Chapter 9
The Vulnerable Self: Enabling the Recognition of Racial Inequality

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Abstract This chapter is a descriptive account of a disposition that promotes the recognition of racial oppression. Insofar as white supremacy conditions whites to not see racial injustice, they are discouraged from recognizing white racism; as a result, disagreement on matters regarding race and racism often falls along the color line with a typical black view that accounts for racism and a typical white view that often does not. It is therefore unlikely that more evidence will convince whites of the fact of racial oppression. It seems reasonable, then, to turn to the self and reveal what character disposition enables the recognition of racial oppression despite conditioning. I propose that selves who are *dispositionally vulnerable* are able to recognize racial inequality. *Dispositional vulnerability is an awareness of self dependence on others for understanding and respect, and an awareness, in turn, of the other's dependence for understanding and respect*. Whether dispositional vulnerability is cultivated or conditioned, it promotes understanding across group differences like privilege and subordination and contributes to an atmosphere in which people feel compelled to understand and cooperate with one another.

Keywords Vulnerability · Racism · White privilege · Reparations · Racial oppression

9.1 Introduction

There is convincing evidence that racial discrimination is systemic. Housing discrimination continues despite laws banning it,[1] blacks receive longer prison terms than whites who commit the same or similar crimes[2] and black children attend under-resourced schools more often than their white counterparts. Still, many whites deny that racial discrimination is to blame. They instead choose to believe that

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blacks are responsible for making poor choices of where to live, blacks are prone to criminality, and black schoolchildren are lazy or have unsupportive parents. They assert that our society is meritocratic and egalitarian and will concede that at the most, there are unfortunate racist individuals but not systemic racial discrimination. Charles Mills holds that views like these are indicative of a 'cognitive handicap' (Mills 2007, 15) that whites have regarding racial discrimination and oppression such that they are unable to recognize that it exists. Still, there are some whites who manage to avoid the cognitive handicap of white supremacy, or, despite their handicap, do appreciate the reality of racial oppression.[3]

In this chapter I offer a descriptive account of a disposition that I think promotes the recognition of racial oppression. Insofar as the ability to recognize racial oppression is independent of the persuasiveness of the evidence because white supremacy conditions whites to not see racial injustice, it is unlikely that more evidence will bring about recognition. It is reasonable, then, to suggest that the ability to recognize racial oppression lies within the self; that is, if whites recognize racial oppression, they do so because they are dispositionally inclined to recognize it.

I propose that selves who are *dispositionally vulnerable* are able to recognize racial inequality despite powerful white supremacist conditioning that discourages it. *Dispositional vulnerability is an awareness of self dependence on others for understanding and respect, and an awareness, in turn, of the other's dependence for understanding and respect*. Thus, I advocate rescuing vulnerability from its negative connotations of weakness and helplessness by claiming that being vulnerable is a desirable disposition because, as it encourages understanding across difference, it encourages the recognition of systemic racial oppression.[4]

9.2 A Matter of Perspective

In a lifetime we are presented with a dizzying amount of information that we must sift through and judge whether to discard or accept. What we decide to believe and what we decide not to believe will be colored by how we have been conditioned to judge. In a society ordered under patriarchy and white supremacy—structures of dominance—those in privileged positions will suffer from blindness to their privilege and others' subordination.

Feminists have long noted that patriarchy makes it difficult for males to see their privilege. In this way, males can be said to be cognitively disabled in matters concerning gender oppression. But even if men do acknowledge the existence of gender oppression, they may be unwilling to acknowledge their role in gender inequality. In other words, men may concede that gender oppression exists, but will not concede that they benefit from it in any way. Peggy McIntosh opens her famous essay 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack of Privilege,' (McIntosh 1989) by describing her experience with male students in her women's studies class. Not surprisingly, some men denied the existence of gender oppression, but among the ones who did not, some were unable (or unwilling) to see their own role in gender oppression, how they personally benefited from gender privilege. The experience

led McIntosh to realize that she too missed the ways in which she benefited from privilege—not gender privilege but white privilege. Indeed, her essay shows how white privilege often goes unnoticed by whites while underprivileged blacks easily recognize it.

Feminist philosophers like Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock and Alison Jaggar (Harding 1986, 1991, Hartsock 1983, Jagger 1983) have argued that one's social location (standpoint) affects one's knowledge claims. Historically, claims about 'universal' truths have been made by men from their privileged locations, yet they supposedly speak for all of us, including underprivileged women and blacks. The notion that men could speak for everyone comes from a patriarchal social structure in which men hold the only position from which true knowledge can come—the only position that counts epistemologically.

