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Care Exploitation: Taking Advantage of One’s Caring about Another

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Abstract

Care exploitation pervades our lives. Consider the public school teachers who care about helping children achieve their goals by providing them with a proper education and are expected to do so by parents, administrators, or legislators—even with abysmal pay and little appreciation. Perhaps the most common case of care exploitation is the expectation of a mother to make great (and disproportionate) sacrifices in her life for the well-being of her child, which mothers often meet because they bear a caring orientation toward their child. Despite their willingly assenting, there is something morally problematic about their treatment. I argue that an injustice has been perpetrated against them, drawing on interpersonal accounts of exploitation to highlight that the unique wrong of care exploitation is the failure to respect one’s dignity by taking advantage of their vulnerability of caring about. Following this, I articulate the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of care exploitation and their relationships to one another.

Keywords: exploitation, caring about, interpersonal, vulnerability, maldistribution, dignity, presumption, coercion, manipulation

Care exploitation is a pervasive, yet undertheorized, phenomenon. To familiarize yourself with it, consider the following four examples: (i) the public school teacher who cares about helping children achieve their goals by providing them with a proper education and is expected to do so by parents, administrators, or legislators—even with abysmal pay and little appreciation; (ii) the domestic care worker whose growing connection to the children in their care allows their employers to demand more and more of them; (iii) the faculty member who does substantially more departmental service than their peers—and is increasingly relied upon to do so—because it is known they care deeply about the success of their department; and (iv), perhaps the most common case of care exploitation, the expectation of a mother to make great (and disproportionate) sacrifices in her life for the well-being of her child, which mothers often meet because they bear a caring orientation toward their children.

Despite their willingly assenting, there is something morally problematic about the treatment of the teacher, domestic care worker, faculty member, and parent. In particular, I will argue that an injustice has been perpetrated against them, and despite their assent, the injustice is a form of exploitation in which their caring has been unfairly taken advantage of.¹ Exploitation is widely accepted to be the unfair taking advantage of one individual by another. Where views part ways is in determining what exactly it means for the advantage taken to be unfair.²

I will argue that the unique wrong of care exploitation is—in the interest of gaining some disproportionate benefit—the failure to respect one’s dignity by taking advantage of their vulnerability of *caring about*. To care *about* some being or thing is to pay attention to, have concern for, and become invested in the subject’s well-being; this is to be contrasted with caring *for* some thing or being, which is to perform actions that tend to or nurture the subject or that help the subject thrive (Tronto 1993).³ Care exploitation, broadly construed, occurs when one’s caring about a subject is leveraged against them—to the advantage of another—so that one provides care for said subject. The general sense of caring about relevant to my argument here has two components: beliefs and desires. The individual that cares has beliefs about how things are going for the subject they care about, which are accompanied by a desire to aid in the achievement of the subject’s flourishing.⁴ The desire to aid at the root of caring about arises from, in part, “appreciating someone else’s situation from their perspective, and being moved to help them because of what one sees from that perspective” (Collins 2015, 24). This requires attentiveness and receptivity on the part of the caring individual (Noddings 2002, 13); an awareness of the way that “our own needs, desires, and interests may color, obscure, or deflect

¹ Wood (1995) resists this, arguing exploitation is often morally problematic but not a matter of justice. I treat exploitation as an injustice, granting that the lines between morality and justice may be difficult to draw.

² An alternative, nonmoral use of exploitation means “to make use of” (Wertheimer 1996, 5); this is not what I’m concerned with. Among those that offer distinctive structural analyses of exploitation are Marx (1906–09, 1921), McKeown (2016), Wollner (2019), and Zwolinski (2012). More interpersonal accounts include Ferguson (2016, 2021), Feinberg (1984), Goodin (1985, 1987), Logar (2010), Mitra and Biller-Andorno (2013), Sample (2003), Snyder (2008), Vrousalis (2013), Wood (1995), and Wertheimer (1996).

³ Caring for and caring about a subject often overlap but can occur independently (Collins 2015).

⁴ Without the desire, one merely has information about the status of an entity’s flourishing and does not yet care about them.

those of the individual cared for” and an effort to mitigate the effects that our perspective may have upon their flourishing (Kittay 2011, 615).⁵

To articulate the wrong of exploiting one’s caring about others, I first introduce the case of Marie and Alex, surveying alternative explanations of the injustice she is subjected to. I consider how leading accounts of interpersonal exploitation—which identify the wrong as related to maldistribution, vulnerabilities, or a Kantian conception of respect—might account for the phenomenon I’m attending to. I ultimately argue that we can gain the best understanding of what has gone wrong in cases of care exploitation by drawing on the resources of each of these accounts, together. Next, I present the conditions that must be satisfied for care exploitation to occur, expanding upon each so that one can have a comprehensive picture of what care exploitation is.

1. Recognizing the Wrong of Care Exploitation

There is a large body of literature in feminist philosophy that offers both moral and political approaches to how we ought to understand and address our caring responsibilities, interpersonally and collectively. Often these works demonstrate a sensitivity to relationships being ripe for the mistreatment of caring individuals, which motivates their introduction of theoretical resources to protect against said mistreatment. For example, “good care,” or the care at the center of care ethics, might be defined in such a way that it isn’t *actually* care if it puts the caring individual at a substantial disadvantage (Collins 2015). Some even go so far as to specify duties of the cared for, which on the most demanding end is a duty to appreciate the care (Noddings 1984). More recently, Asha Bhandary’s (2020, 120) theory of liberal dependency care has been formulated to avoid, in part, the danger of “care chicken”: when there are no formal provisions for care and parties who are “situated near vulnerable charges defer responding to needs to see who will capitulate first.” And Elizabeth Brake (2021, 215–16) has argued that understanding as labor those attitudinally caring relationships where one subjectively experiences “benevolent attention or concern”—calling for the extension of economic and labor protections to unpaid caregivers—can alleviate the exploitation of these caregivers.

