Woman Centered: A Feminist Ethic of Responsibility

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In recent years, feminist philosophers have emphasized that, in a society organized on principles of dominance and subordination, much militates against the development of responsible moral agency. Such agency is something that many of us have to struggle toward, hoping through conscious effort to grow into the kinds of selves we need to be to free ourselves and others from oppression.

For those less fortunately located within various matrices of domination, the challenges of responsible moral agency are many. Oppression is internalized in more ways than one: not only does it often lead its victims to think ill of themselves, it can also lead them simply not to think of themselves much at all. Women, for instance, are taught in myriad ways—from being erased in the media to being ignored and interrupted in conversation—that we are simply not very interesting or important. What we do, think, and feel thus comes to seem not worthy even of our own attention, let alone anyone else's. (The slogan for Women’s E-News, a feminist news website: “What news looks like when women matter.”) Our lives seem to lack the kind of drama that make them compelling in our own eyes—not because of their substance, but simply because of whose lives they are.

Feminists have been especially concerned, of course, with the particular personal and moral perils that may be associated with the sociopolitical situation(s) of women. In particular, as many have observed, the cultural assignment of women to various forms of “caring labor” can be harmful to women, both individually and collectively, by rendering them dangerously vulnerable to exploitation. Women who fail to rein in their “caring” for others may maintain relationships at all costs (including to themselves), avoid legitimate self-assertion in order to keep the peace, devote their energies to
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Risks to Self: Dissolution

Margaret Urban Walker proposes what she calls a responsibility ethics, emphasizing that “specific moral claims on us arise from our contact or relationship with others whose interests are vulnerable to our actions and choices. We are obligated to respond to particular others when circum-
stance or ongoing relationship render them especially, conspicuously, or peculiarly dependent on us" (1998, 107). A well-functioning moral agent on this view, then, would be one who responds appropriately to and within her various relationships: a responsibility ethics is an ethics of appropriate responsiveness.

Evaluating modes and levels of responsiveness is a complex matter. In hierarchical relationships, in particular, the parties' conceptions of what counts as appropriate responsiveness may well be profoundly skewed. The potential problems for such an ethic, however, are not limited to those introduced by hierarchy. As Walker points out, some critics have worried that such an ethic of "open-ended responsiveness" is inimical to integrity. With so many others to whom one must stand ready to respond, and so many ways in which one might respond to them, how can one's life remain "of a piece"? Walker observes that, of the several kinds of "narratives" that constitute one's self-understanding, the "narrative of relationship" seems most liable to undermine integrity, for in that narrative, "it seems that one is pressed to define how she goes on in terms derived from others' needs and demands, and others' unpredictable situations" (1998, 111). The risk of so doing, however, is a sort of filterlessness—an unlimited and indiscriminate receptivity. A person who lives by an ethic of open-ended responsiveness, it seems, is vulnerable to a kind of dissolution.

The answer to this problem, in Walker's view, lies in the fact that the narrative of relationship is not the only (or perhaps even the central) narrative through which one guides and makes sense of one's life. Equally important, she argues, are narratives of identity and of value. In fact, none of us is truly filterless: each person has a "persistent history of valuation" through which she selects some people, situations, and relationships for her primary attention. Whether consciously or not, Walker says, we "set definite priorities among values, develop highly selective responses, and pay acute attention to particular kinds of things as well as people" (1998, 112). This describes at least part of what Walker means by a "narrative of identity"; it is largely through this selective attention that one carves out, and distinguishes from one's surroundings, the particular person that one means to be. Thus, not only is such selective attention permissible, on Walker's view, it is morally necessary, for it "reflects and refines a moral identity that gives our deliberations greater focus and refinement. Equally important, [it lets] others know where we stand and what we stand for" (112).

So through the selective attention that structures one's responsiveness, one becomes (as Bernard Williams might say) "someone in particular." As Walker puts it,

It's the coherence of the three narratives, and connections among them, that makes a distinctive moral life out of what could otherwise be an odd lot of
disparate parts. . . . A life's being so organized . . . enables the person living that life to decide with good reason how and what to select, within the limits of moral acceptability, for some (or most) attention. At the same time, a life legible in these ways gives promise to others of reliable performance and accountability of specific kinds. (1998, 114–115)

Selective attention, then, is important to having an identity; without it, one would be unmanageably permeable and indiscriminately responsive. To the extent that such a person can be imagined, he or she would lack anything that we might call a personal identity or character. Such a life, as Walker says, seems "unowned even if benign."

