

We are All Some Father's Child:
Toward a Paternal Ethic of Care

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Over the last several decades, care ethicists like Eva Feder Kittay have challenged modern liberal accounts of the human person that posit individual autonomy and rational self-determination as both the ground and purpose of personal liberty and equality. Kittay and others have argued instead that the liberty and equality modern people treasure rest upon a prior relation of existential interdependence of which the mother/child relation is paradigmatic.¹ In Kittay's coinage, "we are all—equally—some mother's child." That is to say, we are all due nurturant care.²

At the very origin of human life and the very heart of the human condition, then, we find a salient paradox. Each child is equal to his or her mother as a human being worthy of care. But a fundamental inequality exists between the mother and her child which is also experienced as a constraint on the mother's liberty. The child depends existentially upon the mother who must choose, day in and day out, to give her child care—care which, in the early period, only she can give.³

From this paradigmatic mother/child relationship – which centers on not equal autonomy but human vulnerability, dependence and the universal need for care⁴ -- care ethicists like Kittay

¹ See Gilligan (1982) Noddings (1984) Ruddick (1989) Fineman (1995). Despite this focus on the maternal/child relation at the origins of an ethics of care (as image, concept, metaphor), often one senses an ambivalence to motherhood itself, and the maternal body. For a recent popular argument exploring the significance of relations of care, see Strauss (2024).

² Kittay (1999) 24. She specifies further: "To assert that 'I, too, am a mother's child' is to assert that I am due treatment compatible with or analogous to the treatment a mother renders to a child....It is to be deemed worthy of such treatment." Kittay (1999) 68-69.

³ A breastfeeding mother often nurses into the second year of the child's life. Including nine-plus months of pregnancy, the mother's unique nurturance of the infant can extend to years rather than months. As I discussed vis-à-vis Kittay in Bachiochi (2016), my account differs from Kittay's in including the maximally dependent prenatal child in the ethic of care, *and paradigmatically so*.

⁴ In striving for a connection-based equality over an individual-based equality, Kittay encourages us to ask not, "[w]hat rights are due me by virtue of my status as an equal [but instead] [w]hat are my responsibilities to others

have developed what I call a *mothering norm or ethic* (albeit, in her view, not one ultimately limited to women or even to mothers).⁵ The mothering norm can be described as such: the child's existential need for nurture creates a moral claim, or duty of care, on the part of the mother to attend to those needs that she is specially or uniquely situated to meet, as *this* child's mother.⁶ As Kittay writes of this norm, "It is neither capricious nor misogynist nor disrespectful of individual rights when we insist that individuals who mother infants or young children defer their own desires, and even needs, to meet those of their dependent child."⁷

Building upon Kittay's insights but distinguishing my view from hers in crucial ways, I will argue that we are also *all some father's child*. The human maturation of dependent children and the flourishing of their caregiving mothers depend upon theoretically developing and culturally supporting a normative account of fatherhood that is distinctive from motherhood, one that goes well beyond historic accounts that emphasize genetic contribution and financial provision but also does not simply collapse fatherhood into motherhood.⁸

with whom I stand in specific relations and what are the responsibilities of others to me." Kittay (1999) 28. I share this older account of how obligations are derived. See Bachiochi (2021).

⁵ Kittay writes, "I am convinced that there is nothing inherently gendered about the work of care. Nonetheless, to ignore the fact that most of the care of children is done by mothers, and to call this work of caring for children parenting rather than mothering is a distortion that serves women poorly. I therefore follow other feminists who have called the care of child mothering, acknowledging that fathers, too, can be excellent 'mothers.'" Kittay (1999) xiv. See also Doucet (2006).

⁶ Throughout this article, I refer to the father as the paternal source of the child's existence. So too do I regard the mother as the maternal source of the child's existence. Of course, biologically-grounded duties of maternal and paternal care are traded, in adoption, for legal duties of care. But the biological parents transfer or relinquish those duties which are first and foremost theirs. Of course reproductive technologies such as surrogacy have made these relations and the obligations that flow from them far more complex.

⁷ Kittay (1999) 52. She continues, "Whether or not it is desirable to be a relational, giving self, my argument rests on the moral requirements of dependency work that makes such a self indispensable.... Every society must count on certain persons adopting such a moral self."

⁸ Kittay notes that women are historically more attached to children perhaps because the caregiver is "not fungible" in the way the breadwinner is. Kittay (1999) 27. Perhaps it's a product of the time in which she was writing -- more

The fathering norm I seek to develop arises from the unique and embodied personal relation of the father as the paternal source of the child's existence, and as specially situated to care for that child, in ordinary circumstances. That is to say, the father's embodied relation to *this particular child* – a uniquely personal relation, like that of *this* mother to *this* child -- creates a similar, but distinctive, moral claim on the father. In his case, I will argue, it demands that he “defer [his] desires, and even needs” to meet both the existential, relational needs of the maternal/child dyad as well as the individuating needs of each as full human persons. Importantly, this fathering norm, like Kittay's mothering norm, also challenges false accounts of the mythic autonomous individual of liberal imaginings – ever imaged male – even as it highlights the essential quality not only of nurturance but also of personal agency to human maturation.

In Part I of this article, I put these questions in historic context, briefly examining notable practices pre-modern cultures in the West employed for demanding paternal responsibility for children, and why early feminists rightly urged their demise. In Part II, I engage with Kittay's classic work, *Love's Labor*, to help me, in Part III, begin to develop the contours of a distinctive fathering norm for our time.