As feminists argue that patriarchy hides gender oppression from the gender privileged, so critical race theorists have argued that white supremacy effectively hides white privilege. Part of the difficulty in persuading the unpersuaded is that antidiscrimination legislation obscures the reality of gender and racial oppression. Because it is against the law to discriminate on the basis of gender or race, whites and men are encouraged to see sexist or racist behavior as anomalous or a matter of individual racism or sexism rather than systemic gender and racial discrimination (Pateman and Mills 2007).

Mills asserts that 'white ignorance' (Mills 2007, 15) is a phenomenon of white supremacy that poses a serious obstacle to seeing racial injustice. It is a handicap that whites are encouraged to maintain all their lives. This cognitive disability is to blame for opposing perspectives between white cognizers and black cognizers resulting in a typical black view and a typical white view.

> . . .*white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the post pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years. . ..requir[ing] a certain schedule of structured blindness and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity. (Mills 1997, 19; emphasis in original)

Whites, he points out, '*mis*interpret the world' and 'learn to see the world wrongly' (Mills 1997, 18). The problem is a problem of cognition and knowledge where, because of white supremacy, whites have incorrect knowledge of social realities like racial oppression and will often go to shocking extremes to deny what seems obvious to blacks.

Others have noted the discrepancies between white cognizers and black cognizers. Mills notes that David Roediger

> [U]nderlines the fundamental epistemic asymmetry between typical white views of blacks and typical black views of whites: these are not cognizers linked by a reciprocal ignorance but rather groups whose respective privilege and subordination tend to produce self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation, on the one hand, and more veridical perceptions, on the other hand. (Mills 2007, 17)

Mills asserts that cognition will improve if 'cognitive practice' improves, resulting in a 'practical payoff in heightened sensitivity to social oppression and the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate that oppression.' (Mills 2007, 22)

Improving cognition will be quite a task for those who have been socialized and conditioned to construct a false reality and ignore accounts that counter it.

> Inference from perception. . .will be founded on testimony and ultimately on the perceptions and conceptions of others. The background knowledge that will guide inference and judgment, eliminating (putatively) absurd alternatives and narrowing down a set of plausible contenders, will also be shaped by testimony, or the lack thereof, and will itself be embedded in various conceptual frameworks and require perception and memory to access. . .[Testimony] will have been integrated into a framework and narrative and from the start will have involved the selection of certain voices as against others, selection in and selection out. . .at all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted. (Mills 2007, 24)

Here I will discuss two contentious topics, one a historical plea for justice and the other a contemporary tragedy, that highlight perceptual differences between whites and blacks about racial inequality.

9.2.1 Traditional (Dysfunctional) White Cognizers and Racial Reparations

Every so often the topic of racial reparations for American slavery in the form of financial compensation, education programs, business subsidies (and others), finds its way into the national spotlight. Whites who are opposed to the idea of financial compensation quickly point to the implausibility of compensating people who have not been directly wronged by American slavery. After all, they point out, no one alive today was ever a slave or a slave master. Derrick Bell notes that '[h]idden by the often-outraged opposition to reparations is the fact that this country compensates for generalized loss all the time' (Bell 2004, 73). Bell identifies four general arguments for reparations:

> (1) slaves were not paid for their labor over two hundred years, depriving their descendants of their inheritance; (2) the descendants of slave owners wrongfully inherited the profits derived from slave labor; (3) the U.S. government made and then broke its promise to provide former slaves with forty acres and a mule; (4) systematic and government-sanctioned economic and political racial oppression. . .excluded them from sharing in the nation's growth and prosperity. (Bell 2005, 73)

Opponents of reparation ask, 'What are forty acres and a mule going to do for anyone these days?' and 'How do we go about locating and paying all of the descendants of all slaves?' Rather than spending time to linger on the arguments themselves and coming to terms with what they represent,[5] in knee-jerk fashion, opponents dismiss reparations (financial and otherwise) as an outdated and impossible project to carry out. When whites take this position, it is upsetting to blacks. It is reminiscent of the era of segregation where whites (sometimes well-meaning whites) urged blacks to drop attempts at integration, not because they were against it, but because it would take too much effort and was just too hard for whites who were used to segregation to adjust to.[6]

Robert Gooding-Williams asserts that the gap between the 'black view' and the 'white view' could be narrowed with multicultural education.

