

BOOK REVIEW

Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence: Adriana Cavarero with Judith Butler, Bonnie Honig, and Other Voices

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Feminist philosophy has been at the vanguard of a turn toward relational ontology that has gained increasing traction in recent years. This collection provides an invaluable opportunity to encounter a thinker whose work has been pathbreaking in this field: Italian political philosopher Adriana Cavarero. Featuring essays by Cavarero herself and contributors including Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig, the volume is essential reading for those seeking alternative paradigms through which to counter the legacies of the supposedly self-sufficient, autonomous subject of the modern individualist tradition and “the violent practices of domination, exclusion, and devastation of which the subject itself is an accomplice” (Cavarero 2016, 12). A particular highlight is the “Coda,” where Cavarero responds to her interlocutors, reinforcing Elisabeth Anker’s observation in the endorsement on the back cover that reading this book “is like participating in an electrifying seminar with some of the most incisive feminist thinkers of our time.”

As Cavarero notes, articulating the terms for a relational ontology is not merely a matter of “correcting individualistic ontology by inserting the category of relation into it,” but of thinking “relation itself as originary and constitutive” (Cavarero 2016, 13). Across her work, Cavarero takes up this task by re-orienting the horizons of thought toward human beginnings in birth and natality and working from there toward an original account of the human condition as co-constituted by uniqueness, plurality, and vulnerability. Her work makes a crucial contribution to recent feminist attention to the ontological and political implications of vulnerability and provides a starting point for an ethics of nonviolence. It is this starting point and the paradigm shift on which it rests that are taken up in *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence*, via a focus on one of Cavarero’s most recent books, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Cavarero 2016).

If Timothy Huzar’s preface offers a captivating insight into “who” Adriana Cavarero is—to borrow the distinction between “who” and “what” that is so important to Cavarero’s work—the introduction by Huzar and co-editor Clare Woodford provides a helpful guide to the “what” of Cavarero’s main claims, outlining her philosophical methods and the development of her thought across her key books. Huzar and

Woodford situate Cavarero in relation to Italian sexual difference feminisms, in ways contributors Olivia Guaraldo and Lorenzo Bernini subsequently augment, and adroitly frame the conversation between Cavarero, Butler, and Honig. As the introduction notes, the volume springs from a 2017 conference on Cavarero's work, "Giving Life to Politics," a title that signals the pivotal intervention that Cavarero makes into contemporary theories of the biopolitical. Her original combination of Arendt's concept of natality with a feminist emphasis on birth and sexuate embodiment both informs and is furthered by the critique of rectitude and turn to inclination that is the focus of her 2016 book and of this collection.

Cavarero's opening essay sets the scene by crystalizing the stakes, method, and central claims of *Inclinations*. While breaking new philosophical ground, this book epitomizes both the extraordinary range with which Cavarero engages the Western tradition and the generative impropriety with which she steals from this tradition to invert its perspective and invent alternative figures for thought. *Inclinations* builds on Cavarero's longstanding work to expose and counter the philosophical erection of a supposedly universal but archetypally masculinist subject, expanding this into a critique of rectitude understood as a postural geometry of epistemological and moral correctness that inevitably results in exclusionary and appropriative violence. In her essay for Huzar and Woodford's volume, Cavarero outlines this postural geometry as it appears in the thought of Plato and Kant, before revisiting the central image of *Inclinations*, Da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* (1503-1519).

In a strategic reappropriation that deliberately exaggerates the "relational character and anti-verticalism of the scene" (Huzar and Woodford, 42), Cavarero proposes that the transgenerational maternal relations Da Vinci depicts represent asymmetries of dependency that not only throw the erect subject off balance but provide an alternative paradigm for an ethics of inclination. Turning again to Arendt, Cavarero emphasizes that such an ethics, rooted in the structural asymmetries of the natal condition, is altruistic in the ontological sense that every inclination "turns outwards" and "leans out of the self" toward an other (39). Inclination is thus "a good point of departure . . . from which we might rethink the ontology of the vulnerable and its constitutive relationality" (42).

In their responses, Butler and Honig draw out the significance of Cavarero's work for the question of (non)violence in the context of feminist and queer struggles to reimagine the terms of shared life. Butler expands the critique of rectitude by foregrounding the ways in which the supposedly self-supporting, independent subject relies not only on "the inclined body it disparages" (46) but an entire social and environmental infrastructure. Averring that in reality "no one stands on her own" (46), Butler asks "whether the inclining figure shadows forth in the upright figure such that the two are *not* radically distinct and never fully oppositional" (49). To illustrate this point, they turn to none other than Kant, showing how the disavowal of dependency "comes back to haunt [Kant's] position in a rather queer way" (51), "shadowing forth" in the shattering vibrations of the sublime and the vertigo that the septuagenarian Kant suggests is the unsettling result of philosophizing while walking.