I. The Making and Unmaking of the Historic Patriarch

Modern technology has enabled the accurate determination of biological fatherhood by way of the paternity test, with fathers' duties and rights to their children increasingly dependent upon this genetic determination.⁹ Outside of (often religious) subcultures that still promote marital and

than twenty-five years ago -- but Kittay tends to view fatherhood through the near exclusive lens of financial provision.

⁹ Hendricks (2023) 3.

parental norms and roles, few cultural practices remain to offer normative guidance to men who become fathers.¹⁰ Given the relative ease with which biological fathers have always been able to flout responsibilities to their children, in addition to the historical reality that a man could not know with certainty whether a child was his, pre-modern societies developed their own cultural practices to identify, secure and enforce paternity, beyond the legal presumption that marriage traditionally provided.

Cultural and legal norms that in our time are rightly called patriarchal were once widely understood to reduce the ambiguity of paternity enough to make paternal investment a cultural expectation. *The sexual double standard*, which monitored women's sexuality far more strictly than men's, theoretically enabled male kin to police access to the physically vulnerable (and potential maternal) bodies of their daughters, sisters and other close female relations so as to ensure provident care of women and resultant children. *The legal doctrine of coverture*, which disempowered women legally upon marriage in common law jurisdictions, theoretically fortified cultural expectations that men carry out duties of protection and provision of legally and economically dependent wives and children.¹¹

These expectations themselves originated in the West from the consolidation of patrilineal primogeniture within feudalism, as well as Judeo-Christian norms of paternal authority-as-

¹⁰ In the case of unwed parents, state demands for child support form a kind of paternal norm related to financial provision, and after divorce, courts allocate paternal (and maternal) norms related to quantity of time spent with children. But whereas new mothers are at least shown in the hospital after delivery how to breastfeed their child, today little to no guidance is offered to new fathers as to any distinctive contribution they might make.

¹¹ William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765) gave the principle of coverture its most systematic and influential articulation, one that was deeply influential in the Anglo-American legal world until reform efforts emerged in the late 1840s. The legal principle of equity was sometimes used to protect propertied women's assets when they entered marriage even in common law jurisdictions.

responsibility.¹² With Christianity's inversion of pagan hierarchies, including the absolute authority of the Roman paterfamilias, dependent children and their mothers were newly regarded as persons of inviolable dignity and so due nurturance and dignified care (even as women remained legal subordinates in the household). Indeed, Western Christendom's most influential theologian, St. Augustine, laid out his norms for fatherly governance of the family from within a Christian ethic of love, peace, service—and explicitly, *care*.¹³ Once the patrilineal and feudal order and agrarian economy collapsed with the rise of both industrialization and the modern liberal state, many pre-modern norms were gradually institutionalized and/or replaced with formal legal regimes and police forces. In time, threats to vulnerable women and children from *within the family* would be scrutinized legally as well.

Into this new moment, influential early liberals like John Locke sought to reconstruct on contractual grounds the parental obligations that custom had mainly enforced. Locke envisioned a constitutional republic comprised politically of economically independent, property-owning (male) representatives of families who entered into social contract with one another to ensure legitimate governance. In his vision, liberal governance relied on mothers in the private sphere to provide dignified nurture and liberalizing education to their children. Upending the divine right of kings, critiquing primogeniture, and promoting the selfsame education of boys and girls,

¹² Women's status had significantly improved in the early Middle Ages, but feudalism and patrilineal lineage signaled precipitous decline. Martin (1994) 124-139.

¹³ “[T]his is the order of this concord, that a man, in the first place, injure no one, and, in the second, do good to every one he can reach. Primarily, therefore, his own household are in his care, for the law of nature and of society gives him readier access to them and greater opportunity of serving them....For they who care for the rest rule—the husband the wife, the parents the children, the masters the servants; and they who are cared for obey—the women their husbands, the children their parents, the servants, their masters. But...even those who rule serve those whom they seem to command; for they rule not from a love of power, but from a sense of duty they owe to others.” Augustine (1962) 147-8. Prior to these Christian norms based in service, the paterfamilias in ancient Roman law possessed absolute authority over his children, including the right over their life and death, over who they would marry, and whether to sell them into slavery.

Locke defended the goods of monogamous marriage as well as the authoritative paternal and maternal duties of care as essential to the liberal regime he envisioned, at least until children reached majority.

As I've argued at length elsewhere, the mid-19th century rise of the early women's movement in Britain and the United States built upon these large-scale legal and political transitions while simultaneously responding to their dislocating social and economic effects.¹⁴ The early movement also brought much-needed attention to the way in which 1) the still extant sexual double standard undermined the virtues men needed to be chaste companions to their wives and dutiful fathers to their children, and 2) coverture's legal disabilities inhibited married women's own responsible agency in the new political economy, even as it left far too much unchecked authority in the hands of their husbands.

Those pre-modern cultural practices may have served to protect more privileged women (i.e., those with caring and respectful kin) from the inherent physical dangers of the pre-modern era and encouraged marital and paternal support of women and children. But early feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and Sarah Grimke (1850) argued that society needed also to encourage chaste sexual norms for men (not only women) while empowering women (not only men) to take part in the new era as mature and responsible agents of their own lives.¹⁵ After all, despite more difficult material conditions, women of all classes had enjoyed a good deal of

¹⁴ See Bachiochi (2021), Bachiochi (2023) and Bachiochi (2024).