What Walker wants to show, in addition, is that one who lacks such an identity is unlikely to function well as a moral agent among others—that is to say, that he or she is likely not to be entirely benign. Selective attention, Walker thinks, is necessary for integrity, and integrity is "interpersonally as well as intrapersonally indispensable." Rejecting any view of integrity as intactness or purity, she defines it instead as "a kind of reliable accountability," recommending that we "[t]hink of 'integrity' used to describe the sturdiness of structures people have built, the property of holding up dependably under the weights and stresses these structures are apt to encounter given the purposes to which they are put and the conditions they might encounter" (1998, 115). A person is less likely to display integrity so understood if she is—or even tries to be—uniformly attentive and responsive. She is so "de-centered" that she cannot be located, let alone be "read" by others for her particular strengths, vulnerabilities, and patterns of dependable response.4 We might say, following Walker's metaphor, that she lacks any "structure" at all, let alone a sturdy or dependable one.

The novelist George Eliot aptly described the overpowering flood of sensation that such a lack of structure would permit, observing in Middlemarch that "if we had a keen vision and feeling of all of ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity."5 Grass and squirrels aside, the point is that persons can contain and tolerate only so much empathy, even for other persons. In order for one's "vision and feeling" to function as part of an integrated personality, one needs to "filter out" not only the squirrel's heartbeat, but also some of the human feelings and needs that might otherwise call for one's empathic response. To put it metaphorically, then, one cannot simply blend or dissolve into one's surroundings and still maintain a personal character—to so dissolve is to lose oneself. To the extent that perspectival "filtering" is necessary, it must be governed by some particular and limited set of values and priorities (whether or not these are consciously and explicitly endorsed). Such filtering (or "stupidity" as Eliot calls it) allows one to remain lodged in a particular experience and point of
view—a kind of emotional and perspectival "home base." To lack such a perspectival home is to risk a dangerous centerlessness.

**RISKS TO SELF: "VICARIOUS POSSESSION"**

But to avoid losing oneself, is it enough merely to have some perspectival filter or other? Will just any filter do? To see that it will not, imagine that you have a particular kind of filter: one that focuses your attention intensely and routinely on the experiences, feelings, and needs of a particular other person. What you are most attuned and responsive to in any given situation is how it affects this other person; her experience (as you empathically imagine it) is alive to you and salient to you in a way that no one else's is—not even your own.

What shall we say about this case? It seems wrong to say that you lack a personal character; after all, you do have a "persistent history of valuation"—thus, you are likely to be perfectly "legible" to others, who will know what responses and patterns of attention to expect from you in most situations. Although you have a perspectival center, that center is not located in you. Unlike that of the decentered person, your life is not "unowned"—it is owned, but we wonder by whom. The risk to your identity here is not dissolution, but subsumption.

The kind of perspectival filter I have in mind is well illustrated by Simone de Beauvoir's portrait, in *The Second Sex*, of "The Woman in Love." Beauvoir says the following about the woman lover's relationship to her (male) beloved:

> The measure of values, the truth of the world, are in his consciousness; hence it is not enough to serve him. The woman in love tries to see with his eyes; she reads the books he reads, prefers the pictures and the music he prefers; she is interested only in the landscapes she sees with him... when she questions herself, it is his reply she tries to hear. ... Her idea of location in space, even, is upset: the center of the world is no longer the place where she is, but that occupied by her lover. ... She lets her own world collapse in contingency, for she really lives in his. (1983, 663)

It would be misguided, of course, to suggest that all "women in love" (or, for that matter, no men in love) adopt this sort of perspective. Furthermore, love is not the only attitude or situation that can give rise to such a radically reordered perspective. Nonetheless, Beauvoir's description captures a phenomenon that is both familiar and important: the focus of the "woman in love" is wholly on what's good for another person, and/or on what is good from his or her point of view. Either she has no independent conception of what is good (in general, or for herself), or to the extent that she does have
such a conception, she cannot bring herself to care about it, to be moved by it, or to direct her attention to it in any very sustained or engaged way. There is indeed a perspectival filter here, and what is “filtered out” is her own self—her perspectives, feelings, and interests—or at least these as her own, in particular as independent of anyone else’s.

Adrian Piper (1991) describes a similar condition, but offers greater detail. Piper contends that “modal imagination”—the capacity to imagine how things could be—is crucial to moral agency. She draws a distinction among imaginative objects “according to the degree of one’s momentary experiential involvement in them. Some such objects hold us in their grip, while others slide over the surface of our awareness while barely disrupting our emotional and psychological state at all” (733). Piper calls the latter a “surface object of imagination.” In contrast, she says, “depth objects of imagination call forth a deeper psychological investment of energy and attention. They occupy a larger proportion of one’s waking consciousness, and may either replace or vividly enhance reality as one experiences it . . . . Most imaginative objects lie somewhere between the two” (733).