But having these theoretical guardrails in place does little to address the lived experiences of those that are understood—both by themselves and by others—as caring and still find themselves taken advantage of because they care. This work aims

⁵ In the interest of space, I leave my account of care relatively underspecified and open. This is because I believe we can exploit the care of those that do so in nonoptimal ways. I do, however, find the normative accounts of Tronto (1993, 2013) on care and Gruen (2015) on empathy—which I understand as ultimately consistent—to be most attractive.

to speak to those experiences, articulating how these problematic relationships have gone wrong. This will support future work in having a more comprehensive understanding of what is required to avoid harming each other in these ways and move toward moral repair.

1.1. Marie and Alex

Imagine two adult siblings close in age: Marie and Alex.⁶ They find themselves in a difficult situation because their mother needs constant support due to her age, and they're unable to find a home health nurse that suits her needs.⁷ The difficulty is compounded by the fact that they both have careers they enjoy and must maintain to live comfortably. Marie is particularly torn. Not only does she love her mother as Alex does, but additionally, she is deeply invested in how well things go for her mother on account of a caring disposition that Alex lacks.⁸ Specifically, she is concerned with the interests of her mother and helping her flourish, affectively bound up in the success of the project of caring for her and invested in her success in pursuing her projects—broadly construed. In other words, Marie *cares about* how things go for her. This isn't for self-interested reasons, though. Rather, she is oriented toward the world such that she feels compelled, without external motivation, to support others. If only Marie were to leave the job she loves and give up some creature comforts, she could meet her mother's needs. And she's willing to do this, despite understanding the costs and wishing there were a better alternative that allowed for her personal pursuits. Unbeknownst to Marie, Alex has decided what the obvious solution to this problem is: they'll ask Marie to *care for* their mother, with the presumption that she'll agree. Alex's presumption isn't unfounded, given Marie's general caring disposition

⁶ Throughout I will use "they, them, theirs" pronouns to refer to Alex. I do to distinguish Alex and Marie in writing, while avoiding the perception that sex or gender is unduly influencing either of them. It is not difficult to imagine this case occurring between siblings of the same gender.

⁷ It is a presupposition of this case that Marie and Alex share the mutual—although often implicit—understanding that many siblings share: if parents come to require eldercare, the related responsibilities will need to be negotiated among them and preferably distributed in some equitable manner. It is important to recognize they are often in this situation because institutions of care have failed (Brake 2017).

⁸ One might think that Marie has, in fact, been motivated to take up this caring disposition due to externally imposed social norms contingent upon her gender, race, class, or some other feature of her identity (which may intersect in various ways). While this is possible, it is not necessary. This case has been constructed such that her caring disposition is not externally imposed, so we can set aside one possible overlapping source of injustice when identifying the wrong of care exploitation.

in addition to her love for her mother. In fact, it would be very unlike Marie to turn down an opportunity to help others. Unsurprisingly, Marie agrees.

I take Alex to be unfairly taking advantage of Marie. To understand where to locate the unfairness in this case, it is helpful to look to the explanations offered by leading accounts of interpersonal exploitation. Perhaps what is unfair is that the burdens of this arrangement are placed entirely upon Marie (i.e., the maldistribution account). It is likely that Marie would have volunteered to care for her mother anyway, but by asking her prior to her volunteering, Alex benefits from Marie’s caring disposition to her detriment. After all, they can keep their career and not sacrifice the luxuries they are afforded as a result, unlike Marie. This isn’t to say Marie gains nothing at all; she, like Alex, gains the peace of mind that their mother is being taken care of well. Or maybe what’s problematic about Marie’s treatment is that she is seen by Alex as merely a means to their end; Marie, by virtue of her caring, is seen as instrumentally valuable in solving the issue of their mother’s care (i.e., the Kantian account). Evidence for this lies in their complete failure to compensate Marie for costs; if you see someone as having the same worth as yourself, it makes little sense to not share in the costs of an agreement because you would not willingly permit others to use you merely as a means. Alternatively, one might see this case as problematic because, if one is to understand Marie’s caring as a preexisting vulnerability, Alex has done something wrong by unfairly benefiting from her vulnerability (i.e., the vulnerability account). I contend that, independently, each theory is incapable of adequately articulating how Alex has done something wrong by exploiting Marie’s care. But these diagnoses are not mutually exclusive, and by drawing on elements of each, we can garner helpful insights. I now turn to a brief survey of each of these accounts, which is followed by a positive proposal of how we ought to understand the wrong of care exploitation.

1.2. Interpersonal Theories of Exploitation

The maldistribution account of exploitation is one of substantive unfairness, locating the wrong in an outcome—namely, the unfairly distributed benefits gained from the transaction. This is to be contrasted with accounts of procedural unfairness that locate the wrong in the process by which one exploits (e.g., vulnerability and Kantian accounts). Wertheimer (1996, 231) argues that one determines if the benefits are unfairly distributed by appealing to the hypothetical market price for the good being exchanged in the transaction. Hypothetical market prices represent “the price that an informed and unpressured seller would receive from an informed and unpressured buyer if the [good or service] were sold on the market” (Wertheimer 1996, 230). If the good is not exchanged at the hypothetical market price, then the exchange is exploitative. Importantly, the exploiter’s actually benefitting—and not

their intention to benefit—is both necessary and sufficient for exploitation to take place.