¹⁵ Bachiochi (2021) 44-51, 108; Wollstonecraft (1792), 142-143 ("For I will venture to assert, that all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity, which I have already enlarged on, branch out of one grand cause—want of chastity in men....Chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by all mankind, or they will be cultivated to little effect); Grimke (1850) in Lerner (2004), 308 ("How many so called wives, rise in the morning oppressed with a sense of degradation from the fact that their chastity has been violated, their holiest instincts disregarded . . . and that, too, a thousand times harder to bear, because so called husband has been the perpetrator of the unnatural crime.")

personal agency in pre-modern societies, whether as noble landowners managing estates, as merchants and tradeswoman assisting in their husbands' crafts and trades, or as feme sole (or religious nuns), working independently in the same.¹⁶ To these early feminists, paternal duties of care within chaste marital relations were *self-evident enabling goods* for women who bore and raised children – marital and paternal duties which these women demanded men heed.¹⁷

As legal disabilities were dismantled, and new civil and political rights recognized, feminist attention in the twentieth century began to shift from demanding that men meet their obligations within marriage to scrutinizing the institution of marriage altogether. With the rise of radical feminism especially, greater attention was brought to the inequalities and power dynamics inherent in male/female relations, dynamics of which thinkers like Wollstonecraft and Grimke were also aware, but which these modern feminists brought to the fore in a new and different way. With the presumptive expectation of dominant and exploitative men subordinating physically and reproductively vulnerable women, feminist theory over the last half century has tended to regard heterosexual sex and marriage with suspicion, pregnancy and motherhood as potential threats to women's agency, and contraception and abortion as fundamental needs. Given the desire to mitigate real and potential harm to vulnerable women and children, modern forms of feminism have tended not to advance robustly positive accounts of motherhood or

¹⁶ See Power (1975) and Gies and Gies (1978)

¹⁷ See Bachiochi (2021) 51-57, 109; Wollstonecraft (1792) 27, 199 ("To adulterous lust the most sacred duties are sacrificed, because before marriage, men, by a promiscuous intimacy with women, learned to consider love as a selfish gratification.... But that noble simplicity of affection, which dares to appear unadorned, has few attractions for the libertine, though it be the charm, which by cementing the matrimonial tie, secures to the pledges of a warmer passion the necessary parental attention; for children will never be properly educated till friendship subsists between parents.")

fatherhood, sometimes viewing early feminists as naïve, and often undermining strongly these familial relations instead.

Care ethicists like Kittay (and care and relational feminists more broadly) have distinguished themselves from this trend by working to elevate the essential human goods of nurture and care such that they are not culturally subordinated to liberal (or “masculine”) values, and such that women are not valued only when imitative of liberal (autonomous) men.¹⁸ But the tendency among care ethicists has been nearly the reverse: to incorporate men conceptually into the “gender-neutral” work of caregiving (or “mothering”), so that care ethics risks valuing men only when conforming to the mothering norm, leaving little conceptual room for what might be distinctive about fathering as such. As leading care feminist Martha Fineman put the point long ago in an important book that sought legal and social recognition for dependency work: men can and should be mothers, too.¹⁹

As much as I wholeheartedly agree that men can and should engage in the work of care, I will argue that a robust ethic of care—an ethic of care that guides and governs the embodied male and female beings we humans actually are—would move beyond the radical feminist view that men *qua men* are presumptively dominating and exploitative and the care feminist view that men

¹⁸ See, e.g., West (1988) 2 (arguing that liberal legalism and its critical legal theory variant are “masculine” in their common view that human beings are first and foremost distinct or separate individuals rather than relational beings). To my mind, the modern (liberal) view that human beings are, first and foremost, rights-bearing autonomous individuals rather than interdependent relational beings with natural responsibilities to others is simply erroneous, not masculine. But the error did arise from male figures of the Enlightenment period whose own embodied experience may have made that error more plausible. See Erika Bachiochi (2025) for a historical and philosophical analysis of these questions.

¹⁹ Fineman (1995) 234-5 (“Men can and should be Mothers...in the stereotypical nurturing sense of that term—that is, engaged in caregiving.”)

ought to be imitative of mothers to insist rather on a distinctive ethic of paternal care: a fathering norm that is *a unique personal relation of embodied care*.

II. In Search of an Ethic of Paternal Care

a. The Problem with Dependency: Inequality and Domination

One of the important insights that care ethicists like Kittay share with radical feminists – that liberal feminists tend to abstract from too quickly – is the view that vulnerabilities, dependencies, and therefore inequalities, are basic to human existence.²⁰ (What justice requires in response to inequalities differs among and within such theories.)²¹ But a certain realism about the vulnerabilities of human existence rightly prevails in these theories over a view that blithely presumes liberal institutions procedurally ensure equal parties will negotiate freely to contract agreeable terms, even in the family. As Kittay writes in the preface to *Love's Labor*, “A conception of society viewed as an association of equals masks inequitable dependencies, those of infancy and childhood, old age, illness and disability.”²²

But whereas radical feminist theories emphasize inherent power asymmetries between men and women as an existential threat to more vulnerable women—a dominance structure that patriarchal societies are said to create and entrench—care ethicists contend that inherent power asymmetries between mother and child call forth an ethic of care. *With radical feminists*, then,

²⁰ Firestone (1970) 8-9.