The distinction Piper describes is experientially familiar, but philosophically underemphasized. When it is remarked, it is often in order to emphasize the moral importance of encountering others’ feelings and needs as depth objects of imagination—of entering empathically into another’s experience and perspective. The incapacity or unwillingness to so enter is a moral vice—as Piper calls it, the vice of self-absorption. The self-absorbed person is too caught up in her own point of view to imagine how things appear and feel to the other person. In Piper’s terms, she experiences her own inner states as “depth objects” of imagination, and the other person’s inner states as mere “surface objects”—while she may be dimly aware of the latter, they simply don’t make much of an impact.

For many people who lean toward self-absorption, moral growth centrally involves learning to allow others into one’s own inner world and to admit others’ feelings and needs as real. Piper points out, however, that as with many vices (all, if we believe Aristotle) there is a contrary vice that results from “too much” rather than “too little” of the relevant action or feeling. Piper’s term for the vice contrary to self-absorption is “vicarious possession.” As one might expect, it involves treating one’s own inner states as surface objects, and the other’s inner states as depth objects of imagination. Piper describes vicarious possession as follows:

1. One empathically experiences the other’s feelings as one imagines them to the exclusion of one’s own reactions to them (i.e., a case of being “out of touch with one’s feelings”); 2. One is so preoccupied with imagining what the other is thinking that one’s own thoughts are temporarily suppressed; and 3. One’s actions reflect one’s conception of the other’s wishes or desires as to how one should act
or what should be done. In general, to be vicariously possessed by another person’s inner states means that one’s own sentence, rationality, and agency are suppressed in favor of the other’s as one empathically imagines her to be. This constitutes an *abduction of one’s self to another as one imagines her.* (1991, 740-741; emphasis added)

Noting the existence of vicarious possession—and of people who lean toward it, rather than toward self-absorption—is an important step. As Piper points out, many accounts of moral impartiality (both for and against) “are faulty in presupposing the natural preeminence in consciousness of one’s own inner states over another’s as one empathically imagines them. [They assume] . . . that impartiality consists in applying a corrective to a natural tendency to self-absorption alone—as though vicarious possession were not as much of a vice, and as prevalent a vice, at the opposite extreme” (1991, 750). I would only reiterate that this pervasive assumption is a prime example of a male gender bias in mainstream moral philosophy.

**A DIFFERENT IDEAL: SELF-CENTERING**

While it is easy enough to see the person in the grip of vicarious possession as in some way lacking, it is more difficult to say just what it is that she lacks and why it matters. To begin with, it seems, such a person’s patterns of attention are out of kilter. Robin S. Dillon (1992) points out the close conceptual connection between attention and respect. In particular, she observes that the root meaning of “respect” is the Latin “respicere,” which means “to look back at” or “to look at again” (70). “This suggests,” Dillon continues, “both that we re/spect things that are worth looking at again, and that in respecting something we pay careful attention to it” (70). Respecting something requires that we pay attention to it long enough to see it for what it really is, and moreover, that our attention to it reveal what is valuable about it. This understanding, in turn, helps reveal what counts as a respectful behavioral response to the thing, “[W]hat counts as respecting the object, acting respectfully, or responding appropriately out of respect is determined by the nature of the object and its respect-warranting fact or feature” (71).

Absent vicarious possession, then, a person pays attention to her own inner states—to her childhood memories, to her latest professional project, or to her plans for the afternoon or her vision of world peace. Her self-valuing, however, is more emotionally resonant than this description might suggest. Such a person takes joy in what pleases her, actively pursues what interests her, and is accordingly reluctant to abandon herself to take up imagined residence in the psyches of others. Her respectful attention is likely to have an additional result: namely, that its objects come alive to her. As Marilyn Frye
puts it, “attention is a kind of passion. When one’s attention is on something, one is present in a particular way with respect to that thing. . . . The orientation of one’s attention is also what fixes and directs the application of one’s physical and emotional work” (1983, 172). Thus, the more one’s careful attention is devoted to one’s own plans, projects, and values, the more likely one is to turn one’s time and efforts toward furthering and enacting them.