> [W]ere. . .whites to learn something of American racial slavery and of its impact on African-American life, they could begin to see that the argument for reparations is plausible and begin to share with the African-Americans who advance that argument a common moral ground for further deliberations. . .through the study of African-American social history, they could begin to acknowledge the cogency of the considerations in light of which many African-American black persons, in reflecting on that history, have insisted that being black in America involves collective injustice. (Gooding-Williams 1998, 20)

I agree with Gooding-Williams that exposing whites to black social history through quality multicultural education curriculum could lead to whites acknowledging the reality of racial inequality. Certainly whites (and blacks) could benefit from more education on black history. However, given white supremacy's legacy of white denial of racial injustice, I think that unless whites are dispositionally situated to take up information that requires them to give up their denial, whites are unlikely to do so. If whites are invested in evading racial oppression, presenting more evidence, information, and narratives is unlikely to provide the impetus for them to acknowledge it. Thus, whites will accumulate more information but there is no reason to believe that the information will be accepted.

9.2.2 Traditional (Dysfunctional) White Cognizers and Hurricane Katrina

The horror of Hurricane Katrina brought to the fore the relationship between generational poverty and racial inequity. When the storm struck in August 2005 many black families did not evacuate even though authorities issued credible warnings of impending floods. The national discourse soon broadly divided into two camps. In one camp were those who believed that the people who stayed in New Orleans did so because they did not have a *choice* to leave. They understood that the legacy of racial inequality severely limited people's ability to escape such that they *could not* leave. Having no savings to draw from, no investments to cash in, no car to drive away in, no credit cards to pay for a hotel, and no extended family economically able to help, they remained.

In reality, racial oppression is to blame. Because of discrimination and the legacy of racial inequality, blacks are more likely to take out large loans to attend college, to pay a higher interest rate for cars and homes and financially support other family members. These factors limit one's ability to accumulate wealth. In contrast, many whites have parents who pay for college so that when they graduate they hold little to no debt. Their parents help them with a down payment on their first house (perhaps with a home equity loan from their own home). Meanwhile, more blacks rent than own homes but if they do own they are more likely to have a mortgage with a high interest rate leaving them barely able to make the payments much less take out an additional loan. Or they may live in a neighborhood where houses do not appreciate

much limiting the amount of equity they earn on their homes. Families draw on home equity to finance college, buy cars, and make investments. A household's wealth is primarily determined by the amount of home equity accumulated. If wealth is a good indicator of future success, and economists and sociologists suggest that it is,[7] then the future looks dismal for many black families.

The other camp—mostly white—drew a very different conclusion about the disproportionately large number of blacks who remained in New Orleans after the hurricane. To them, stubbornness and stupidity, perhaps combined with poor financial choices were to blame. Tyrone Forman and Amanda Lewis, in 'Racial Apathy and Hurricane Katrina: The Social Anatomy of Prejudice in the Post-Civil Rights Era' (2006), suggest that 'racial apathy' among whites explains why so many believed that blacks were responsible for their lot. Forman defines racial apathy as 'an indifference to societal, racial and ethnic inequality and lack of engagement with race-related social issues' (Forman 2004, 44). And contrary to popular thought, they point to an increase in racial apathy[8] rather than a decrease. Apathetic whites feel that blacks are inferior to themselves and/or express ignorance about racial inequality. Racial apathy led many whites to see the Hurricane Katrina survivors not as victims but as irresponsible (and therefore responsible for their situation). Not surprisingly, these same whites are opposed to black federal assistance like reparation and affirmative action (Forman and Lewis 2006, 186).[9]

This interpretation misses the reality of the legacy of long-standing racial inequality. If one takes into account that many of the people who stayed had no car to carry them to safety, no bank account from which to withdraw cash, and a lack of other critical resources to draw from in times of disaster, then it is easy to see that stubbornness and stupidity did not keep blacks in New Orleans, but rather a systemic lack of means. Even in cases where homeowners had the ability to leave, they may have been reluctant to do so if, lacking other valuable possessions, their one source of wealth was their home. The reluctance itself can be understood as having a structural basis.

9.3 The Vulnerable Self

Being vulnerable usually denotes a negative state that we would want to avoid. Most of us would not want to seek out a state of vulnerability because being vulnerable means that we are in danger, helpless, or weak. In what follows I argue for vulnerability for blacks and whites as a positive state or disposition of openness and exposure to others that can promote understanding across difference.[10]

Vulnerability is (a) recognizing one's dependence on others for respect and understanding and (b) recognizing others' dependence on oneself for respect and understanding. The vulnerable self, then, is existentially aware of self and other dependence for respect and understanding. The ability to possess the first component, recognizing one's dependence on others for respect and understanding, is an exercise in humility because one recognizes and internalizes how one needs others. The ability to possess the second component, recognizing others' dependence

on oneself for respect and understanding requires one to de-center the self in the interest of others.