²¹ Firestone, for instance, wishes for a totalistic technological response to free women from these inequalities, vulnerabilities and dependencies. In this way, the radical feminism of Firestone (and her descendants) shares a kinship with Thomas Hobbes whose response to the real threats of human vulnerability is a totalistic state.

²² Kittay (1999) xi. See also Macintyre (1999) who praises Kittay early in his *Dependent Rational Animals*.

Kittay affirms: “The inequality of power is endemic to dependency relations.” But she then distinguishes acts of domination from the demands of an ethic of care: “[N]ot every such inequality amounts to domination. Domination involves the exercise of power over another against her best interests.”²³ Against the determinism of radical feminism vis-a-vis relations of power, then, Kittay makes an ethical demand that the caregiver genuinely respond to the other’s concrete and particular needs, making them her own. Yet despite this important distinction in her thought concerning the relation of dependency to dominance and care in the mother-child relation, Kittay does not extend this insight to relations between mothers and fathers. There, she follows radical feminists’ presumption that dominating men will exploit caring women instead.²⁴ Before I articulate a paternal ethic of care that builds upon Kittay’s work, I want to explore her differential treatment of these two relations of dependency: mother and child and mother and

²³ Kittay (1999) 34.

²⁴ There are distinctions among radical feminists concerning the origins of female dependence and vulnerability and male domination. Firestone (1970) views women’s dependence upon (and vulnerability to) men as downstream from reproductive asymmetry. By contrast, Catherine MacKinnon (1984) views women’s dependence as a result, not of reproductive asymmetry, but as a product of the male domination that has always existed (i.e., “on the first day that matters”). MacKinnon (1984) 40. For Firestone, then, maternal/fetal dependency creates the vulnerable conditions in which male domination occurs; for MacKinnon, male dominance itself inscribed the construction of sexual difference and the slavish relation of feminine dependency (and care). The relevant passage in Firestone:

[S]ex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equally privileged. Although, as De Beauvoir points out, this difference of itself did not necessitate the development of a class system—the domination of one group by another—the reproductive *functions* did....[Therefore] even in matriarchies where woman’s fertility is worshipped...there is still some dependence of the female and the infant on the male.” Firestone (1970) 8-9.

As we will see, Kittay seems implicitly to take Firestone’s position as to the origins of male dominance (the caregiving mother is a vulnerable position due to her economic dependence on the father) opening her to my critique, from within sex realism, that the child’s position vis-à-vis the mother is analogous to the mother’s position vis-à-vis the father, and that both demand an ethic of care. MacKinnon, for her part, views the “feminine” ideals of an ethic of care as itself socially constructed by men: “Women value care because men have valued us according to the care we give them, and we could probably use some. Women think in relational terms because our existence is defined in relation to men.” MacKinnon (1984) 39.

father. I will extend the logic of care within her rightful concern about dominance from one to the other.²⁵

b. Which Dependencies Demand Care?

Central to Kittay's work is the astute observation that the mother's *caregiving status*—her maternal need to care for her dependent —also makes her vulnerable and dependent, to such an extent that she needs the support of another (a “provider”) who will attend to her material needs while she withdraws from the market economy to attend to the dependent child's needs. Thus, a relation of dependency emerges first between dependent child and caregiving mother and then between caregiving mother and “provider.”

As I've noted, Kittay's response to the first inequality – the inequality of “capacity” between mother and child – is a strong moral claim (the mothering norm) that “insist[s] that [mothers]...defer their own desires, and even needs, to meet those of their dependent[s].” Indeed, Kittay writes that “this obligation has to be assumed even when there is a substantial cost to the dependency worker's [mother's] own interests and projects.”²⁶ This care work as such, Kittay writes, carries a “heavy moral load” because the mother is “uniquely situated to harm” (or benefit) the dependent child.²⁷ Indeed, I would specify this insight further by arguing that, in the paradigmatic mother-child relation, it is the mother's uniquely personal, embodied relation to

²⁵ I have explored these themes in Kittay's work before in Bachiochi (2016).

²⁶ Kittay (1999) 65. Because I am discussing the paradigmatic relation of mother and child in pregnancy and early caregiving while Kittay's book extends that maternal relation to analogous relations of care in the caring professions, I retain those terms rather than her tendency to use “dependency worker” and “charge” as her book progresses.

²⁷ Kittay (1999) 49.

this child, one which makes her specially situated to meet its needs, that calls forth her maternal obligation.

This moral load itself can be physically and emotionally draining, not to mention the opportunity cost that attends caring for dependents instead of engaging in other types of work. But this relation of care, once one undertakes it, can also be experienced as deeply rewarding.²⁸ Still, Kittay argues, care must be taken such that carrying this moral load is not itself exploitative to the mother, since she too is of equal value. Even as she becomes more vulnerable and dependent in caring for the child, she too is still “some mother’s child,” and so also worthy of care herself.

In the case of pregnancy – the paradigmatic case of maternal caregiving (in my view, not Kittay’s)²⁹ – one can imagine that taking on life-threatening or disproportionate health risks could be considered exploitative to the mother.³⁰ But, as Kittay appreciates, one can also imagine cases in which the (stronger) mother harms the (vulnerable) child, or fails to defer her desires and needs to meet those of the developing child, one whose own development is existentially dependent upon the mother’s concrete care.³¹ The maternal norm still holds, Kittay would underscore, even as some fail to observe it.