But there is a deeper structure here, for underlying all these objects of her self-reflexive attention is her own status as a rational creature with an active valuational capacity. In deeming these objects worthy of her attention, she implicitly acknowledges and honors that status—or, better, that capacity itself. Harry Frankfurt makes a similar point in his recent discussion of self-love:

As with every variety of love, the heart of [self-love] is that the lover cares about the well-being of his beloved for its own sake. . . . Since in this case the beloved is himself, the interests to which he is devoted by his self-love are his own. Now those interests, like the true interests of anyone, are defined and determined by what he loves. Thus . . . [a] person who loves himself displays and demonstrates that love just by being devoted to what he loves. (2001, 8)

To put the point more generally: one enacts and expresses one’s attitude toward oneself as a valuer through one’s attitude toward what one values.

So far, much the same account seems to hold whether the object of a person’s attention and devotion is her own inner states or someone else’s. In paying attention to these inner states, one acknowledges and honors the valuational capacity that generates them, whether or not that capacity is one’s own. But there is something distinctive about this relationship between valuing a person and valuing what she values, when the object of valuation is oneself.

We can see the first distinctive element of self-valuing by introducing an objection to Frankfurt’s account. Frankfurt himself believes that the structure of self-love described earlier is identical to that of love for another, and indeed he claims this apparent parallel as a point in favor of his account of self-love. In fact, however, it is commonplace to love someone else while not loving, or even being particularly interested in, at least some things that they love. For instance, I love my mother, and she loves gardening. I care about her doing the things she loves (including gardening), and her loves are part of what I love about her. Nonetheless, I have no interest in gardening in and of itself. If my mother’s gardening required my help in any way I would be glad to provide it, but since it doesn’t, I don’t. Thus, it seems a stretch to say that in order to love my mother, I must be “devoted” to what she loves.7

In contrast, it seems entirely correct to say that in order to love myself—or even, to put it in my terms, to value and respect myself properly—I must be devoted to what I love. In short, I have to really love what I love. Frankfurt puts it this way:
The health of the mind lies ... in being wholehearted. A wholehearted person ... identifies himself fully and uninhibitedly with the volitional configurations that define his final ends. This wholehearted identification means that there is no ambivalence in his attitude towards himself. There is no part of him—no part with which he identifies—that is opposed to or that resists his loving what he loves. He is altogether wholehearted in loving what he loves. In other words, he loves himself. His self-love is constituted by the wholeheartedness of his unified will. (2001, 12)

Here, Frankfurt points out two elements that seem to me distinctive of how one must approach one's own loves (or "volitional configurations") in order to be properly self-valuing: one must endorse them and one must identify oneself with them. Neither is necessarily involved in loving others. Although we do care deeply about our loved ones' ends, it is less common to regard those ends as embodying or expressing oneself. In contrast, a self-loving person quite literally identifies with his own ends. Encountering his willings and loves, he says "this is me." Thus, his approach to his own ends is, as Frankfurt says, wholehearted.

Thus, a person who properly values herself cannot encounter herself as merely "one among others." Rather, she occupies the center of her own emotional and perspectival field; her stance is what I'll call (with intentional irony) "self-centered." In his argument for the compatibility of love with the egalitarian spirit of morality, J. David Velleman (1999) ably shows that it is possible to value some persons in a special or distinctive manner without attributing any greater value to them. By placing my account of self-centering within Velleman's framework, I hope to show that self-centering as I understand it has nothing to do with crass egoism or self-privileging. The distinction between egoism and self-centering, besides being important in its own right, is especially vital for many women, whose feminine socialization may render them particularly vulnerable to accusations of "selfishness."

According to Velleman, love is (contra Sigmund Freud) not a drive or "inner itch." In fact, it is not any kind of desire to achieve a result; contrary to much analytic philosophy on the subject, love is not a desire at all, although it is frequently associated with various desires (e.g., to be with the beloved, to please her, to benefit her, and/or to be well thought of by her). Freud and the analytic philosophers have shared a common error in assuming that love can be analyzed in terms of an aim. This assumption, Velleman observes, "implies that love is essentially a pro-attitude toward a result, to which the beloved is instrumental or in which he is involved. I venture to suggest that love is essentially an attitude toward the beloved himself but not toward any result at all" (1999, 354). To explain how this is possible, he appeals to Immanuel Kant's idea that the end of an action can be a person rather than a result. In respecting a person as an end in herself, we do not try to bring about some particular result; instead, we recognize the value of the person
and allow that value to constrain our actions toward her. Similarly, love is a response to the already-existing reality of the person, in particular to the value of her rational nature or "true self." A person's rational nature is not merely her intellect, but something broader: her "capacity to care about things in that reflective way which is distinctive of self-conscious creatures like us. Think of a person's rational nature as his core of reflective concern, and the idea of loving him for it will no longer seem odd" (365-366).