As a structure of dominance that affects how honest one will be with oneself and how responsive one will be to others, white supremacy affects how vulnerable the self will be. I stated earlier that white supremacy confers privilege on whites that often blinds them to realities that others experience. Vulnerability, then, will be easier for blacks to achieve because of their subordinate status and will pose a challenge for whites to achieve because of their privileged position.

9.3.1 Black Vulnerability

Developing a positive notion of black vulnerability that is sensitive to black oppression is tricky—claiming that there is anything beneficial that results from oppression is problematic. Some may see it as ignoring, romanticizing, or failing to appreciate the horror of oppression. However, in noting a positive dispositional ability that results from underprivilege, I am neither supporting oppression or arguing in favor of it. The kind of vulnerability I'm describing should not be confused with vulnerability in general usage, i.e., susceptibility to harm. White racism and oppression certainly makes blacks susceptible to harm and this is precisely the kind of vulnerability I am not arguing for. I am describing a *dispositional* vulnerability of openness and exposure to others for understanding and respect that blacks are generally more familiar with than whites because of their experiences with discrimination and oppression. Put another way, because of underprivilege, blacks are already primed to attain the first component of vulnerability which fosters an ability to meet the second component.

Conceptually, black vulnerability is problematic. Vulnerability is a desirable disposition of openness and exposure, but white supremacy can lead blacks to have an unhealthy relationship with whites where blacks are overly dependent on white validation. Thus, the legacy of white supremacy's violence to the black psyche may make blacks too vulnerable in this sense, where they try to make sense of their own oppression and 'understand' racial inequality. With black vulnerability, then, the risk lies in being *too* exposed and open such that one attempts to understand what perhaps should not be understood and not withdrawing respect when one should.[11] Mills notes that 'power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony' (Mills 2007, 22) mean that along with whites, some blacks will also suffer from 'white ignorance.' I suggest that ideological hegemony will have some blacks believing (and supporting) the hype of white superiority by privileging white respect and understanding over blacks. Here we have a danger of vulnerability: one can be too vulnerable in ways that damage the self. But vulnerability is not at fault—white supremacy is. Because blacks have lived it, blacks are able to meet the first component of vulnerability: the recognition of one's dependence on others for respect and understanding which sensitizes one to others' discrimination and oppression. In what follows, I give an example that illustrates how the experience of oppression can prime one to recognize other kinds of discrimination.

In the spring of 2004, the state of Georgia tried to push through a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. A group of black members of the House of Representatives, most of them deacons and ministers, stalled the amendment. Even though they were strongly against same-sex marriage (in fact most of them already backed the state's law against it), they were against amending the constitution because they did not want to 'restrict the aspirations of a group of people.' (*NYT*, March 3, 2004) Representative Georganna Sinkfield of Atlanta said, 'What I see in this is hate. I'm a Christian, but if we put this in the Constitution, what's next?. . .You're opening the floodgates for people to promote their own prejudice' (*NYT*, March 3, 2004). This case demonstrates understanding across difference in that when one has suffered from discrimination it becomes easier to recognize it. To do so, they had to subordinate their own interests and beliefs to respect homosexuals enough to try to understand their call for justice. And they succeeded. They proved that they 'know discrimination when they see it.'[12] As Seth Kilbourn of the Human Rights Campaign noted,

> At the national level and in states like Massachusetts and Georgia, African American leaders have been pretty clear in their opposition to these kinds of constitutional amendments. No matter how they feel about marriage for same-sex couples, they don't want to write into our governing documents laws that treat one group of people different from another. They've seen this country go down that road before. (*NYT*, March 3, 2004)

To be sure, some representatives were against it for self-interested reasons. Some members of the Legislative Black Caucus saw it as a bullying tactic on the part of conservative Republicans and dug in their heels to prevent the Republicans from riding on their coattails to a large turnout during voting season (*NYT*, March 3, 2004).