²⁸ “The loving gaze or laughter of a child with profound cognitive disabilities can offer a special joy to her attendant, even if the child is unable to utter a ‘thank you.’” Kittay (1999) 65.

²⁹ Kittay does not regard the prenatal human being as a “child” and so pregnancy does not enter into her account. As I have written in Bachiochi (2016), I think this is a major error (both scientifically and philosophically) in her otherwise deeply insightful work. See *infra* note 31.

³⁰ In such cases, pregnant women justly access medical procedures to treat grave complications, even though such may result in the loss of their developing child. For my view of the ethics involved, see “Protecting the Unborn: A Scholars’ Statement of Pro-Life Principle and Political Prudence,” Ethics and Public Policy Center (Sept 2022). <https://eppc.org/pro-life-principle-and-political-prudence/>

³¹ This is especially true before the child is born which is why I foreground pregnancy as the quintessential mother-child relation. By contrast, in *Love’s Labor*, Kittay assumes the legitimacy of liberal abortion laws but does not argue for them. “An adequate defense of abortion is not within the scope of the present project. Nonetheless it is an interesting challenge to the vulnerability model to attempt to mount a defense of abortion that respects the largely

For Kittay, however, the response to the second inequality – between caregiving mother and third party “provider” – is treated as categorically different from the first. Rather than “insist” (as she does for the mother) that the traditional “provider” – the child’s father -- “defer [his] own desires, and even needs, to meet those of the dependent [caregiver],” Kittay short-circuits the relation between mother and father altogether. She argues instead that the caregiver’s relative vulnerability and lack of economic power (by virtue of that period’s all-encompassing caregiving) can only be rectified by one fully outside the relations of dependence: the welfare state.

Indeed, because the caregiving mother is also some mother’s child – one who is providing an essential service to the community by virtue of her care – Kittay’s chief conclusion is that the government owes the caregiver an obligation of *direct* provision.³² Kittay argues this is necessary to prevent the creation of a “secondary dependency” of the caregiving mother upon the typically male “provider,” whose traditional position as “autonomous” economic provider leaves the caregiver “exceedingly vulnerable to exploitation, to domination by the one upon whom she

involuntary nature of the relation between pregnant woman and fetus.” Kittay (1999) 201, n. 117. When pressed on this point in a 2021 online discussion with Kittay, Robin West, Elizabeth Schiltz, and this author, Kittay responded: “The reason I haven’t talked about pregnancy as dependency work before is because I am not willing to call the unborn being a child. The unborn being is still, because of its utter dependency, it’s utter dependency on one single woman’s body, it’s not an independent being (not that any of us are independent beings, but relatively speaking, an independent being), that should have that kind of claim on a woman’s body and life if that is not chosen...because no exit is open.” “An Unsafe Space – Episode 1, Female Poverty, Abortion & Autonomy” (March 27, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_LSuabXL6U, accessed 9 September 2025. See Bachiochi (2016) for my account of elective abortion and an ethic of care. See also, Bachiochi (2022) (“it is precisely the unborn child’s state of existential dependence upon its mother, not its autonomy, that makes it especially entitled to care, nurture and legal protection too.”)

³² Recognizing that the caregiver needs more than financial provision, Kittay argues that they are “entitled” to “a relationship that sustains her as she sustains her charge.” Kittay (1999) 68. To meet this relational need, she creates principle of *doulia*: “Just as we have required care to survive and thrive, so we need to provide conditions that allow others—including those who do the work of caring—to receive the care they need to survive and thrive.” Kittay (1999), 107. As Part III explores, my view is that an ethic of care ought to insist, in ordinary (non-exploitative) circumstances, that the child’s father provide the relational need “that sustains her as she sustains her charge.”

depends for support.”³³ Kittay’s solution of state provision rather than paternal support seeks to avoid the kind of total dependence on men that early and modern feminists both saw as a potential source of exploitation in the modern economy. But this move, however understandable, leaves the normative question of what fathers owe their children and their children’s mothers in the ethic of care out of reach.

Although there is yet even greater inequality between caregiving mother and dependent child, no such exploitation on the part of the mother is presumed, even as the risk of exploitation is accounted for in Kittay’s theory.³⁴ Instead, a relation of trust between the unequal parties is deemed normative, if not natural.

[T]he charge [child] must trust that the dependency worker [mother] will be responsible to and respectful of her vulnerability and will not abuse whatever authority and power has been vested in her to carry out those responsibilities. The dependency worker [mother] must, in turn, trust the charge [child] neither to make demands that go beyond her true needs, to exploit the attachments that are formed. No doubt, such trust is violated.... But unless this trust is respected often enough, it is difficult to imagine how the work of caring for dependents could be accomplished.³⁵

³³ “It falls upon the larger social order [the government] to permit the flourishing and preservation of dependency relations by providing for the dependency worker [mother] without creating the secondary dependency so debilitating to women today.” Kittay (1999) 43. “[W]e see that when families fracture, the fissure is rarely between dependency worker [mother] and charges [children], but between the dependency unit [mother/child dyad] and provider. The autonomous individual is the provider, not the [mother] who sees herself foremost as a custodian of a dependent’s well-being.” Kittay (1999) 48.

³⁵ Kittay (1999) 35-36.