Velleman summarizes as follows his view of the relation between respect and love: "The Kantian view is that respect is a mode of valuation that the very capacity for valuation must pay to instances of itself. My view is that love is a mode of valuation that this capacity may also pay to instances of itself. I regard respect and love as the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value" (1999, 366). Like respect, love is a response to the value of this rational nature or true self; and again, like respect, love is less like a desire or urge than like a kind of awe or wonder. In respect or reverence, one's recognition of this value arrests one's impulse toward (what Kant calls) "self-love" and thus gets in the way of one's using the other as a mere means to one's aims. Love, according to Velleman, goes a step further: when one loves the other, one appreciates her value as a rational being in a special way—a way that arrests one's emotional defenses, thus making oneself vulnerable to her. One who loves is willing to be laid bare to the other and to be deeply affected by her.

Presumably, then, loving oneself would involve appreciating the value of one's own rational nature—where this appreciation arrests one's emotional defenses toward oneself, allows one to be deeply affected by oneself, and unleashes various emotional responses toward oneself. This sounds a bit strange: for instance, what could it mean not to be deeply affected by oneself? Self-love so understood sounds very much like what I am calling self-centering, while in contrast, one in the grip of vicarious possession is likely to be inured to her own feelings, uninterested in her own distinct perspective, and largely unmoved by her own preferences and projects. And as I've argued, such a person fails to respond appropriately to the value of her own valuational capacity—she feels and acts as if her own valuational capacity had no real power to confer value.

To encounter robustly, from the inside, the value of one's own rational nature does not necessarily involve wanting to benefit oneself or promote one's own welfare. For as Velleman observes, love is not the same as—and is not even necessarily accompanied by—the desire to benefit the beloved.

Certainly, love for my children leads me to promote their interests almost daily; yet when I think of other people I love—parents, brothers, friends, former teachers and students—I do not think of myself as an agent of their interests. I would of course do them a favor if asked, but in the absence of some such oc-
casion for benefiting them, I have no continuing or recurring desire to do so. At the thought of a close friend, my heart doesn't fill with an urge to do something for him, although it may indeed fill with love. (1999, 353)

The point is important, for it shows that a special response to one's own value need not amount to the kind of partiality in which one privileges one's own interests over others, or even regards oneself primarily as an agent of one's own interests. Centering oneself does not mean putting extra weight on one's own interests or concerns simply because they are one's own: indeed, the weighing metaphor already assumes that one is relating to one's concerns as objects among others. A self-centered person instead occupies her own perspective as its subject, a natural result of which is that her own concerns seem weighty to her—that they actually affect her and engage her. This in turn does not necessarily mean that she will then seek to benefit herself above others—just like (as Velleman points out) loving someone else does not necessarily mean one seeks to benefit them (at all, let alone above others). Whether she prioritizes her own well-being will depend on (among other things) the content of her own concerns, which might well be altruistic.

In this section, I've argued that when one turns one's engaged and respectful attention on oneself, the attention is expressed and manifested in unique ways due to facts ineluctably associated with one's being oneself. Although the nature and quality of such attention is the same regardless of to whom it is directed, its dynamics shift when its object as well as its subject is oneself. The result is the condition that I call “self-centering.”

**SELF-CONSTRUCTION AND RESPONSIBLE AGENCY**

According to Piper, vicarious possession is not only a potentially perilous condition, but a moral failing as well. She argues that vicarious possession is a vice for the very same reason that self-absorption is a vice: namely, each violates the moral requirement of “strict impartiality.” For example, she says,

one may regard another's pain as one empathically imagines it as more worthy of consideration than one's own as one directly experiences it, because one regards other people in general as more worthy than oneself; or because one regards other people's inner states as intrinsically more interesting or worthy of investigation than one's own.... [T]he irrelevant attribute that directs one's personal bias to the other is the attribute of being other than oneself. (1991, 752)

So in Piper's view, vicarious possession runs afoot of moral impartiality in that it de-emphasizes one's own experience (or “inner states”) for no good reason, thus implicitly devaluing oneself in comparison to others. Vicarious
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Possession is wrong for the same reason that it would be wrong to judge one person's pain less important than another's because of their relative heights (an irrelevant attribute).