Their recognition is not unflawed, however, given that they did support the state ban against same-sex marriage. Possibly, they saw the battle for same-sex marriage in Georgia as futile given its history as a very conservative state. Or perhaps they saw it as a politically savvy move, supporting the state ban against same-sex marriage that is more vulnerable to being overturned by a judge while blocking a constitutional amendment that is far more difficult to repeal. What does seem clear, though, is that the 'state′s Legislative Black Caucus has largely come to see [a constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage] as denigrating a minority.' (NYT, March 3, 2004) Some of the representatives who were polled were vehemently opposed to any comparison of the fight for same-sex marriage equality to the fight for black civil rights but most of the black legislators who opposed the amendment, 'compared the resolution to laws that once restricted the lives of blacks' (NYT, April 1, 2004).

Although imperfect, the black legislators responded as vulnerable selves, exposed and poised to understand the plight of others across difference—no small feat considering that homosexuality and same-sex marriage deeply clashed with their religious beliefs. They recognized the proposed constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage as discriminatory because they were conditioned to see discrimination by virtue of their own experiences with it; they were better positioned

to 'know.' Through their recognition of their own dependence on others for respect and understanding, they were able to see that others are dependent on them for respect and understanding.

Religious beliefs presented a challenge to black vulnerability and recognition across differences and would surely present a challenge to white vulnerability as well. But there is another, perhaps more pernicious impediment that will tend to make one invulnerable to others—privilege. Privilege due to gender, race, sexuality, or social class can be a stumbling block to recognizing gender, racial, sexual and class discrimination and oppression.

Black women experienced how privilege confers blindness during the Civil Rights Movement when black men overwhelmingly expected women to take on supporting roles rather than be a part of the movement themselves. Subordinated by race, black men are privileged by gender and often blind to the sufferings of black women who are subordinated on both accounts. Black men have expected black women to put their feminist concerns aside for the 'larger' struggle against racism. Black women who refuse to give primacy to the fight against racial domination over gender domination are seen as enemies to the black struggle—insofar as black men view the black struggle as a struggle for black men. Called militant, traitors, and man-haters, black women quickly discover that racial solidarity is no match against gender privilege. White supremacy as a structure of dominance is complicated by the intersectionality of gender domination. In Mills' words, '*nonwhite men get to be white supremacists too*, at least with respect to nonwhite women' (Pateman and Mills 2007, 191; emphasis in original).

Thus, where one is positioned in the race/gender hierarchy will affect how vulnerable one is to others. Subordinate by race and gender, black women do not have a stake in not seeing things as they are. They 'have no vested interest in privilege, which does not, of course, mean that their cognitions will automatically be veridical, but means that they will have no group interest, as others do, in getting things wrong' (Pateman and Mills 2007, 191). Black women, located at the bottom of the race/gender hierarchy, at the intersection of underprivilege, will be the most open and exposed to recognizing oppression and discrimination in its other forms. Yet, because of their subordinate status, black women 'will find it more difficult to speak in the first place, and more difficult to be taken seriously even when they are heard (if they are)' (Pateman and Mills 2007, 191). Those who have been socialized and conditioned to invulnerably not see or know will have to work harder to recognize oppression.

9.3.2 Challenges to White Vulnerability

Whites enjoy 'accidents of birth' (Bartky 1999, 35–36). This means that whites are given the benefit of the doubt; seen as a smart, knowledgeable, trustworthy individual with an agreeable disposition. For the most part, I am oversimplifying white privilege by abstracting away from class, gender, and sexual orientation to

highlight the differences between blacks and whites. Still, it is important to note that white supremacy does not confer superiority equally. Gender, sexual orientation, and social class will affect how privileged one is, and, accordingly, how dependent one will feel on others for respect and understanding. Whites in lower social classes, white women, and white gays and lesbians are not privileged in the way that white, upper class, heterosexual men are.

Heterosexual white men will be less inclined to look to others for respect and understanding than, for example, white women and white gays and lesbians, because they occupy the most privileged position in the race, gender, and sexual orientation hierarchy. Privilege means that they do not have to. Not only will they fail to see others as mutual dependents for understanding and respect, but they will also fail to see race and gender dominance. They will, as Mills states, 'be most susceptible to the delusions of race and gender ideology, since they have the greatest stake in maintaining the structure of illicit benefit and exploitation' (Pateman and Mills 2007, 179).

One would expect that white women, subordinated by gender domination, would be more sensitive to other forms of domination, like racial and sexual domination. The exclusion of nonwhite women by white women from both the first and second wave feminist movements, however, shows that white superiority often trumps the bond of sisterhood against gender subordination. At the intersection of race privilege and gender subordination, white women occupy a contradictory position. They are, in Mills' words, 'subpersons' (subordinate to men due to gender) and 'subcontractors' (superior to nonwhites due to race).