The mother is assumed to care, the father, to exploit. No relation of trust is expected or demanded of the father – no fathering norm of relational care.

c. Fathers as Secondary

The radical feminist presumption that the male provider will be exploitative among care ethicists like Kittay leaves actual fathers with no role in the theory beyond that of donors of genetic material, *except insofar* as they conform to the mothering norm. Now, there is no question that men in their families (and in caregiving professions)³⁶ can act as nurturant caregivers in the long period of child development after pregnancy and breastfeeding. But is there no distinctive contribution for men *qua fathers* in relation to that paradigmatic mother-child dyad upon which Kittay's care ethic rests?

After all, that most basic relation of maternal care is one that the father can observe but cannot himself participate in *as a mother*: by virtue of their male bodies, men do not nurture *like mothers* at that earliest stage of care. Indeed, fathers, in this formative stage of the child's development stand at a relative distance from the nursing (and prenatal) child. They are “secondary”, to quote a father reflecting anecdotally on this experience of being on the outside of his wife's nurturance of their infant children.³⁷

Without a fathering norm that is distinctive from the mothering norm, new fathers are bereft of normative guidance *qua fathers*; indeed, they may be left to feel unnecessary. This may be especially true when, even from the care feminist perspective, other “mothers” can step in just as

³⁶ Robb (2023)

³⁷ Sweeney (2025).

well as the child's father, and the government (or mothers privileged with abundant paid leave) can provide the material support that fathers were traditionally expected to offer.

But the father-child relation is not a mere genetic one nor ought the father's role be merely one of economic provision. The father-child relation, like the mother-child relation, is a paradigmatic human relation. As such, it is one which ethically demands a distinctive, uniquely personal relation of embodied care, one the father is specially situated and responsible to give. We are all, after all, some father's child, too.

III. We are All Some Father's Child

a. Paternal Care Should be Normative, even if Too Little Recognized

Like Kittay's mothering norm in which an ethic of care should guide and govern the existential inequality between caregiving mother and vulnerable child, the fathering norm, or paternal ethic of care, should likewise govern the asymmetrical relation between the father and mother/child dyad, ensuring, first and foremost, that this unequal relation does not give way to exploitation, domination or abandonment. Exploitative situations, which are not infrequent in our time or any other, are those in which the state must step directly in. But it is possible – and indeed, needful – to craft an ethic, or normative approach to good fathering, that can guide men who are fathers today, *even if too few practice it*.

A norm of paternal care is one that insists that the father, as the paternal source of the child's existence, is *uniquely situated to care*, to put himself in attentive service of the child for whom, and to whom, he is specially responsible. Such a norm can and should be articulated even while - or perhaps especially because of – the perennial threat the bad man poses to those for whom he is paternally responsible.

Without a normative account of how fatherhood is quintessentially distinctive from motherhood in an ethic of care, we risk – and I think have risked – developing only part of the relations of care needed for full human maturation. We assume that developing children do not need the kind of care which is specific to the men who are their fathers, an assumption we do not make, and should not make, about the women who are their mothers. Though there are always situations in which these natural familial relations break down and require next best options, to fail to articulate a normative account of good fathering -- such that men can work to become the kind of persons capable of it and cultural institutions can assist them as they do -- is a loss to children and their mothers, but also to men who are or will become fathers. It also underestimates the potential reach of an ethic of care which rightly puts the most vulnerable human beings and those who care for them at its very center.

b. Paternal Care of the Mother and Child as Distinctive Personal Relations of Embodied Care

In an ethic of care, as I've articulated it, the quintessential vulnerable person is the maximally dependent child. The mother stands in immediate (vertical) relation to this developing child as its nurturant caregiver, both in pregnancy and in infancy. The father *qua father* does not stand in that sort of (maternal) immediacy to the child. Rather, beginning in pregnancy, he stands in immediate relation (horizontally) to the mother, "secondary" to her embodied capacity to provide first, enveloping nurturant care, and then, sustaining nutrients and nurturance through her milk. Despite their defining embodied difference, both mother and father are personally responsible for *this* child as the creative act brought *this* being, who is needy by nature, into existence.³⁸

³⁸ This is true for the creation of new human beings through sexual intercourse (even when contraception is employed, sexual intercourse has the distinctive potential to create dependent human life) or in vitro fertilization.

At the maximally vulnerable prenatal and infant stage then – which is the paradigmatic moment these caring norms ought to capture – the father stands at a *relative* distance from the mother/child dyad. This relative distance or separation of the (generally stronger) male body from the (more vulnerable) mother/child dyad represents the individual autonomy which modern liberalism (and liberal feminism) tends to promote, one that radical feminists, and Kittay herself, rightly see as a potential threat to relatively vulnerable women and children. As Kittay recognizes in the case of the inherently asymmetrical relation between mother and child (and radical feminists, and Kittay, recognize between men and women), the one with greater power or capacity is “uniquely situated to harm” the more vulnerable. But per Kittay’s ethic of care, the one with greater power and capacity is also in the position to be of great benefit to those in her care. Indeed, she is obliged to do so, without in any way devaluing herself.

Thus, I suggest that the fathering norm in an ethic of care would insist, like Kittay’s mothering norm, that fathers likewise defer their desires and needs to meet both the caregiving needs of the mother (by virtue of her need to care) as well as the individuating needs of both mother and child. Like the maternal duty of care, the paternal duty of care arises because of the unique, personal, embodied relation *he* has with *this* child that he, *as its father*, is responsible and specially situated to meet.³⁹ Just as a woman’s actions are not determined by her body (with its defining feminine capacity to gestate and nurture a child within), a man’s actions are not

The violent act of rape cannot be considered “creative” in this way, nor is woman at all responsible for the existence of a child who results, even though her body provides existential nurturant care to the child who is her own. In this way, one can understand how the woman in this tragic situation might be thought to be existentially responsible *to* this child whom she is not responsible *for*, but the issue remains philosophically a knotty one (unless one regards the life of every human being as intrinsically worthy of care and so falls upon, even if unfairly, the mother to care for her own child).