One of the strengths of the volume is that it makes the longstanding dialogue between Butler and Cavarero more visible. These are thinkers willing to risk the impropriety of "imagin[ing] even the impossible" (179), "guided by inclination toward a different future" (61). Butler suggests that this future may be imperiled not only by the violence that results from egological individualism but also by the unsettling force of a more primary destructiveness that springs from a constitutive condition of interdependency. In ways that intersect with *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004) and *The*

Force of Non-Violence (Butler 2020), Butler presents this interdependency as manifesting not only in social relations but also in the “ties to creaturely life and to living processes” that precede and condition the individuation of a subject (Huzar and Woodford, 59). Echoing Cavarero’s emphasis on the ambivalence of the *vulnus*—the exposure to wounding or care that constitutes human vulnerability (Cavarero 2009, 30)—such bonds of interdependency “are not only primary but ambivalent” (Huzar and Woodford, 60): though they may be sustaining, they can also be intolerable, resulting in aggression toward interdependency itself. Thus, as Butler emphasizes, recognizing constitutive interdependency is no guarantee of nonviolent cohabitation, but a condition of struggling for and toward it.

Honig suggests that this struggle is more agonistic than Cavarero allows. As she elaborates in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, for Honig, Cavarero “invites us both to see inclination as refusal and to stage our refusals inclinationally—not vertically—in order to escape dead-end oppositionality” (Huzar and Woodford, 67). Nonetheless, Honig’s concern is that by seeking a postural geometry set “completely apart” (180) from the verticality of masculinist individualism, Cavarero risks leaving the ongoing violence of rectitude in place. Returning to ancient Greek texts that have been central to both her own work and Cavarero’s, Honig offers original, “inclined” readings of Euripides’s *Bacchae* and Sophocles’s *Antigone* to make the case for a “sororal agonism” (64).

In the “Coda,” Cavarero welcomes the inclusion of sorority among the agencies of “inclinational refusal” (Huzar and Woodford, 185) while remaining hesitant about “agonistic engagement with verticality” (181), indicating that her interest lies less in separatism than in the incommensurable political imaginaries oriented by rectitude and inclination respectively. Indeed, Honig shows how Cavarero’s thought opens onto the question of what constitutes political action and connects this to Black feminist and decolonial work that complicates the masculinism emphasized by sexual difference feminisms by centering the racialization of Man (81). Thus, we might read Cavarero, as Honig does (Honig 2021), alongside Saidiya Hartman’s insistence that the lives and labors of Black women and girls constitute political refusal and re-imagining (Hartman 2016; 2019), repurposing Woodford’s incisive formulation, “not care *instead* of struggle. . . but care *as* struggle” (Huzar and Woodford, 174–75).

Butler’s and Honig’s contributions are followed by a series of shorter but no less insightful responses. Christine Battersby’s essay complements Butler’s by unsettling the image of Kant as an isolated individual, drawing on archival research into an engraved goblet from 1763 that testifies to Kant’s inner circle of friends. In previous work, Battersby has extensively critiqued the role of gender, race, and Orientalism in Kant’s philosophy (Battersby 2007). Here she reflects on Kant’s close relationships as well as his writings on friendship and sociability to suggest that Cavarero’s relational ontology “needs a further swerve so as to include arcs of dependence that are appropriate to friendship” (Huzar and Woodford, 111). If the asymmetries of inclination are to inform new political ideals, the dialectics of friendship between adults offer a helpful model, she suggests, insofar as these involve negotiating “disparities in power, personal situations, inclinations, and beliefs” (117).

Woodford expands on this by offering a compelling portrait of critical friendship that can encompass dissent. Although Cavarero notes the risks of strategically exploiting maternal stereotypes, Woodford remains concerned that the inclinations depicted in images such as Da Vinci’s are too easily recaptured by heterosexist norms of patriarchal motherhood. In response, Woodford foregrounds queer Madonnas and subversive

female rectitude where love and care confront violence and exclusion. Her essay augments Honig's emphasis on agonistic inclinations and provides an invitation to reckon with the harms of normalizing care, as well as to further queer what Honig suggestively calls "inclination's kinship archive" (74). Following Honig (2021, 45–60), we might thus track how *Inclinations* is generatively prefigured by Sara Ahmed's work on the straightening force of verticality and the alternative forms of sociality oriented by the queer slant of lesbian desire (Ahmed 2006, 65–107).