In Marie’s case we can imagine her stipulating what a fair compensation from Alex for taking care of their mother might be. Perhaps she would expect that Alex help compensate for the financial losses she would experience in providing for the needs of their mother while also being invested in her well-being. Or maybe she would expect them to provide emotional support in the times when caring for their mother is particularly psychologically taxing. Alex, once informed of the cost of care work, would likely reach a similar conclusion about what the appropriate “price” (i.e., cost) is. But, with Alex’s unwillingness to pay any price at all, the outcome of the transaction between them is exploitative. While the maldistribution account reaches the right conclusion (i.e., Marie has been exploited), it also misses something important. While Marie’s case seems problematic in part because Alex is unwilling to share in the cost, what makes Alex’s exploitation particularly offensive is something about the way they go about exploiting her.

Consider an alternative case: Alex and Marie can and do hire a home care worker, offering the care worker a fair wage. Here the siblings avoid exploitation by conforming to the agreed upon hypothetical price, with neither party unfairly benefiting from the transaction. In this alternative case, simply hiring the person providing the care work prevents Alex from being engaged in care exploitation. But simply hiring Marie, as one might hire a home care worker, would not solve the problem—it would just shift it. This is because the problematic feature of care exploitation goes beyond Alex’s failure to compensate Marie. Even if they were to pay Marie the fair market price for her care, the presence of their presumptive call that initiates the transaction is, I will argue, exploitative. The maldistribution account cannot properly capture the morally relevant procedural element of this case; a substantive theory of exploitation is plainly unable to account for care exploitation.

The vulnerability account is more promising, identifying what makes the advantage taken by the exploiter unfair as acting in such a way that one is “playing for advantage in situations in which it is inappropriate,” violating the norm of “*protecting the vulnerable*” (Goodin 1987, 187; emphasis original).⁹ As Goodin formulates it, this duty to protect the vulnerable has two parts: first, “it involves a general duty to suspend ordinary rules of behaviour in dealing with those who are particularly vulnerable to you,” and “secondly, it involves a duty to take positive measures to assist those who are particularly vulnerable to you” (187). There are four ways one can fail to protect the vulnerable, unfairly strategizing to gain advantage over them in interpersonal relationships (i.e., exploit them). These include strategizing for one’s own advantage against another (i) that has intentionally chosen

⁹ See also Mitra and Biller-Andorno (2013).

not to strategize for their own advantage, (ii) that is unable to strategize for advantage altogether, (iii) that is no match for oneself, and (iv) when one’s advantages are derived from another’s “grave misfortunes” (Goodin 1987, 185–86). By focusing on strategy rather than outcome, the vulnerability account is procedural. One reason for this is that it’s particularly difficult to articulate exactly what a fair distribution of costs and benefits would be (contra Wertheimer), but “we nonetheless can say with confidence that one party has sometimes exploited the other” (Goodin 1987, 181). This point about the difficulty of identifying fair distributions—and perhaps the usefulness of distributions altogether—is bolstered if we accept that affections are simply not something that can be distributed (Hampton 1993, 240) or that “it is a mistake to reduce [justice] to distribution” (Young 2011, 15).

While Goodin provides a lengthy justification for why failure to uphold our duties to the vulnerable is exploitation, he spends little time explicating what it means for one to be vulnerable. Examples of vulnerabilities corresponding to the four ways of gaining unfair advantage include letting one’s guard down with those they trust, having weakness of will, lacking bargaining power, and being a victim of a natural disaster or disease. If we follow the vulnerability account, there are four ways that Alex might be taking unfair advantage of Marie: by strategizing for their own advantage (i) against her when she has intentionally chosen not to strategize for her own advantage, (ii) against her when she is unable to strategize for advantage altogether, (iii) against her when she is no match to them, or (iv) when their advantages are derived from her “grave misfortunes.”

Regarding whether Alex is unfairly strategizing for advantage in the first way, it is not the case that Marie *has* renounced strategizing for her own advantage. It may not be that her own advantage is her primary objective in this transaction, but that hardly means she has intentionally chosen not to strategize altogether. Marie stands to gain from this transaction—and may have this in mind when she’s deciding what to do—simply because she has an interest in helping her mother flourish. This isn’t only because it’s her own mother but also because the nature of her caring is such that she is bound up in the success of the project of helping others flourish, generally. While Marie stands to gain far fewer advantages than Alex, she stands to gain more than none at all. So, (i) fails to capture what has gone wrong; Marie has not fully renounced strategizing for her own advantage.

The second way of unfairly strategizing—against her when she is unable to strategize for advantage altogether—is also insufficient. While caring might compel one to answer calls to aid others in their own flourishing, it does not necessarily require that one sacrifice their own well-being altogether, intentionally or otherwise. In other words, Marie’s caring disposition does not render her incapable of considering and pursuing personal advantages. For the wrong of care exploitation to arise because Marie is simply no match to Alex seems more promising; it is

substantially less likely Marie will reject the call to aid another in their flourishing than her sibling (due to her caring more). But this difference between Marie and Alex is not of the same kind that Goodin or other vulnerability theorists have in mind when one is not a match for another. Goodin (1987, 185–86) follows others in characterizing two parties as not being a match when the exploiter has “vastly disproportionate” bargaining power compared to the exploitee, with the exploitee desperately needing what the exploiter has to offer or needing it in order to survive. But Marie’s situation is hardly comparable to the typical exploitee in these scenarios because she has what her exploitative sibling needs—the ability to provide care. Additionally, Marie does not stand to gain anything above and beyond what Alex gains, much less the satisfaction of a desperate need.