³⁹ Even as each father is responsible to meet the needs of his child and its mother, circumstances may dictate that his paternal care is better carried out through financial provision. But this should be understood as an exception, not the norm.

determined by his (with its defining masculine capacity to sire a child who begins its life at a physical distance from him). A woman *can choose not to nurture* through harming or abandoning her prenatal or infant child just as a man *can choose to engage* in the attentive care of his child and its mother. The ethic of care thereby corrects the liberal autonomy lens more fully when it insists, insofar as conditions are just and non-exploitative, that mothers and fathers engage in care in both cases, even as – during the child’s gestation, especially, and in some specific ways in infancy, too – such maternal and paternal care is embodied differently.

c. Paternal Care as a Personal Relation of (Pre-existing) Trust

As the paternal source of its existence, the man is responsible *for this child* and so also *to* this child. Due to the father’s defining “secondariness” vis-à-vis the child, he is specially situated to meet the needs the child’s mother cannot herself meet (because of her primary-ness in relation to the child). Specifically, he is specially situated, in that horizontal relation, to meet her needs so that she can meet the child’s existential needs.

So, for example, the father’s relative (physical) distance from the pregnant and nursing mother at that early stage of the child’s development enables the father to have a broader perspective on the conditions in which the mother is providing care. Standing at a remove, he is in a better position than she to ensure the conditions of her nurturant care are safe, secure, stable -- and just. Turning again to the father who described the secondariness of his contribution, Sweeney writes:

For nine months, in utero, I could do nothing for my developing child. Her mother did it all. And then in those first several months after birth, what my baby needed most was never me. Of course, I held my infants, experienced them skin-to-skin, changed diapers, etcetera. But I could not nurse them and thus could rarely comfort my little ones in the

same way as my wife. To father is to know that you are not primary. But it also means something further.

As a father, I discovered my chief use in service to my wife. My first baby nursed for long stretches. What could I do? I could get the novel my wife wanted to read, fetch a glass of water, move the footstool. With subsequent babies, I helped most often by taking the other children, serving them and, in serving them, also serving their mother.⁴⁰

When this perspective on the whole is put fully in service of the mother/child dyad to whom the father is responsible, the caregiving mother is afforded a freedom to entrust herself and the child(ren) to his paternal care. Such an entrusting frees her to care for the concrete needs of *this particular child* with the attention and affection he or she needs, as no two children are the same.

Given the father's secondariness in relation to the maximally dependent child, the father's first distinctive contribution to his children's well-being, then, is that he focus, as a matter of priority, on ensuring his child's mother has her needs met so she can attend to the child's needs. That is to say that if she must focus as a matter of priority on the nurturant needs of the developing child, making *this child's concrete and particular* needs her own, he must focus on the concrete and particular needs of the caregiving mother, making her *personal* needs his own. This includes that he ensure that she is not unjustly taking on too much or inordinately giving of herself such that she is treating herself (or being treated) as less than "some mother's child". She is not only the child's mother, after all, but an individual human being with personal (physical, emotional, spiritual, familial and perhaps professional) needs that must be met for her to carry out well her obligations *as this child's mother*, and beyond.

⁴⁰ Sweeney (2025)

But to truly make her own distinctive and personal needs his own as the mother does the child (in like manner, no two mothers' *concrete and particular* needs are the same, even if I have named general categories of need), he must come to appreciate the specific nature of *her* needs, and the family's as a whole. That is to say, he must know her *as a person*, commit to meet her *personal* needs and those of the family as a whole, and follow through in doing so on a consistent basis. Otherwise, she cannot confidently entrust herself as she nurtures, their other children, or the family as a whole to his enabling, paternal care. In this way, the father supports the mother as she nurtures each child as only she can, but also so that she might retain in that process her individuality, as some mother's child with personal needs, relations, and obligations beyond maternity.

But how can such a relation of trust between our paradigmatic mother and father come to be? We have already noticed, with Kittay, that this stage of child development on which we are particularly focused constrains the freedom of the mother and places her in a vulnerable – unequal -- position vis-a-vis the father. The father stands at a relative distance, is nearly always physically stronger and freer to engage in market work, and thereby, as we have explored, may also be a potential threat to her and their child, by either violence or neglect.

For a paternal ethic of care to be authentic and effective as real care of the mother and child to whom he is specially responsible, then, a relation of trust between the man and woman must pre-exist the existence of the child. Indeed, such trust on the part of the mother for the father in her extraordinary vulnerability will only emerge if the man's capacity and willingness to put his personal, embodied qualities in service and care of vulnerable others has been tested over time. He should not only be revealed to not be a threat. He should instead have shown himself in deeds to be trust-worthy, that is, personally capable of attentive service and self-giving *love*.

