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Martin Langby

# Emancipation and Christian Feminism

A Critical Study in Ethics of Subjectivity,  
Vulnerability, and Relationality



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### **Abstract**

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This study explores the emancipatory potential in different strands of contemporary Christian feminist theology. The study develops a comprehensive understanding of how subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality intersect with and impact Christian feminist ethics, which seeks to counteract patriarchy and promote emancipation. This is operationalized by the research question: How do different understandings of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality relate to Christian feminist ethics and its emancipatory potential? To answer this, the author explores how subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality are understood in three prominent models of contemporary Christian feminist ethics as devised by Susan Frank Parsons, Catharine Keller, and Denise M. Ackermann.

The theoretical framework used to analyze the views of the three theologians draws primarily on the works of Judith Butler and Hille Haker. Additionally, Michel Foucault's understanding of power is crucial to assessing different models' emancipatory potential. The study challenges prevalent perspectives that are often found in Christianity, and seeks to move beyond such ideologies and practices that use Christian traditions to legitimize domination, especially of women.

The author argues that a dialectical understanding of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality provides new critical resources for Christian feminist ethics. Ethics and theology are seen as mutually reinforcing; and it is argued that Christian feminism should embrace a self-reflexive stance that is devoid of triumphalism, and support a theology that does not promote or support domination of others.

The author argues for a constructivist approach to gender, since it provides more nuanced resources for the critique of different forms of patriarchy if compared with essentialism, which risks reinforcing dualisms that could support hierarchical divisions. As a critique of the mind/body dualism devised after Descartes, the author argues for a dialectical approach to mind and body—an approach that challenges hierarchies and domination. Subjectivity is argued to be constituted relationally; and vulnerability, as an ontological condition of human existence, should be embraced rather than eliminated.

*Keywords:* feminism, Christianity, ethics, Susan Frank Parsons, Catherine Keller, Denise M. Ackermann, emancipation, subjectivity, vulnerability, relationality

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*To Inga & Ida*



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Uppsala, January 2025

# 1. Introduction

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

St. Paul, *Galatians 3:28*<sup>1</sup>

*He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.*

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*<sup>2</sup>

The above citations could be said to summarize the problematic dichotomy that is present throughout Christian history to a painstakingly high degree. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes as if there were no value difference between the genders in relation to God. Almost two millennia later, Simone de Beauvoir points to the lived experience of all too many: that half of humanity are not subjects but remain the *Other*. Anyone endorsing equality must see that this is unjust and should be subject to change.

In this dissertation, I study different types of Christian feminism, focusing on how the concepts of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality are used in Christian feminist ethics. I hypothesize that subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality all relate to the view of the human and that Christian feminist ethics provides valuable emancipatory resources.<sup>3</sup> Feminism has a long history of intersecting with religion.<sup>4</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)* of the Bible. Michael Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, 5th ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 26. Originally published in 1949.

<sup>3</sup> I view feminist ethics not as a branch of ethics, but rather as a modality of how one *does* ethics, as described here: Cristina L. H. Traina, "Christian Feminist Theological Ethics," ed. Brendan Wolfe, *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianFeministTheologicalEthics>.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 141 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6–16.

focusing on these concepts, I assume that they are crucial in understanding what it is to be human, especially from a subjugated position.<sup>5</sup> By challenging the conventional views that are prevalent in ethics and theology, Christian feminist ethics seeks to create a space for the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals, particularly women, within ethical discourse. By highlighting these concepts, I argue that we can explore how power dynamics, social structures, and cultural norms have shaped and continue to shape ethical frameworks today. In drawing on Christian feminist resources, different perspectives are brought to the fore, shedding light on the underlying assumptions and biases that have influenced traditional normative positions.

As Ellie Anderson, Cynthia Willett, and Diana Meyers write in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,<sup>6</sup> “The topic of the self has long been salient in feminist philosophy, for it is pivotal to questions about personal identity, the body, sociality, and agency that feminism must address.”<sup>7</sup> The question of the self, or the Subject, continues to be important—or perhaps even sees an increase.<sup>8</sup> The subject has always played a crucial role in relation to ethics.<sup>9</sup> Adjacent to this, the question of human vulnerability has become more prominent in recent years. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds note: “Although moral theorists, political philosophers, and bioethicists generally acknowledge that our human vulnerability is normatively significant, there has been little systematic analysis of the concept of vulnerability.”<sup>10</sup> Different types of vulnerability are present in human life. One

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<sup>5</sup> From a global standpoint, it is evident that women are discriminated against in relation to men on all too many accounts. See, for example, “Women, Business, and the Law 2024,” World Bank, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/03/04/new-data-show-massive-wider-than-expected-global-gender-gap>.

