsibility she feels to exercise whatever power she has to keep his humanity alive and help it grow, for his sake and for the sake of all whose lives are affected by him.

In the end the strain of this relationship proves intolerable. It finally manifests itself in a desperate struggle that causes Dana to fear for her life and to kill Rufus. She is flung forward in time, but part of her remains in Rufus's grip. As Butler describes it, the decision Dana must make tears her apart, literally as well as metaphorically. We see this in the scene that immediately follows Rufus's death.

His body went stiff and leaden across me. I pushed him away somehow--everything but his hand still on my arm. Then I convulsed with terrible, wrenching sickness.

Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it--painlessly, at first--melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and non-living.

Something...paint, plaster, wood--a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home--in my own house in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it--or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where the flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped.

I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard.

And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! I screamed and screamed. (1988, 260,261)

As well as telling a powerful story, Butler's narrative expresses some important features of relationality as the context of our moral lives. First: recognizing relationality does not generate an obligation to sustain relationships, especially relationships which like the one between Rufus and Dana, threaten the core of your identity and your capacity for self-determination. The moral logic of Butler's narrative does not require Dana to stay with Rufus. But understanding relationality as the matrix of identity does make sense of why Dana stays with Rufus for so long. Engaging with the connection between Dana and Rufus enables us, with Butler, to imagine the implications of severing it. Though shocking, it is inevitable that in tearing herself out of the relationship Dana will lose a piece of herself, not just her physical self but also her moral self.

This loss follows from another feature of relationality expressed in *Kindred*, namely the givenness of relations. Critics of care theory often take the relational imperative as an injunction to choose relationship over non-relationship. This interpretation of care theory presupposes that we can exist outside of relationship, perhaps even that our most natural state is prior to relationship. By contrast, on my reading of care theory, one that I think is so well expressed in Butler's work, we are inherently relational beings. By this I don't mean that we simply like or are predisposed to enter relationships. I don't even mean that some of us live lives shaped by the responsibilities for dependent others, though this is true and it's worth noting how unevenly relational burdens are distributed.<sup>12</sup> I mean that we are all born into a complex extended web of relationships with which we must come to terms as part of the task of understanding and expressing who we are as moral beings. We may extend the web in new directions, we may cut ourselves off from some parts of it, but we cannot choose to enter relationships from some self-contained pre-relational space anymore than we can choose our histories.

Nor can we expect to leave relationships and emerge whole into some post-relational house of being, anymore than we can exit history.

If we take Butler's work as an instance of narrative moral reasoning motivated by awareness of relations of care then we can better understand what Carol Gilligan may have had in mind in characterizing the ethics of care in terms of efforts to sustain webs of relationship motivated by the desire that "everyone will be responded to and no one will be left alone or hurt." (1982, 63) Butler's narrative, in contrast to Thomson's, Miller's and even Singer's arguments, contributes to preserving the web of moral relationships in which we are situated through its representation of what it means to be both tightly woven into it and torn out of it. This narrative preserves more features of the moral experience of relationality than would an argument that takes the care principle to mean that everyone has a *right* to be responded to and never left alone or hurt.

The latter interpretation of the ethic of care is what prompts Celia Wolf-Devine's criticism of Gilligan and her ilk on abortion. How, she asks, can feminists committed to preserving relationships and mindful of responsibilities to care for particular others, legitimate a woman's decision to sever life-sustaining ties to one with whom she is most intimately connected? Such action, she argues, ought more aptly to be described as typical of so-called masculine morality, whose "voice speaks in terms of justice and rights, stresses consistency and principles, and emphasizes individual autonomy and impartiality in one's dealings with others" (1997, 161).

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<sup>12</sup> Kymlicka (1990, 283-286) regards appreciation of this point as one of the more valuable contributions care theory can make to the justice tradition.