If understood for the purpose of revealing this particular man's capacity for self-giving love and attentive care of the woman, and this particular woman's capacity for self-giving love and attentive care of the man, a period of testing (or "courtship") that leads to a public commitment of mutual trust (or "marriage"), can be shorn at last of the bygone associations explored in Part I -- and resurrected for our time.⁴¹ Indeed, a lifelong commitment in which each seeks to make the other's needs one's own in a personal communion of trust, loving encouragement and mutual support would seem to be an especially advantageous relation in which to welcome vulnerable and dependent children and to raise them to mature adulthood, and in the case of a caregiving mother, to enjoy a (short or extended) period of relative vulnerability and dependency in doing so.

d. Paternal (and maternal) care as a personal relation of embodied care

A father ought to not only be a personal support and encouragement to the caregiving mother, even if that secondariness predominates at the earliest stages of their child's development. The father's own engaged attention is also necessary to the child's full maturation. If the mother's initial immediacy to the child provides important concrete custodial and nurturant care for the safe and secure development of the child's emotional and physical needs, the father's (relative) distance from the mother/child dyad *in itself* plays an important part, too. The father's personal

⁴¹ Articulated as such, this paternal norm is one confirmed by recent social science research. A father in a good relationship with the mother of his children is far more likely to have children who are healthier, both psychologically and emotionally, especially if the biological mother and father are married. And the single most important determinant of a mother's happiness is the very same: the father's commitment and emotional investment in the woman's well-being and in that of their children. Bachiochi (2021) 289. Greater governmental assistance and high quality day care—no matter how legitimate or generous—cannot provide mothers with the intimacy necessary to offer them the *personal* supports they need, day in and out, to mother their children well—and flourish while doing so. But governments can ensure maternity and paternity leave from paid labor (and other financial provision) so that caregiving mothers, and fathers who both enable such care and provide their own care, are enabled a respite from economic provision.

attention to and affection for his child can offer her the confidence she needs to separate from the mother's custodial care, begin to stand on her own as an individual with distinct needs, talents and responsibilities, and push her limits in that essential human maturation process toward personal agency.⁴² Play is an early means of this kind of boundary-pushing individuation, and one that fathers seem to gravitate to more than mothers. Play seems to give the child the confidence to take greater and greater risks, in the subtle recognition that the conditions in which she is playing are safe, secure, stable and just.⁴³ This risk-taking confidence is an important aspect of developing individual agency, itself a key marker of adult maturation, or the capacity to make responsible decisions and carry out one's respective duties of care oneself.

As children grow, the concrete and particular care both mothers and fathers offer becomes more and more substitutable: fathers can now feed their children as well as mothers, mothers can nudge their children toward independence, and both can provide economically for the family, according to the family's circumstances and needs and the circumstances and needs of each of the family's members. But paternal and maternal care are not substitutable in the personal relationality each embodies throughout the shared life of parent and child. Even as mothers and fathers' distinctively sexed bodies become less salient in the kinds of care they provide, paternal and maternal care remain distinctively embodied because we are never not our bodies: *this* mother and *this* father care uniquely and personally for *this* child. As girls and boys grow, especially as they develop distinctively in puberty, the potential maternity of the feminine body and paternity of the masculine body, and the distinctive responsibilities and pitfalls of each, take

⁴² Though causation is always difficult to prove, studies show that daughters with attentive fathers are far less likely to engage in sexual activity before they are ready, and sons with the same exhibit far more self-control. Both reflect the development of personal agency, the individuated power to act for their own good and the good of others. Bachiochi (2021) 289 (and notes).

⁴³ Lamb (2026) and Paquette (2004).

on consequential meaning that are often best navigated with someone who shares that embodied experience. That is to say that each human person cares *as a* masculine or feminine body in relation to others who are embodied male and female, too.

Beyond functional care, each mother, who once cared for *this* child in utero and infancy as his or her nurturant mother, still cares for *this* child as he or she matures into adulthood. Likewise, the embodied relation *this* father has with each of his children is a distinctive personal relation only they respectively enjoy. That personal relation – of *this* mother and *this* father with *this* child -- is therefore *not substitutable*, but rather uniquely valuable, and one which can develop, in the best of cases, over a lifetime. This is true, even if in many cases, the well-being of the child requires instead the responsible and generous care of those who step in functionally to take the place of mother or father. The latter remain evermore the source of the child's existence, but their maternal and paternal duties may be legally transferred.

IV. Conclusion

Beginning with Aristotle, and then through much of the Enlightenment period, moral and political philosophers have regarded the relatively independent male as normative, with the female as secondary, dependent, and therefore, subordinate in value to the male.⁴⁴ But when we give pride of place, as care ethicists do, to the dependent and vulnerable and those who care for them, then the gestating and nursing maternal body is ascendant.⁴⁵ Fathers find a reason for their

⁴⁴ Bachiochi (2023)

⁴⁵ Early in *Love's Labor* when introducing her central claim – that we are each some mother's child -- Kittay notices "the widespread appeal" of images of Mary and Jesus across cultures. Kittay (1999) 24.

masculine body's relative independence and strength in attentive service of the more vulnerable and those who first care for them.

A normative ethic of paternal care calls upon men -- as fully human, and therefore, like women, as rational, embodied persons with obligations that flow from their personal relations -- to join together as equal partners, in prioritizing the nurturant care and agentic maturation of the vulnerable and dependent, first in families, but also in politics, economics and law. But the necessary turn required of men in an ethic of care is not that they become "mothers," even as both paternal and maternal care demand self-giving attention and love. The necessary turn is that men, as potential and actual fathers, are called to cultivate their distinctive, uniquely personal, embodied capacities for care, and that cultural institutions come to support that essential -- paternal -- caregiving work.

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