> [in the racia-sexual contract] one has simultaneous insight and sightlessness. . .contradictorily located, [white women] are subpersons with respect to the white male, but are nonetheless superior to the different variety of nonwhite male subpersons, and certainly to the nonwhite female nonpersons. So while they may be objects for the subjecthood of the white male contractor, *they are nonetheless subjects and subcontractors in their own right with respect to nonwhite men and women.* (Pateman and Mills 2007, 179, my emphasis)

The first component of vulnerability, recognizing *one's dependence on others for respect and understanding*, will then be difficult for whites to attain—even those one would expect to be more sensitive to oppression and discrimination (white women, poor whites, gay/lesbian whites)—because whiteness handicaps them epistemologically—even if they have other sorts of epistemic privilege.

The second component, the ability to recognize *others' dependence on oneself for respect and understanding*, will also be a challenge for whites. White supremacy confers privilege, but as I stated earlier, it also leads many whites to be cognitively deficient about racial inequality. In order for whites to see the reasonableness of reparations for American slavery, for example, or how the legacy of racial inequality left many blacks behind when Hurricane Katrina hit, or how blacks are not prone to criminality but rather the legal system is prone to racism, the ability to empathize with blacks is necessary. Feeling empathetic toward blacks about racial oppression will require them to de-privilege their own privileged experience and (imaginatively) replace it with the underprivileged black experience.

But if white supremacy discourages whites from thinking of blacks as fully human equals it is difficult to see what would motivate whites to empathize with those who challenge the very structure that affords their privilege and fosters apathy rather than empathy.

9.3.3 White Vulnerability

I argued above that whites are encouraged to not be dependent (or deny that they are dependent) on others for respect and understanding. White supremacy also discourages them from empathizing with victims of oppression because that would require them to acknowledge their privilege. Still, some whites actively work against their privilege. Abolitionists and race traitors belong in this group. Why are some whites able to see the reality of racial oppression? Understanding across very different social locations is a great challenge. As Mills notes, 'When the individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he is doing so with eyes and ears that have been socialized. Perception is also in part conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid' (Mills 2007, 23–24).

How we are disposed to others—our disposition—is a part of our socialization and also affects how we cognize and perceive. Disposition, then, is a part of our conceptual grid through which we view the world and will influence how responsive we will be to another's situation, and/or suffering. Thomas Hobbes sees us as mutually vulnerable in that we are all susceptible to harm from others (Hobbes 1982) but that is just one side of the story. The other side is that we are also mutually dependent on one another. No doubt luck plays a part, but we could not do well in school without good teachers who cared about our progress, we could not recover from misfortune without family or friends or companions to help us through, we could not succeed in our careers without good mentors. The fact is that we need each other more than we ever let on.

Rather than recognizing our susceptibility to harm and then taking measures to protect ourselves against it, per Hobbes, why not recognize our mutual dependence and then feel an obligation to understand others? If people focus on their susceptibility to harm, they may (unjustly) mobilize against others whom they perceive to be most harmful even if they are not (under white supremacy the most harmful group is black men).[13] How we feel toward others, then, whether we feel pulled to recognize others' dependence on us for respect and understanding or whether we feel disconnected due to overprivilege, will guide our responsiveness.

Milton Fisk holds that a mixture of social feelings like 'sympathy, compassion, and benevolence' (Fisk 2007, 123) toward others when they suffer and 'outrage, mistrust and disillusionment' (Fisk 2007, 123) at people and institutions that cause the suffering, can foster a moral orientation that motivates cooperation with others.

> A mixture of social feelings of both types [compassion and outrage] serves to motivate important social tasks—defining problems, uniting people, setting goals, and implementing them. The identification with others coming from these feelings lays the basis of working together with them on social tasks. (Fisk 2007, 124)

Fisk is concerned with making socialist morality transparent and showing its opposition to capitalism yet I think he invaluably shows how the ways in which we identify with others, the feelings we have toward others, can motivate cooperative behaviors. He argues that if we locate ourselves dispositionally within a community of dependent others, then we will feel morally pulled to help. He asserts that we should focus on what feelings generate in us a sense of being responsible for helping others.