Were I to take Wolf-Devine's criticism to heart and apply it to my reading of Thomson, it would follow automatically from my claim that the kidnap victim ought to care about the violinist that she would be violating his rights if she chose not to save him. But I do not claim this. I claim only that from an ethics of care perspective our moral reasoning about this dilemma is inadequate if we do not attempt to come to terms with our anguish about the violinist, and that arguments appealing to indignation at the idea of being forced to help are inadequate to the task. Thomson's own recognition of this is reflected in her suggestion that in many cases failing to save a life would be indecent even if not unjust. This generates a two tiered moral theory, however, and one that begs the question of the priority of justice over "decency". The inadequacy of Thomson's efforts to address this problem are a reflection of an inadequacy of method rather than the intractability of the problem. By contrast, the narrative mode of care reasoning has tools appropriate to the task that arguments from principles of justice lack.

It is worth remembering here that Gilligan's *original* field research on the ethics of care began with the ways in which women attempted to come to terms with the possibility of terminating unwanted pregnancy. Abortion decision-making is not the unforeseen test case that threatens to undermine care theory. It is where the theory of narrative care reasoning started for Gilligan.

Central to the task of care ethics is an effort to make sense of the web of relationships within which you know yourself to be located when you experience as calls on you the needs of those to whom you are tied by accidents of history or choice. To fulfill this task it is necessary to construct a narrative that can make sense both of your experience of calls for response as well as your experience of yourself as narrator, the one to whom it falls to make sense of all that you experience. It is not mere coincidence, I think, that Butler constructs Dana, the central figure in this piece of narrative moral reasoning, as a writer.

At first glance it may appear that the relational perspective I have described is a thoroughly relativistic one: if the moral task is to construct a narrative rather than applying a universal standard then any story will do just as well as any other. This might be the case if the project of constructing a narrative were not itself relationally embedded. That is, a narrator cannot make up a story and have it mean whatever she wants it to mean just by wishing it to be so. Its meaning will to a large degree depend upon how it resonates with the other narratives that constitute the context in which it is read.

For example, as I suggested earlier, the breakthrough effect of Thomson's analogies is indicative of how resistant dominant social traditions have been to the construction of moral agency stories about an unwillingly pregnant hero. Thomson's violinist analogy, as well as her other pregnancy and abortion analogies, make reproductive choice narratives more comprehensible. The success of contemporary reproductive choice narratives is dependent in part on being read within a tradition of stories and analogies like Thomson's.

This observation draws me on to my next point. We don't all have equal access to our culture's stories as tools with which to make sense of our moral experience. This is an effect of the fact that we read ourselves and are read by others as the kind of characters that available narrative repertoires present as possible identities.

Let me apply this claim analogically to Miller's scenario, taking it this time as an analogy for abortion decision making. Miller focuses on the question of whether it would be permissible for you to choose not to help another person who will die without your help. My concern in

analyzing his answer is to consider the impact on the decision-maker of being faced with this question at all: either you must bear the non-lethal but nonetheless painful bone shattering consequences of saving the other, or must live with the psychologically shattering impact of witnessing a death you were called to prevent but chose not to.

Concern for this feature of the situation should lead us to ask questions about how *you* came to be faced with this dilemma. Is this a unique event or something you might have to face repeatedly? Does you live in a neighbourhood with shaky balconies (i.e. inadequate contraceptives) over which people often fall? Do only certain kinds of people (e.g. women) live in neighbourhoods where people fall from tall buildings? Do some of these people lack the special knowledge of ballistics that you have (i.e. do some women lack the material and social resources to raise a child)? If yes, then it is mistaken to focus all our problem solving energy on the question of how an individual should respond to such impossible choices, as if they were unavoidable randomly occurring events. We should not neglect questions about how their occurrence can be prevented or consequences borne more equitably.<sup>13</sup>

Consideration of questions about where relational burdens and benefits are located is important and they don't stop here. A narrative care ethic enables us to recognize a further level at which differences of moral geography manifest themselves. That is, it enables us to consider how social location determines access to the narrative resources with which we might build new stories to make better sense of our moral experience.

To explain what I mean here I'll turn now to Nel Noddings's discussion of relationships with fetuses and animals.