Finally, her sibling’s unfair advantages might be derived from her “grave misfortunes.” But we can suppose that Marie came to be caring not because of some grave misfortune but because she saw a caring person as a moral exemplar early on, or because she is particularly empathetic and realized she was well positioned to help others. In short, not one of the four ways to strategize for unfair advantage offered by the vulnerability account properly captures Marie’s case as exploitative; the vulnerability account is independently insufficient.

We may turn, instead, to the Kantian account of exploitation (Sample 2003). It is paradigmatically procedural because it locates the wrong of exploitation in interacting with another for advantage in a way that fails to respect their inherent moral worth (Sample 2003, 57); to exploit someone is to use them merely as a means to one’s own ends, failing to recognize their autonomy. And autonomy is, for Kant, what makes one inherently morally valuable; making one a being with dignity. Every failure to respect someone is an instance of undermining their dignity.^{10, 11}

The Kantian and vulnerability accounts are made distinct from each other, in part, by how they articulate what feature of an individual is being unfairly taken advantage of: the vulnerability account holds that it is necessarily one’s vulnerabilities, while the Kantian acknowledges that there are a number of ways disrespect can manifest. Notably, a Kantian account considers more transactions exploitative than other accounts because the use of another merely as a means is sufficient (and necessary) for exploitation. There are multiple ways one might gain an advantage in a way that fails to respect others, including (i) “neglecting what is necessary for [another’s] well-being or flourishing,” (ii) “taking advantage of an

¹⁰ Throughout I use “failure to respect” and “undermining dignity” interchangeably.

¹¹ To use one merely as a means is traditionally understood as treating them in such a way that one cannot consent (O’Neill 1989) and is conceptually at odds with gaining consent. In spite of this, Sample (2003, 14) argues that one can consent to a transaction in which they are exploited.

injustice done to [them],” and (iii) treating some aspect of another as a fungible commodity when one shouldn’t (Sample 2003, 57).

When it comes to Marie’s case, the Kantian account is going to identify the wrong as Alex interacting with her for advantage in one of these three ways. The first involves Alex gaining advantage by neglecting what Marie needs to flourish.¹² But, this is not how Alex is exploiting Marie; Marie is not being denied any needs. Yes, she must sacrifice some creature comforts to care for their mother, but this by no means amounts to denying her what is required for a good life; many people live good lives without such comforts. Even if one contends that her needs for purposeful employment or psychological well-being are denied, though, the Kantian account only contingently arrives at the correct conclusion about Marie having been exploited; this will not suffice for consistently and accurately identifying this widespread injustice. If we consider her need for purposeful employment as what is neglected, this suggests that Marie’s caring simply cannot amount to something she feels gives her life a purpose or meaning. But this is clearly false. Individuals often adopt roles that require caregiving and are enhanced by caring about others precisely because they think aiding others in their flourishing is a worthy purpose. Similarly, caring about others often contributes to—rather than detracts from—psychological well-being; to frame them as fundamentally at odds is to deny altogether the ways caring can contribute to our flourishing. The upshot of considering (i) is that, in identifying needs as what make disrespect possible, the Kantian account has gone astray; one can fail to respect another without neglecting their needs.

Perhaps (ii) or (iii) are better suited in their current form to capture the wrong of care exploitation. Recall that (ii) states exploitation occurs when one takes advantage of the injustice done to another in a disrespectful way. Here my criticism is the same as the one I raised against the vulnerability account regarding deriving unfair advantage from “grave misfortunes.” Again, we can suppose that Marie came to have the caring orientation that Alex is benefitting from not because of some injustice done to her but because she had a caring moral exemplar or is particularly empathetic and well positioned to help others; (ii) does not adequately capture care exploitation as wrong because Marie’s case fails to satisfy the condition of being derived from injustice.

This brings us to (iii), which locates the wrong of Marie’s exploitation in Alex’s interacting with her in such a way that they gain advantage by treating her caring orientation as a fungible commodity when they shouldn’t. The most plausible reason for thinking Marie’s caring about her mother is being commodified is that Alex takes her care as something that can be instrumentally used for some end (i.e., their evasion of shared responsibility). And to conceive of her or her caring as a fungible commodity

¹² See also Snyder (2008).

tends to make us think of her as a means rather than an end (Sample 2003, 156).¹³ It seems likely that less enjoyment comes from seeing an individual make strides in increasing well-being or flourishing when it arises out of one's own exploitation (compared to when one's care isn't being exploited). In the case of care exploitation, it's plausible that the wrong articulated in (iii) gets part of the story right. The commodification of Marie's caring is problematic insofar as it may negatively impact how she experiences caring for others because she feels underappreciated or used. But as it stands, the Kantian account is ill-equipped to fully and consistently articulate what is unique about Marie's case and others that have their care exploited.

1.3. Identifying the Wrong of Care Exploitation

While these accounts are independently incapable of articulating the moral wrong of care exploitation, drawing on the resources of each can give us a clearer understanding of said wrong. By helpfully articulating how care exploitation is morally problematic, we can take the first step in understanding this pervasive phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, I take Alex to be unfairly taking advantage of Marie. When Alex simply assumes she will accept their call—failing to remain open to the possibility of her exercising her own agency and making an alternative choice—by independently deciding that Marie is well positioned to sacrifice her career to care for their mother, Alex undermines Marie's dignity; Alex disrespects Marie. When Alex fails to be open to her choosing to do otherwise, they fail to recognize her as having the capacity for exercising her own agency (i.e., self-authorship). This is not to say that Marie cannot or does not actually consent; in answering Alex's call to aid, she does exercise her own agency in choosing to care for her mother.