I've suggested, however, that "which person I am" in any given encounter is not irrelevant in the way that someone's height is irrelevant to how much his or her pain matters. Thus, I am not convinced that impartiality as Piper understands it is the proper antidote to vicarious possession. I offer a different view of what is morally wrong with vicarious possession, and more broadly, with the failure to center oneself. Self-centering is not only a warranted response to the value of one's own rational agency (as Kant would call it), it is also crucial to constructing and maintaining oneself as a distinct person, and thus also to one's functioning as a fully responsible moral agent. In order to preserve one's responsible agency, one must self-center—that is, one must fully inhabit one's own perspective as its subject, rather than encountering it as an object among others.

When we ask what makes someone a distinct person, the most obvious place to look for an answer is from theorists of personal identity, whose business it is to say when, where, and in virtue of what one person leaves off and another begins. The strand of personal identity theory beginning with Derek Parfit (1984) has some affinity with what I have been arguing thus far, in that it ties the notion of distinct personhood—or being a distinct self—to normative considerations. Parfitian psychological connection theory thus changes the way of addressing the nature of personhood in an important respect: it ties survival up definitionally with "what matters." Instead of asking whether I shall be some future person," Parfit says, "I ask whether my relation to this person contains what matters" (1984, 271).

Some have criticized psychological connection theory on the grounds that it cannot explain or justify the special concern that (it's assumed) we each have for our own future selves. If that future self is not me—that is, numerically identical with me—then what explains or justifies my having special concern for her of the sort one normally has for oneself? Or, to put it a different way, what is the difference between this future self and all the other ones, given that none of those future selves is identical with me? The problem seems exacerbated by taking seriously Parfit's view that not only are none of those future selves identical with me, but in fact my relation to the future self that is me is not fundamentally different from my relation to those that are not. If this is so, then it is not even quite clear what it means to say that one of the future selves is me, let alone why I would or should have special concern for that one.

Jennifer Whiting (1986), a psychological connection theorist, rejects the notion that special concern is justified only by numerical identity, pointing out the obvious but underappreciated fact that we have a special concern for certain other persons as well as for ourselves. She explains and justifies spe-
cial concern for one's own future self by comparing it to the concern one has for one's friends.

Suppose, then, that I am asked what justifies my concern for a particular friend. I respond that the friend shares many of my values, desires, and interests, that I have shared many experiences with her, and that she influences my choices and values, as I do hers. As these shared values, experiences, and interests unfolded over time, I developed care and concern for her—first primitive concerns that she do or experience certain particular things (e.g., that she do well on her exam or that she have a successful shopping trip), and then a general concern for her welfare. This is roughly Whiting’s account of the genesis and justification of concern for a friend. Whiting makes the crucial point, however, that what results is not an existing friendship that then justifies concern. Instead, my care and concern is a component of the friendship relation; being concerned for my friend is part of what makes me her friend.

According to Whiting, my relation to my future selves can be seen in much the same way. My future self and I have many common experiences of which we share memories, and we share many values and perspectives. And in much the way a concern for a friend develops, Whiting says, “general concern for my future selves can . . . grow out of primitive concerns that they do or experience certain things” (1986, 564). And again, perhaps most importantly, the relationship I bear to my future selves does not result in or justify my concern for them. Instead, my concern for my future selves is part of what constitutes the psychological continuity in virtue of which they are my future selves. If I lacked that concern entirely, they would not be my future selves. “In this sense,” Whiting says, “we make our future selves by coming to care about them in much the same way that we make friends by coming to care about others” (566).

Whiting thus criticizes the “false supposition that concern for our future selves must be separable from personal identity and something for which such identity provides independent and antecedent justification” (1986, 552). Neither friendship nor psychological continuity exists distinct from the patterns of care and concern that accompany it, and thus neither can provide independent justification for that concern. Instead, the concern comes first, along with the other psychological relations that characterize the relationship, and what we call the metaphysical facts—“she’s my friend,” “she’s my future self,” or “she’s me”—are ways of describing and reifying those patterns of psychological relationship.

Whiting’s view suggests that being a distinct person in any normatively important sense is not a natural or metaphysical inevitability, but is (at least in significant part) a result of one’s choices, commitments, and concerns. Like most personal identity theorists, her focus is diachronic, addressing what holds a person together over time. But the synchronic cohesiveness of a person also
merits attention: what holds a person together and separates her from those around her, making her, at any given time, a distinct individual? I think that the view of self-centering I’ve been developing can shed light on this question. Just as I “make” my future self by caring about and identifying with her, so I “make” my present self by caring about and paying attention to her projects, values, and inner states. I hold myself together as a distinct self, right now, by wholeheartedly identifying with myself—by occupying my own perspective as its subject.