Where Woodford invokes nonnormative parenting, Bernini proposes a perhaps unexpected alliance between Cavarero's ethics of inclination and the queer antisocial theories of Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani. Bernini notes Cavarero's own alignment of her critique of rectitude with queer theory's undoing of straightness (Cavarero 2016, 63) and suggests that "her insistence on the maternal does not translate into a heterosexist stance" (Huzar and Woodford, 123). Cavarero herself remains wary of the particular alliance Bernini proposes (185). Nonetheless, one wonders what might emerge by allying her distinction between maternal generative power and a socially prescribed reproductive function (Cavarero 1995, 57–70) with queer critiques of reproductive heteronormativity, while the potential of the latter to disclose "new aspects of human vulnerability . . . where care and sex are perversely enmeshed" might be amplified by Cavarero's attentiveness to the oblique lines of inclination, as Bernini suggests (Huzar and Woodford, 127).

Another strength of this volume is its inclusion of some of Cavarero's most significant Italian interlocutors, including Simona Forti as well as Guaraldo and Bernini. Their contributions do important work to situate *Inclinations* in the longer arc of Cavarero's writings. Guaraldo returns to *Relating Narratives* (Cavarero 2000) to retrieve a figure of eros as a re-staging of relational, natal exposure. She shows how Cavarero extends a subversive feminist materialism, particularly as developed by Carla Lonzi, that works to undomesticate women's bodies and pleasures, untying the logic binding the proper to the propertied individual and patriarchal power. Forti turns to *Horrorism* (Cavarero 2009) and Cavarero's analysis of the ontological crime that aims at demolishing the human condition as it is exposed in the natal uniqueness of singular plural beings. Drawing on Primo Levi, Forti shows how horrorist violence "can emerge from a nonerect position," reminding us of the "gray zone" present in all human cohabitation," such that political violence is "constructed in normality" (Huzar and Woodford, 147–49).

Mark Devenney's concern, shared by Woodford, is that Cavarero herself risks repeating a certain violence—that of ethical rectitude—in suggesting that maternal inclination might serve as "a new fundamental schematism—the gestural mark of a new postural geometry" (Cavarero 2016, 129). Devenney foregrounds the tension between a Foucauldian analysis of contingent *dispositifs* and Cavarero's unabashed commitment to a relational ontology. For Devenney, the ambivalence of the mother–child relation means it "cannot act as the basis for an ethics" (Huzar and Woodford, 138). Yet as Honig suggests (Huzar and Woodford, 87, n. 42), this very feature might be taken as constitutive of the ethical, understood as the ongoing navigation of ambivalence rather than the propriety of a moral code (on this point, see also LaChance Adams 2014). Such is the implication of Cavarero's insistence that "the ethical valence of inclination . . . consists in the alternative between care and wound" (Cavarero 2016, 105) and her image of the human as "the vulnerable one [who] exists totally in the tension generated by this alternative" (Cavarero 2009, 30).

As Huzar's essay helpfully emphasizes, both Cavarero and Butler are motivated by the urgency of responding to existing "scenes of violence—enacted in the name of the mythical figure of the purportedly universal subject of history and against those who do not conform to his implicit morphology and ontoepistemology" (Huzar and Woodford, 153). What is at stake in what Huzar calls the "insurrectionary humanism" of Cavarero and Butler is not replacing one description of the human with another, more correct account, but a project of restitution and refusal that aims to render "dominant accounts of existence" inoperative while offering an alternative "sense of the world" (157, 151). Huzar positions Butler's and Cavarero's relational ontologies as interventions and forms of care "for the singular, plural lives who both inhabit this world and constitute it" (5). In turning to the everyday gestures of maternal inclination, he emphasizes, Cavarero's "imaginary of hope" (179) finds resources "in the precarious lives lived in sociality" despite the histories of violence to which they are subjected (158). In so doing, Huzar's approach provides a further opening to Black, trans*, and queer archives that insist that the impossible is not only yet to come but has already been lived.

Through their thoughtful curation, Huzar and Woodford have produced a plurivocal volume that both conveys the vitality of a specific moment of intellectual exchange and makes a lasting contribution to contemporary ethical and political thought. Essential reading for scholars of Cavarero and sexual difference feminisms, this book is an invaluable counterpart to *Inclinations*, with which it could helpfully be paired on upper-level and graduate courses exploring the philosophical bases of an ethics and politics of nonviolence. At the same time, it provides an inspiring example of how to engage in a textual practice of critical friendship. As Huzar notes, Cavarero and her interlocutors "authorize us to build new worlds; to take risks in the hope that a new sense of what it is to be . . . might be made apparent" (4).

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