The problem lies in Alex's issuing a call, having presumed Marie will assent because they know she is the type of person to feel the pull to aid others—she just cares about other people, and the pull is likely even stronger in this case because it is her own mother. Alex does not remain open to the possibility that Marie might reasonably decline, nor do they engage in a conversation about their mother's care and suitable solutions with Marie prior to coming to a conclusion on the matter. Instead, Alex independently decides Marie is best suited to care for their mother and calls her to do so. Marie is vulnerable to calls to aid others because of her caring disposition, and Alex has taken advantage of this vulnerability for personal gain (i.e., the complete evasion of caring responsibilities). And this advantage is ultimately unfair—exploitative—because they are strategizing for an advantage by disrespecting her on the basis of her vulnerability arising from caring. In other words, Alex is exploiting Marie's disposition to care about.

¹³ Goodin (1985, 90–91) offers a similar analysis of love and affection.

My account of the wrong of care exploitation here draws on the Kantian account insofar as it highlights that Alex undermines Marie’s dignity by simply assuming she will take care of their mother, foreclosing on the possibility that she will choose to do otherwise. This is not to suggest that one ought to instead completely refrain from asking caring individuals if they’ll take on caring responsibilities for fear that they cannot decide for themselves what they can handle. This move undermines dignity by failing to see the caring individual as capable of self-authorship. It is also not to suggest that going through the motions of a deliberation also guarantees respect; it is not difficult to imagine a sibling in Alex’s position creating the façade of an open and honest discussion, all the while presuming their sibling will reach the conclusion they desire. Regardless of whether one sees past this façade, its mere presence means Alex fails to legitimately respect autonomy.

The wrong I’ve articulated draws on the vulnerability theory by recognizing that Alex undermines Marie’s dignity by taking advantage of her vulnerability arising from care—which makes her susceptible to answering calls to aid—rather than by taking advantage of her needs, of some injustice done to her, or by commodifying her care. When Alex’s taking advantage of Marie’s vulnerability is identified as what undermines her dignity, there is more room left for the possibility of one consenting to situations in which their vulnerabilities are exploited. This is because taking advantage of someone’s vulnerability is problematic, regardless of whether they’ve consented to the arrangement. This would not be plausible if we thought of care exploitation in purely Kantian terms. I argue below, however, that we ought to broaden our conception of vulnerability to include one’s openness to be affected by others, which is a necessary feature of caring about. Care is unique in that it is unlike other characteristics in predisposing one to take up (and not reject) calls to improve others’ well-being. Caring about another doesn’t inhibit one’s ability to strategize for themselves in arrangements with others, but it nevertheless leaves them open to this distinctive kind of disrespect and exploitation. Paired with these elements from the vulnerability and Kantian accounts, the maldistribution account indicates another dimension of this case that is unfair and an implication of such disrespect: Alex’s benefiting from the disproportionate burden of caring falling upon Marie.

1.4. Considering Coercion and Manipulation as the Wrong

One might object, suggesting it is better to consider this phenomenon as coercion or manipulation. Coercion is generally characterized as one forcing or threatening to make another worse off if they fail to comply with one’s request (Wertheimer 1996, 26). For Alex to coerce Marie, Alex would need to make a threat of force or enforcement if she fails to comply. One might think that by implicitly refusing to aid their mother, Alex is conveying a message along the lines of “If you don’t do anything Marie, mom is going to suffer.” But Alex is not interested in

threatening their sister, nor do they have any method to enforce whether Marie provides care. In terms of options, coercion is understood as pushing one toward one option over another by threatening negative consequences for acting *against* the coercer's wishes. But Marie is not pushed toward one option rather than another simply because of Alex's proposed arrangement. Her mother won't have care if Marie chooses her career instead of caring for her mother, whether Alex calls her to aid or not. Additionally, given Marie's caring disposition, she would likely choose to care for her mother whether Alex asked her or not; no coercion is required.

One might think that Alex is making a coercive offer rather than a coercive threat. When one coercively makes an offer, the proposal makes the recipient worse off than they would have been had the proposal maker not interfered (Zimmerman 1981). Marie is not being made a coercive offer by Alex for the same reasons that she isn't coercively threatened by them—her options and the expected outcomes do not change simply because of Alex's call to aid. Perhaps what Alex is doing wrong here by calling her to aid is using a stronger bargaining position to get Marie to do what they want.¹⁴ But this isn't itself coercion; this is exploitation. And so, coercion is off the table as a candidate for Alex's wrong.

Determining whether Marie's case is manipulation is less straightforward, in part because there is little consensus on how to characterize it. But there are three predominant theories: understanding manipulation as (i) bypassing rational deliberation, (ii) trickery, or (iii) pressure. Suppose we understand Marie's case as manipulation in the sense of bypassing the target's rational deliberation with the introduction of nonrational influences (Raz 1988). We can easily imagine Alex doing this—for example, by bringing Marie her favorite baked goods to get her into a brighter mood before calling her to aid, or by making her feel particularly guilty about their mother's situation. Even if this was a feature of the case, influencing Marie in this way is extraneous to the wrong of the call to aid itself—the wrong lies in the call being made such that it takes advantage of her vulnerability arising from her caring. So Marie's case seems clearly to not be one of manipulation by bypassing rational deliberation.