Each person is importantly constructed and maintained, then, by her own self-regarding attention. Such caring attention is thus not directed to something entirely fixed, but instead to something uniquely and especially constructible by the person herself, precisely through that attention. To fail to direct one’s caring attention to oneself, then, is to fail to take responsibility for constructing oneself.17

This account is echoed in some closely related metaphors and images in the views that I’ve been discussing. Recall that Beauvoir (discussing the “woman in love”) says that “the center of the world is no longer the place where she is.” The actual center of the world never was, of course; Beauvoir means that the woman’s perspectival center has shifted, that she experiences the world as if from her beloved’s point of view—almost as though she were standing in his skin, having abandoned her own. Similarly, Piper says that vicarious possession involves “abdication of oneself to the other as one imagines her”—rather like abdicating the throne, except that here there is no one to step into one’s place.

Owen Flanagan has made a similar point in a different context. Discussing the relation of my present self to my future selves, Flanagan says the following:

The answer to the question...—By what right do I legislate now how the life of that person I will be then shall go?—is this: If not me now, then who? Even if it were possible to abandon the project of shaping the particular future to which I will undoubtedly be relatively more connected than anyone else, I would be doing far more than ceasing to be presumptuous in a certain way. I would be abandoning that life to being shaped by forces and parties which are far less connected to that life and far less interested in how that life will go. (1991, 67, emphasis added)

Flanagan’s observation suggests that the problematic aspects of “abandoning” oneself are more than self-regarding. In abandoning oneself, one abandons something that is properly in one’s charge, thus allowing that thing to be shaped and controlled by whatever “forces and parties” may happen along: as Beauvoir says, the self-abandoner “lets her own world collapse in contingency.” The person in the grip of vicarious possession, of course, abandons herself to a particular other person—namely, the person(s) by whom she is possessed (or in Beauvoir’s terms, her “beloved”). The point
stands, however: her world still collapses in contingency. For what the beloved may come to want, value, or pursue is, from her point of view, a contingent matter; and yet her persistent attention and responsiveness to the beloved's wants, values, and projects fixes the direction of her own actions and aims. Thus, here, too, she abandons control of herself to something that is not itself within her control.  

Perhaps an apt metaphor for an ideal relationship to oneself is that of guardianship. A proper guardian acts on her sense of responsibility for something or someone, in the first instance, by remaining in its presence and paying attention to it. To abandon something is incompatible with functioning as its guardian. The guardian attends not only to her ward's well-being, but also to his or her conduct and character: she sees to it both that s\he fares well and that s\he does not run amok. Such "seeing to it" requires a steady, invested, caring, and disciplined attention. To be one's own responsible guardian, then, one must center oneself.

Although egoists and their ilk are all around us, so too are those persons who lack an appropriate perspectival home. The two types may reinforce one another: the centerless and the possessed are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by the egoistic, while the latter's egoism may be fed in part by their fear of becoming like the former (and thus similarly vulnerable). For each, moral development requires coming to see that there are safer, more stable possibilities—that leaving the familiar one behind does not lead inexorably to the other. Thus, although it is always important to check one's tendencies toward self-absorption and egoism, for many people—especially many women and girls—it is equally important, and at least equally difficult, to guard against self-abandonment and vicarious possession. The importance of self-centering is not merely a matter of resisting sexist exploitation within a culture that constructs females psychologically as instruments of (mostly male or masculine) others. Nor is self-centering merely a means toward living a more engaged and meaningful life. It is also essential to constructing and maintaining oneself as a fully responsible person. Just as one's visual perspective needs a center, so too does one's deliberative perspective; and to avoid self-abandonment, that center must be "in" oneself. Oneself, although no more valuable or important than others, is the functional center of a life that is one's own.

NOTES

1. See the large and diverse literature on feminism and the "ethics of care," much of it originally inspired by Gilligan's In a Different Voice (1982). For a valuable sampling of work in this field, see Held's anthology Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics (1995).
2. For an enlightening and feminist discussion of the phenomenon of "loss of self," see Hampton (1993).

3. In his critique of what he calls "impartialist morality," Williams asks: "[H]ow can an I that has taken on the perspective of impartiality be left with enough identity to live a life that respects its own interests? If morality is possible at all, does it leave anyone in particular for me to be?" (1985, 69–70)

4. I owe the idea of "de-centering" to Kukla (1996). Card (1996), in outlining a similar though not identical conception of integrity, makes a parallel observation. Speaking of individuals who have suffered severe abuse, she points out that such individuals are particularly vulnerable to internal fragmentation—most dramatically in the case of persons with "multiple personalities," less obviously so in other cases. She points out that it is difficult for a person who is seriously internally fragmented to be a responsible agent in the forward-looking sense: in the case of the multiple, in particular, "no one is sufficiently in charge for her to be reliable" (45).