### ***Relations with spiders and narrative webs***

To begin, I should note that Noddings regards the third trimester fetus as a baby. Among other things, she bases this on the way we tend to interpret apparently responsive behaviour. Thus for Noddings abortion in the last trimester is morally equivalent to infanticide. All of the narratives that Noddings bring to bear on what it means to be in a relationship with a baby are narratives which do not allow for any moral sense to be made of killing it, or even abandoning it. I don't entirely agree with Noddings here. I think the meaning of both pregnancy and motherhood can be understood, though not without difficulty, by being read against a broader range of narratives--a range that would include Thomson's analogies and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, amongst other things. Bringing these narratives to bear would make it more difficult to reject late abortions with Noddings's confidence. Carol Gilligan (1993), who also sees rich resources in Morrison's work is open to a broader range of possibilities for making sense of abortion decision making than Noddings.

Celia Wolf-Devine's problem with Noddings's approach to late term abortion, though is not its narrowness, but its inconsistency with what she regards as Noddings's permissive approach to

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<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the 'moral emergencies' that populate the partiality debates, Friedman (1991, 167) says "The moral world of mainstream ethics is a nightmare of plane crashes, train wrecks, and sinking ships! Wives and children drown in this literature at an alarming rate." But, "the non-feminist impartiality critics never discuss the possibility of investing our moral energies in efforts to *reduce beforehand* those breathtaking contests for survival and love, for example, by better FAA regulation of airline safety."

first and second trimester abortions. Now, what Wolf-Devine objects to in Noddings is precisely what I find most intriguing in Noddings's approach, namely the way in which the moral significance of pregnancy is mediated by narrative. On this view a woman may interpret herself as part of a relationship with someone to whom she is called to respond with care, or she might interpret her pregnancy as a condition of potential but not yet realized relationship. In the former pregnancy as relationship case, an abortion would be as morally unacceptable in the first as in the last trimester. In the latter, pregnancy as condition kind of case, a decision to terminate a pregnancy is as acceptable as any other medical decision a woman might choose for herself.

Noddings says: "An incipient embryo is just an information speck--a set of controlling instructions for a future human being." She continues: "From the view developed here, the information speck is an information speck; it has no given sanctity" (1984, 87). She then goes on to explain how under the right circumstances one can confer sacredness upon such a speck and thereby re-constitute oneself in a relation of natural care with it, from which relation the obligations of ethical caring follow. This means that ethical relation between a woman and an embryo she carries is not inevitable in the normal course of human experience, and so the absence of such a relation is not pathological.

Wolf-Devine objects to the leeway Noddings allows women to determine the personhood of the embryo with which she may or may not be in relationship. This objection depends on a slightly mistaken framing of Noddings's view, one that takes persons as prior to relations. But, Noddings argues that in determining whether an abortion decision could be ethical, the important question "is not a question about when life begins but when relation begins" (1984, 87). Of course, Wolf-Devine might also object to the moral arbitrariness of allowing a pregnant woman the sole right to decide whether her pregnancy constitutes her in relation to the embryo or not.

This objection would be troubling if the basis for a woman's determination of the relational context within which she is situated as a pregnant person were arbitrary or capricious. But on Noddings's account it is not. Rather, it is determined both by objective features of the world (e.g. the fact that the woman is carrying a living product of conception) which are independent of the woman's wishes, as well as by the nature of the narrative resources available to the woman with which to make moral sense of her experience of pregnancy. The woman is constrained by the latter as she is by the former. The constraint of the scientific facts of conception mean that for example it would be mistaken for a woman to construe herself as existing in relation to her *in utero* offspring if she were not in fact pregnant.

It is less easy to show how the second set of constraints work, but I think it no less true to say that they do constrain a woman's determination of her relational status. Noddings's discussion of the ethics of human interactions with non-human animals is surprisingly instructive for understanding how these constraints work. Noddings takes what might be called a pro-choice position on the ethical treatment of animals, one which acknowledges the lack of consensus within our cultural narratives about non-human animals, and disparity in the kinds and frequency of human interaction with animals of the sort that might cause us to engage narratively with them. On Noddings's account, it is our habits of narrative engagement with animals that determines whether we will interpret our interactions with them as interactions with creatures who can call for a moral response from us or not.