9.4 Vulnerability: Enabling Understanding Across Difference

Recognizing others' dependence on us fosters a way of being that promotes understanding and cooperation. Looking upon the other not as a potential danger but as a human with the same dependencies and vulnerabilities (in my sense, not Hobbes') as oneself advances humanity because it promotes dignity. Vulnerability promotes dignity because recognizing another's lived experiences and appreciating their worth enriches one's own view and affirms the dignity of oneself and others. Actively going about in the world open to and with a desire to understand others' experiences is praiseworthy. It is not meant to take the place of active work against oppression—which is vital if racial oppression is ever to be eliminated—yet its worth remains even if no measurable action is taken because of the social feelings and relationships it encourages.

Although in this society we are encouraged to believe that we are autonomous beings who make it on our own, humans are far from being autonomous.[14] We are social beings who need to interact with others and interacting with others makes up a large part of our lives. Most of our interactions require that we communicate (verbally or nonverbally) with others. And in a society as racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse as ours, we often must communicate across great differences. Sometimes our interactions do not go well and we communicate poorly. It may be for pretty straightforwardly ordinary reasons like we may be in a bad mood or having an 'off' day, but I think that often, how well we are able to interact and communicate with others, especially differently situated others, is influenced by other reasons, namely, whether we think we are respected and whether we feel we will be understood.

Communication is difficult if one does not have the sense that one will be understood—or that there is at least the possibility of understanding. If we do not feel we are respected, communication becomes difficult because we are reluctant to communicate and interact with those whom we think do not respect us. Understanding and respect are closely connected as well. Sometimes we try our best to understand others because we respect them; understanding may even come easy because of it. We try to make sense of what someone is saying because our respect for them urges us to try harder to understand. Alternatively, we may be more inclined to respect those whom we feel we understand well *because* we understand them well.

Return to the argument for racial reparations with a vulnerable white cognizer rather than a deficient white cognizer. The vulnerable self does not point out that her family never owned slaves and that she is not a racist. She does not begin to

point out the difficulties of awarding a compensatory damage package to millions of blacks. First, she listens. Listening well requires a dispositional move on the part of the listener. She may first try to imagine how it must feel that measures have been taken elsewhere to compensate those who have been egregiously wronged and may see why blacks seek the same kind of justice. After all, the United States government financially compensated Native Americans and Japanese Americans.[15] The vulnerable self does not immediately disparage and blame the victims of Hurricane Katrina for not evacuating. Aware of the other's dependence on her for understanding, she considers the arguments and evidence from a position of openness and exposure and sees the awful cascade of misfortune Hurricane Katrina victims experienced as deeply rooted in their racial oppression.

9.5 Conditioning and Cultivating Vulnerability

Whether vulnerability can be cultivated or whether one is socialized or conditioned to be vulnerable, or whether the vulnerable self is a combination of conditioning and cultivation are questions for a longer project. I do have some ideas, borrowed from recent socialist thought, about how vulnerability may come about via a mixture of socialization and cultivation.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned Fisk's notion of a moral orientation that comes from having social feelings like compassion and empathy. Social feelings, he claims, lend themselves to a society—a socialist society. In contrast, capitalism's moral orientation which is based on 'non-social feelings of insensitivity, indifference, and self-seeking' (Fisk 2007, 124) lends itself to a society organized by control. Fisk argues for the superiority of a society where people help each other, not because it is someone's right to have help but because we want people to thrive.

I have been arguing that seeing others' dependence on oneself for understanding is part of being a vulnerable self and that it can promote understanding. Like Fisk, the particular kind of society I have in mind that is best positioned to carry it out is a well-functioning socialist society. Ordered from cooperation with its members guided by social feelings of compassion and empathy, socialism aligns itself quite nicely with the notions of vulnerability and non-autonomy I have been developing here.

Learning solidarity may be key to seeing mutual dependence. As Richard Schmitt notes, we have a considerable amount of relearning to do.

> Once we learn to distance ourselves from [the attitude that we are not responsible for poverty, limited educational opportunities, etc.] and begin to get an inkling that everyone has some responsibility for the well-being or troubles of others, solidarity is moved from the arena of power struggle as well as the realm of fantasy. (Schmitt 2007, 154)

There are practical ways to accomplish this and Schmitt notes several, including changes in hierarchy in workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods, affiliating with those from different religions, backgrounds, social locations. As Romand Coles

asserts, 'citizen concern for the least well-off is empty if they are variously objects of disgust, marginalization, and everyday indifference' (Coles 2001, 505).