5. As quoted by Hampton (1997, 41).

6. As Frye argues, a similar condition can be brought about in a person via techniques of coercion and enslavement, and/or by what she calls "arrogant perception." (Frye would also no doubt deny that the condition Beauvoir describes is accurately called "love.") See her influential essay "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love" in The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory (1983).

7. Along similar lines, I think that Frankfurt's emphasis on furthering the other's interests as a central element of love is misplaced. For an alternative view, see Velleman's (1999) account of love, to which I return shortly.

8. There is a clear continuity here with Frankfurt's earlier work on second-order volitions as central to personhood and free will.

9. Velleman grants that "love is felt for many things other than possessors of rational nature"—for infants and other nonreflective, nonrational humans, as well as for books, trees, and houses. "But when the object of our love is a person," he claims, "and we love him as a person—rather than as a work of nature, say, or an aesthetic object—then indeed, I want to say, we are responding to the value that he possesses by virtue of being a person or, as Kant would say, an instance of rational nature" (1999, 365).

10. Velleman recognizes that in loving someone, we often respond powerfully to aspects of the person other than her rational nature per se—the way she throws a baseball, for instance, or her adorable sneezes. "The immediate object of love," he observes, "is the manifest person, embodied in flesh and blood and accessible to the senses. . . . Grasping someone's personhood intellectually may be enough to make us respect him, but unless we actually see a person in the human being confronting us, we won't be moved to love; and we can see the person only by seeing him in and through his empirical persona. Hence there remains a sense in which we love a person for his observable features. . . . But loving a person for the way he walks is not a response to the value of his gait; it's rather a response to his gait as an expression or symbol or reminder of his value as a person" (1999, 371).

11. Frankfurt makes a similar observation (2001, 5–6). He points out that defining "self-love" in terms of satisfying one's inclinations—as Kant did—seems to confuse self-love with self-indulgence.

12. Piper goes on to argue that "strict impartiality" is in turn required for true compassion, so that the vicariously possessed person, like the self-absorbed person, can-
not have true compassion (at least insofar as, or at the time that, he or she is taken up in self-absorption/vicarious possession). She means, in so arguing, to refute the common view that there is a conflict between compassion and impartiality; on the contrary, she says, “an impartial perspective on our own and others’ inner states . . . is a necessary condition of experiencing compassion for others” (1991, 726). I will not pursue this further aspect of Piper’s view.

13. In a strict sense, of course, psychological connection theory does not begin with Parfit; it might better be said to have begun with David Hume. But my limited purpose here is well enough served by considering (and briefly at that) Parfit and his contemporary followers.

14. For a detailed account of such critiques, see Whiting (1986).

15. Parfit himself hedges on this point, saying “it seems defensible both to claim and to deny that Relation R gives us reason for special concern” (1984, 312). He does point out that at least one reductionist accepts the apparently counterintuitive consequence: Perry grants that on his own view, I have no more or different reason to prevent my own pain than to prevent someone else’s pain.

16. This point is lent support by the fact that, as Whiting points out, other accounts of personal identity do not fare well on the antecedent-justification approach either: it is not at all clear, for instance, why or how having the same immaterial soul as some future self would justify my being concerned for her.

17. There is an interesting parallel here, again, to Frankfurt’s conception of love, and in particular of self-love. Frankfurt raises the question of whether a person who doesn’t love anything (else) can be said to love himself. He draws an analogy to the love of parents for their children, observing that parental love is enacted partly by helping children develop their capacity for love and by helping them find things to love. Similarly for self-love: “The most elementary form of self-love . . . consists essentially in the desire of a person to love. That is, it consists in the person’s desire to have goals that he must accept as his own and to which he is devoted not merely for their instrumental value but for themselves. Now this is nothing but a desire on the person’s part that he be in a position to act with firm and genuine purpose” (2001, 10). On my view, this sort of desire ultimately amounts to a desire to bring oneself into being.

18. I don’t mean here to exaggerate the extent to which one’s own wants, values, and aims are within one’s own control; obviously, such control is very limited even in the best of cases. Nonetheless, there is a significant difference between the kind of control one has—or is forced to assume one has, insofar as one adopts a practical deliberative point of view—over one’s own values and aims, and the far more indirect and compromised control one can have over another’s.