One might be concerned that the call to aid that Alex issues directly involves manipulation insofar as Alex fails to be open to the possibility that Marie will choose to do otherwise. But Alex is not bypassing Marie's own rational deliberation; instead, Alex is precluding rational deliberation between them. Perhaps this means Alex is manipulating the situation itself, rather than Marie. This, however, cannot be the case because Alex is not *actually* influencing Marie's available options—she would choose

¹⁴ One reason for this stronger bargaining position may be that Alex knows Marie not only cares for their mother but also for them. Others include a dependency on Alex or their control over harming her (McGregor 1988–89).

to care for her mother regardless of whether Alex calls her to. Alternatively, one might be concerned that Marie’s disposition to care is itself a nonrational influence Alex is appealing to. Marie’s caring is central to her rational deliberation, however, included among the many reasons she weighs when deciding how to proceed. I’m concerned that construing care—or other dispositions tied up with one’s values—as nonrational would ultimately be to devalue the legitimacy of care in reasoning. So Marie’s case is not manipulation of the first kind.

If we understand Marie’s case as manipulation as trickery, Alex would need to have deliberately attempted to trick Marie into adopting a faulty mental state (e.g., belief, desire, or emotion; Noggle 1996; Barnhill 2014). But Alex simply hasn’t done this. Marie knows all the relevant features of her situation: what the care requires, that Alex won’t be making similar sacrifices. Marie maintains the same mental states about her choice situation before and after Alex’s call, aside from gaining the true belief that Alex wants her to care for their mother. So Marie’s case is also not of this second kind.

Finally, if we understand Marie’s case as manipulation as pressure, Alex would need to impose costs on Marie if she fails to care for their mother, failing to do what Alex wants (Kligman and Culver 1992; Wood 2014). Again, Alex does not pressure, and even if they did, it would have no influence upon Marie’s choice; Marie will choose to provide care either way. One might think that a passive call to aid—where Alex simply does nothing waiting for Marie to pick up the pieces—is a subtle form of exerting pressure.¹⁵ But given Marie’s knowledge that Alex is in no better or worse position to provide care, Alex’s sitting back doesn’t change Marie’s available choices at all.

This brings me to the conclusion that Marie’s case is not one of manipulation. So to understand what’s wrong in Marie’s case, or the cases mentioned at the outset of this work, we must find a different way to explain what is morally problematic; the above account of care exploitation can do this. This isn’t to say coercion and manipulation never overlap with exploitation; they likely serve as ways to successfully facilitate it. Thus far, I’ve articulated the wrong of care exploitation, setting it apart from contemporary theories of interpersonal exploitation, coercion, and manipulation. I now turn to the conditions that must be satisfied for care exploitation to occur.

2. The Conditions of Care Exploitation

Formally characterized, care exploitation occurs when the following conditions obtain:

¹⁵ This may be akin to Keller’s (2018) “moral blackmail.”

1. One party, A, calls another party, B, to aid. In issuing the call, A fails to be open to the possibility that B will choose to do otherwise. This call can be actively or passively made.
2. The specific call made by A is for B to aid in the flourishing of another person or project, and this call is made because B has the general disposition to care about or because B cares about the subject of the call in particular.
3. A expects a disproportionate benefit from the call for B's aid, either to A or to someone/something A is responsible for.
4. B will likely accept the call, due to their caring nature. This is either because B has the general disposition to care about or because B cares about the flourishing of the call's subject (which is the source of B's vulnerability).
5. B answers A's call to aid.

The task at hand is to further articulate each of these conditions and their relationships to one another so that one can have a comprehensive picture of what care exploitation is. Importantly, if any of these conditions is unmet, care exploitation has not occurred. Here I focus on Marie's case—rather than a structural (i.e., institutional) one—so that it is easier to isolate the specific wrong of care exploitation without getting caught up in overlapping injustices.¹⁶

2.1. The Call to Aid

In explaining the wrong of care exploitation, I stated that Alex *calls* Marie to aid, and this call is made with the presumption that Marie will care for their mother and not choose to do otherwise (i.e., a failure to be open to Marie choosing to do otherwise). I'm using "call to aid" as a term of art to refer to instances where one makes this problematic presumption and it shapes their actions in some way. A call to aid is morally objectionable and ultimately exploitative because the motivating presumption is disrespectful. The presumption is disrespectful—undermining the caring individual's dignity—by not being open to their choosing to do otherwise, by

¹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore how care exploitation manifests in our institutions. In other work (McKittrick-Sweitzer 2021) I argue that the same conditions are met in structural instances, but how we understand the parties involved shifts.

failing to recognize them as having the capacity for exercising their own agency. It is this condition that captures the Kantian element of my account. Calls are distinct from simply asking another if they’d be willing to do something; when one simply asks, one is open to the possibility that the caring individual may choose to do otherwise.

In order to fully flesh out the first condition, let’s consider a variation on Marie’s case: Alex, having decided that Marie is best suited to care for their mother, simply sits back and waits for Marie to do what they expect (rather than explicitly asking her or telling her to care for their mother). Again, Marie chooses to care for their mother. I understand this reliance upon Marie as a passive call to aid,¹⁷ and I take it to be an instance of care exploitation (and of Bhandary’s “care chicken”). By sitting back and counting on Marie to care for their mother because of her caring disposition, Alex is failing to openly consider that Marie might choose to do otherwise (satisfying conditions 1–3). This failure may be caused by willful ignorance, simply having one thought too few (Driver 2020; i.e., the idea of considering it doesn’t even occur to them), or some kind of wishful thinking.¹⁸ Alex and Marie presumably share responsibility in deciding how to ensure that their mother is cared for; by intentionally abstaining from negotiating this shared responsibility with Marie—either actively or passively—Alex is undermining Marie’s dignity. When a call to aid is absent and we suspect exploitation is still present, it is likely other accounts of exploitation can independently articulate the relevant injustice.