9.6 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have been offering a description of the kind of self who can see injustices like long-standing racial oppression and discrimination. I have argued that selves who improve their cognition despite powerful social phenomena that discourage understanding are vulnerably open to understanding others. Vulnerable selves are proudly non-autonomous individuals who are dependent on others for understanding and see the dependence others have on them for understanding. Vulnerability aids in cognition because through exposure and openness to others, vulnerable selves are poised to 'know' better. It is a way of being in the world that promotes dignity through the affirmation of another's experiences and worth as one strives to understand.

This chapter is meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive, although in the previous section I introduced some ideas from recent socialist thought that I think point to the kinds of changes that may foster vulnerability. I am cynical (realistic?) enough to not expect that there will ever be an end to racial oppression. Indeed, across the globe, many of the suffering peoples are reds, browns and blacks and a good bit of their suffering stems from racial injustice due to the belief that they are just inhuman enough to be exploited. If there ever is an end to racial oppression it will probably come about from self-interest, not vulnerable selves mobilized against injustice. But I can still hope.

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Notes

1. The city of Baltimore is suing Wells Fargo, a major lending institution, for offering loans at much higher interest rates for mortgages in predominantly black neighborhoods than mortgages for comparable homes in predominantly white neighborhoods.
2. There have been many studies on the disparity between white, black and Latino imprisonment rates. See the report by the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives and 'Racial, Ethnic and Gender Disparities in Sentencing: Evidence from the U.S. Federal Courts.' (The Journal of Law and Economics, vol. 44, no. 1, 285–314.
3. For example, white-skin privilege is a phenomenon that some whites find deeply troubling. It would be emotionally easier to, in bad faith, not see one's privilege and to explain away instance after instance of privilege. See McIntosh 1989.
4. See Charles Mills' discussion of epistemologies of ignorance (Mills 1997) and his recent, longer treatment of the phenomenon (Mills 2007). I do not have unreasonably high

expectations of vulnerability, i.e. I do not think that it can or should replace institutions of justice. I am instead interested in revealing what I think are common traits among people who are moved by the suffering of others.

5. I am not suggesting that the arguments for reparations are only representative and not real demands, for they certainly are. I am merely noting that the demands have a two dimensional quality: (1) they appeal to a promise made and then broken and (2) they highlight the legacy of long-standing racial inequality.
6. It is the kind of argument one hears now for the continued discrimination against same-sex couples. Society is 'not ready' for same-sex marriage and civil unions so the discomfort of others trumps justice due homosexuals.
7. For example, scholars have shown that wealth, not income, is a reliable predictor of future success. Statistics indicate that black households hold 1/8 the net worth of white households (Conley 1999), highlighting a huge disparity between black families and white families. Wealth offers a buffer during difficult economic times and comfort when the economy is strong; still, whether the economy is strong or weak many black families are just a paycheck away from homelessness.
8. Forman and Lewis interviewed young whites and compared their responses to older adult whites because young people are usually more empathetic toward others than older adults.
9. What was surprising, however, was that even some whites who had had a 'significant interracial experience' (Forman and Lewis 2006, 187) like living among blacks in the inner city (although the whites who did not experience racial apathy came from this group), missed the racial inequality that was all around them.
10. It should be noted that I see vulnerability as a desirable disposition apart from racial oppression. Its value does not lie in its ability to foster responsiveness to oppression but in its expression of the good of humans and human relationships.
11. I am thinking of victims of abuse who continue to attempt to understand their abuser and the 'reason for their abuse instead of recognizing that there can be no justifiable 'reason' for it.
12. Thank you Bat-Ami Bar On for putting it so succinctly at the Social, Political, Ethical and Legal Philosophy Colloquium at Binghamton University in April 2004.
13. This could certainly be the case with the white response to the 'dangerous black male,' treated as being prone to criminality and thus justifying harsh treatment.
14. Individual autonomy is a myth in the sense that we are able to get on in the world without help from others. Feminist scholars have troubled the notion of autonomy as individual self-sufficiency and developed an account of autonomy that focuses on control over important parts of one's life like one's ability to have an identity and express it. Clearly I don't want to argue for complete dependence. We would not want to be dependent on others for our identities or sense of self and being financially dependent on others is dangerous. What I hope to reveal is our dependence on others for understanding and respect. An account of autonomy that focuses on transcending social relations can be problematic because it can hide the care that one receives from caregivers—often subordinate groups like women and minorities—and gives the false impression that one is able to accomplish things 'on one's own.'
15. The fifth argument Bell notes for reparations for Blacks is just this—that these reparations set precedents for the feasibility of a reparation program for blacks (Bell 2004, 74).

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