Consider, for example, Noddings's accounts of her moral relationships with cats, rats, and spiders. Because of her experience of relationship with Puffy, the cat with whom she lives,



Noddings experiences herself as called morally to respond to any cat that might turn up on her doorstep in a way that she wouldn't were it a rat that turned up. She accounts for the difference in her relations with these different animals by appeal to something she calls formal relations. She stands in a special formal relation with all the cats she has yet to encounter in virtue of her existing relationship of care for Puffy.

Noddings clarifies what this might mean in her reply to Claudia Card's criticisms of the idea of formal relations. She explains that formal relations are not best understood in institutional terms but rather according to a "constructive way of construing 'formal relations'" (1990, 122). On this account we should ask how one relationship or set of relationships *informs* a person, that is, how it constructs or reconstructs her/him so as to be receptive to certain forms of encounter.

But what about Noddings's response to stray cats who present themselves on her doorstep? How has her relationship with her pet cat informed her in a way that will shape her encounter with the stray? Perhaps she has been informed in the way that a person would be informed by learning a second language, motivated perhaps by life with a monolingual speaker of that language. If so, we could say that Noddings could not fail to recognize the stray's reactions to her as communicative of responsiveness or reciprocity because through her relationships with her pet she has come to speak "cat," and so must hear them as responses rather than mere reactions or reflexes.

Something about phrasing the point this way remains unsatisfactory, however, given other examples Noddings constructs. Her account of how a human being can come to stand in ethical relation to spiders for example, sounds less like the result of learning the language of spiders (at least as spiders might speak such a language to each other) than it sounds like a case of projecting thoroughly human values on to spiders. Consider how Noddings describes the formation of a person who responds ethically to spiders:

She looks at spiders and their extraordinary work. She reads about or actually sees a "spider fall" in which a landscape is transformed into a shimmering network of webs. She recalls the legend of Robert Bruce and how he revived his courage by watching a spider build and rebuild. She reads "Charlotte's Web" to her small daughter. She is entranced by the African spider-man-spirit, Anansi, the trickster. What happens? A relation is established. She must forever after coax spiders onto paper towels so that they can be carried with some dignity (and safety) out of the house. She does not squash them, and no-one in her household would think of doing so. There is no ethical escape from the obligation that arises in the caring relation. (1984, 158)

Perhaps, given this story of developing ethical relation with spiders, we should not say that she has learned to hear the messages that spiders communicate, where that might be taken to imply that these are the messages that spiders intend to communicate (assuming they have intentions at all). Rather, it would make better sense to say that she has learned to hear messages that the behaviour of spiders can be taken to express. She has learned this by the ways in which she has come to terms with her direct experiences of spiders (for example by telling herself stories about how they personify certain values, or behave as characters in a narrative) and through her exposure to the ways in which other people have come to terms with them (for example with *Charlotte's Web* and the Anansi stories). Having constructed her experience with spiders in these terms she has become the kind of person who cannot fail to respond with care to the messages she recognizes in the behaviour of spiders. She does not justify her responses by attributing intentionality to spiders, at least she need not do so, rather she *responds* to them as if

they were. That is, she encounters spiders as one whose responses have been conditioned by stories of a moral universe that includes spiders.

Among the things that Noddings's spider story tells us is that we not only live our lives situated within a web of relationships, but that those relationships are situated within a web of narratives.

I am acutely aware of the problem raised at this point by the fact that it is consistent with narrative care theory that pro-life activists construct themselves in concerned relationship with other women's embryos. These narratives can even be illustrated now, thanks to ultrasound imaging and other high-tech interventions. When such relationships are constructed, the pro-life advocates hear threats to the embryos' lives as calls on them for moral response. But how can this response be legitimate if for a particular woman her embryo remains a mere information speck, a feature of her gravid condition, but not as something that exerts any moral pull on her whatsoever?

I have no easy answer to the question of which narrative to privilege anymore than there is an easy answer to the question of who has a right to have their needs privileged in the context of unwanted pregnancy. But we might start, as Gilligan did, by listening to those whose stories have been marginalized within moral theory, and consider, as I think Thomson's work leads us to do, how this affects the way we read the more socially dominant stories with which they conflict.

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