2.2. What It Means to Care

Although Marie’s case is merely an example, streamlined to highlight what care exploitation looks like, there are many ways one might come to care about another, making one susceptible to exploitative calls to aid. Three of these seem predominant: (i) developing a caring disposition, (ii) seeing a need in one and recognizing them as having inherent moral worth, and (iii) caring *for* an individual first, and then becoming invested in their flourishing as a result. Understanding these three ways is important to grasping the second condition required for care exploitation to obtain: the specific call made by A is for B to aid in the flourishing of another person or project, and this call is made *because* B has the general disposition to care about or cares about the subject of the call in particular. While I acknowledge that these three ways of coming to care are distinct, I explicate them here because they can all

¹⁷ The language of a passive call to aid might strike some as odd. In developing my account I’ve struggled to find a clear alternative way to articulate what A is expecting of B, and so I’m willing to accept the cost of this linguistic hiccup in favor of clarity in articulating active instances.

¹⁸ It’s also possible that Alex has developed a disposition to issue calls, which is both epistemically and morally problematic. (Establishing this is left for later work.)

be perceived as justification for issuing a call. If the call to aid is issued for some reason other than B's caring, what is occurring is not care exploitation but instead perhaps the exploitation of some other trait.

First, one might come to care about others generally (rather than specifically) by developing a caring disposition. There are (at least) two ways one might develop this disposition: either by having a caring role model in one's life or by being subjected to externally imposed societal norms. In the first case, one becomes caring by seeing the virtues of caring about play out. For example, you might imagine being fascinated with the critically endangered kākāpō as a child and looking up to a conservationist that dedicates their life to protecting them. Seeing their hard work, you recognize the value that caring about something can have. In the second case, one ends up being disposed to be caring because they're socialized to show deference to and be at the beck and call of others, and this socialization to care is contingent on features of one's identity—typically one's gender, race, and/or class. As a result of this socialization, caring individuals are well prepared to privilege the perspective and recognize the needs of others, where those others are often not themselves members of oppressed communities (Bartky 1990; Bhandary 2022; Collins 1991; Hampton 2007; Young 2011; Zheng 2018). These two ways of developing the disposition of caring about are not mutually exclusive and don't always cleanly come apart. For example, dominant gender norms might make it easier for young girls to appreciate and wish to emulate a feminized caring role model.

Second, one might come to care about another individual or group by recognizing them as having inherent moral worth and seeing a need. To recognize another's inherent moral worth lends itself to valuing their perspective, and to not do so would amount to a denial of dignity (which is at odds with recognizing inherent moral worth). For example, you might not have a general caring disposition but recognize that the hungry unhoused individual that asks if you would be willing to purchase them dinner has inherent moral worth and, in turn, come to care about them. I think that this is also a way one can come to care about nonhuman animals or the environment.¹⁹ One might come to care about a given project in a similar way, by recognizing that it has a substantive impact upon others one recognizes as having moral worth (e.g., the flourishing of one's department). Finally, one might come to care about another by becoming invested in their flourishing after first caring for them. One example of this is a migrant care worker being hired as a nanny for a child and then developing a bond with the child as they build a relationship (Brake 2021).

¹⁹ This is consistent with Gruen (2015); however, her account of empathy is more demanding by requiring attention for and transformative experiences with the subject.

The case of Marie has been constructed such that she develops her disposition to care in the former way to isolate the unique wrong of care exploitation from other potentially overlapping injustices. That being said, the way one comes to care about the subject they are called to aid is irrelevant to determining whether they are vulnerable to having their care exploited; caring about, no matter the source, is enough. We may determine, however, that the severity of the injustice is amplified and the demand for moral repair is even greater when care exploitation is facilitated by other structural injustices. Having considered what is problematic about the call to aid, and ways that one can come to care about (becoming vulnerable to the exploitation of their care), I now turn to the third condition.

2.3. Benefiting from Care Exploitation

The third necessary condition of care exploitation is that, when issuing the call to aid, the individual doing so anticipates a disproportionate benefit arising from the arrangement they make. An expected advantage on the part of the exploiter is a standard feature of exploitation, but in the case of care, this advantage can be to the exploitative individual or to someone or something they are responsible for; this condition captures the maldistribution element of my account. This anticipated benefit to a third party is clearly demonstrated by a couple of the examples provided at the outset. The parents, administrators, and/or legislators are exploiting the care of the teacher with anticipated benefits for the children who are their charges, for whose education they are responsible. The same is true of the employers exploiting the domestic care worker. In Marie’s case, both Alex and their mother benefit. While Alex doesn’t have to bear the burdens of caring for their mother, the mother benefits as the recipient of Marie’s care.

It is at this point that a familiar concern is often raised: we sometimes navigate caring responsibilities in close interpersonal relationships in ways that look a lot like care exploitation. It would be problematic if the account misdiagnoses cases where the care involved is not overly burdensome, ultimately being trivially true and unhelpful for addressing those very injustices I’m concerned with. Consider the following example: “Yesterday I texted my spouse on my way home and asked them to put water on and boil pasta to start our dinner; I presumed that they would do this and didn’t really consider that they would refuse. Does this deny my spouse’s autonomy or dignity? It’s hard to see how—even though it’s something I presumed they’d do anyway, and I figured they’d do it in part because they care about me and care about eating dinner at a reasonable hour.”²⁰ In this case, I share the inclination that care exploitation is not at play; the spouse is not ultimately being disrespected, and the burdens are not disproportionate. A charitable reading is that this single

²⁰ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this concise statement.

presumption is made within the context of a longer relationship that negotiates and distributes caring responsibilities—large and small—equitably. Perhaps the texter set the table or loaded the dishwasher last night, which would ultimately fail to satisfy the third condition. If it is not the case, however, that caring responsibilities are more generally navigated in this way, I have no issue claiming that care exploitation is present. Even if the single task of boiling water is not particularly burdensome, it can be when it becomes part of a larger pattern where one is expected to do the vast majority of small day-to-day caring tasks without appropriate support from their spouse, simply because they care. This brings to light that the contextual details surrounding the type of the relationship (i.e., a single transaction vs. extended), as well as the terms (e.g., workplace, marriage) between A and B, is relevant to accurately identifying care exploitation.

2.4. Vulnerability and Accepting the Call

The fourth and fifth necessary conditions are that the caring individual is likely to accept the call to aid due to their caring nature and actually does so. They are likely to—and do—answer the call because they care about the flourishing of the call's subject, and this caring about is the source of the caring individual's vulnerability.

I was initially reticent to recognize care as a vulnerability. This is because vulnerabilities are widely understood to be problematic, characterized as a weakness or as the lack of something essential (Goodin 1985; Jaggar 2014). But vulnerabilities needn't be understood in a negatively valenced way. Instead, we ought to make room for understanding some vulnerabilities in a positive light. There is precedent for this in our popular culture, somewhat surprisingly. For example, Karamo Brown has said when encouraging one to seek the aid of others that "being vulnerable is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength." (*Queer Eye* 2018) And anecdotally, I've heard prisoners and students in an Inside-Out course speak positively about what they gained from allowing themselves to become vulnerable to one another.²¹ Within these contexts vulnerability is a type of openness to others.²² Not only can openness be the opening of oneself up to others so that others are aware of one's situation, but it can also be allowing oneself to be affected by others.

In some cases, vulnerability as both types of openness is required for success, like when one realizes that they need aid to flourish because they cannot do so independently. In other cases, particularly those of caring about, vulnerability as openness is required so that one can be receptive to the cared about entity's

²¹ Inside-Out is a higher education program where university students and those incarcerated in prisons or jails take a semester-long college course together.

²² Thanks to Elizabeth Sperry for offering the language of "openness" at the 2019 NASSP International Social Philosophy Conference.

perspective; the caring individual’s flourishing becomes wrapped up with the successful flourishing of the subject of care. Without this vulnerability, one simply could not care about. While I remain neutral as to whether care is at the core of morality or the ultimate solution to our sociopolitical problems, I follow others in the care ethics tradition by understanding care as a virtue. I similarly take vulnerability as openness to be a virtue: it “tends to enable its bearer to make the right decisions and to perform good actions,” and openness “is conducive to or partly constitutes living a good life” (Tessman 2005, 162).

Unfortunately, vulnerability as openness is a double-edged sword, aligning with Tessman’s (2005, 4) account of burdened virtues: those “virtues that have the unusual feature of being disjoined from their bearer’s own flourishing.” By being open, a caring individual can have their own flourishing strongly negatively impacted as a result of having their dignity undermined—of having their care, which openness is essential to, exploited.²³ Openness makes a caring individual susceptible to exploitation precisely because one is invested in the flourishing of another—affected by another—and so feels the need to aid in their flourishing. When a caring individual is called to aid or relied upon by another in the way articulated in section 2.1, there’s already a pull to help felt. Despite this, there ought not to be the *presumption* (or, put differently, foreclosure on considering that the individual might choose to do otherwise) that the caring individual will inevitably help. To make a call based on this presumption, as argued above, undermines their dignity.

It should be noted that when only the first four conditions are satisfied, care exploitation has not occurred. For example, if Alex were to call on Marie to aid their mother, and Marie were to choose not to answer the call—perhaps because she is simply overburdened with other responsibilities—Alex would not be exploiting Marie’s care. Alex would, however, still be adopting a harmful attitude toward Marie, *attempting* to exploit her care. And this is still morally problematic, even if it doesn’t amount to the injustice of care exploitation.²⁴

3. Conclusion

Here I have pointed the reader toward a very important and pervasive injustice: care exploitation. In doing so, I’ve offered a unified account of what makes

²³ Another example from pop culture that implicitly expresses this idea comes from an episode of the show *She-Ra* (Clotworthy 2020) when one of the characters (Perfuma) says, “It’s hard keeping your heart open. It makes you vulnerable. But it doesn’t make you weak, and I have to believe it’s worth it.”

²⁴ We feel similarly about attempted murder versus actual murder—the intentions are still morally problematic, and it’s merely a matter of luck that the world hasn’t aligned with them.

it morally problematic, as well as the conditions for its occurrence. One thing that's striking about our contemporary circumstance is that care exploitation is a nonaccidentally gendered phenomenon that's invisible in the existing philosophical literature. Although the foundation has been laid for understanding care exploitation, there is still much work to be done. Its role in gender injustice must be more closely examined, considering not just interpersonal cases like that of Alex and Marie but more structural cases like the widespread exploitation of caring teachers, care workers, nurses, and soldiers. Only after we've identified how it manifests in these spheres of our lives can we turn to preventing and remedying the injustice of care exploitation all around us.²⁵

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