<sup>6</sup> “Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” accessed November 23, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ellie Anderson, Cynthia Willett, and Diana Meyers, “Feminist Perspectives on the Self,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/feminism-self/>.

<sup>8</sup> Especially in continental philosophy. Simon O’Sullivan, *On the Production of Subjectivity: Five Diagrams of the Finite-Infinite Relation* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Elvis Imafidon, ed., *The Ethics of Subjectivity: Perspectives Since the Dawn of Modernity* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, “Introduction: What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?,” in *Vulnerability: New Essays*

precondition of human life is that it is susceptible to harm—that is, that there is an inherent ontological condition that produces vulnerability.<sup>11</sup> Hille Haker writes: “I call this vulnerability ontological, because it does not matter whether we feel vulnerable or invulnerable: human beings *are*, by their nature, vulnerable—that is, susceptible to be affected by incidents and/or conditions beyond their control.”<sup>12</sup> The ontological vulnerability here refers to the essential human condition regarding the possibility of being harmed—something that all humans share.

Further, one central aspect of the feminist critique of a hegemonic, male-dominated subject stems from its lack of relationality, where instead autonomy and detachment reign supreme. Anderson, Willett, and Meyers write: “Modern philosophy in the West championed the individual. Extending into contemporary moral and political thought is the idea that the self is a free, rational chooser and actor—an autonomous agent.”<sup>13</sup> In light of many women’s experiences, this account does not suffice, since it gives an all too prominent role to detachment. Kathleen Lennon writes: “The accounts of the relationship between subjectivity, corporeality and identity which have been developed have implications for other aspects of our corporeal existence.”<sup>14</sup> This also translates back to the subject, since it is never a “neutral” category that is devoid of contextualization. The same could be said about a “person” in ethics, which is considered the general subject in most ethical theories, since the category “person” is not a neutral category *vis-à-vis* the normative ethical position that is provided. Normativity is thus already inherent when assessing moral demands on a subject.<sup>15</sup>

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*in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Being susceptible to harm can be perceived as indicating that there is a state in which the subject is not harmed. In my understanding, this is not the case; and, although there are various understandings of health, I lean toward preferring a view of adaptability. In my understanding, this frees the concept from an idealized vision of “perfect health,” and should instead be seen in relation to subjective agency in which various resources play a role in a flourishing life. For a short elaboration on health as *adaptability*, please see: “What Is Health? The Ability to Adapt,” *The Lancet* 373, no. 9666 (2009): 781.

<sup>12</sup> Hille Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics: Catholic Ethics and Social Challenges*, Studien Zur Theologischen Ethik 156 (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2020), 139.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, Willett, and Meyers, “Feminist Perspectives on the Self.”

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Lennon, “Feminist Perspectives on the Body,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/feminist-body/>.

<sup>15</sup> This is the central conclusion that the Finnish ethicist Jaana Hallamaa makes when she writes: “This means that ‘person’ is not a theoretically ‘innocent’ concept but that

Judith Butler, who has written extensively on the intersections between gender, subjectivity, and vulnerability, states:

The reason I am not free to destroy another—and indeed, why nations are not finally free to destroy one another—is not only because it will lead to further destructive consequences. That is doubtless true. But what may be finally more true is that the Subject that I am is bound to the Subject I am not, that we each have the power to destroy and to be destroyed, and that we are bound to one another in this power and this precariousness. In this sense, we are all precarious lives.<sup>16</sup>

We are embodied vulnerable beings—often under precarious conditions—and are intrinsically bound together. Thus, relationality is of the essence, since the vulnerable subjects are constituted through one another. Vulnerability, as a central aspect of the human condition, is not merely negative. Vulnerability also opens the subjects to one another and moves beyond separation. Haker explores this in what she calls a “vulnerable agency.”<sup>17</sup> By opening oneself, as one inherently must do to be a subject, the negative aspects are joined by positive ones. Haker states:

We are so used to associating vulnerability with the susceptibility to suffering that it is easy to overlook that moral vulnerability has a positive side, too. In any action, we take the risk to affect the other and be affected by them, and morally speaking, we aim to affect others (and be affected) in a positive way.<sup>18</sup>

Again, relationality posits itself amid the subject formation—devoid of the “detached male subject of the Enlightenment.”<sup>19</sup> The same problem is found in the Christian tradition; as mentioned, there is a cleavage between what is promised and what is delivered regarding equality for

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it includes implicit normative aspects in the sense that it states what is morally important and relevant and what can be left to one side. This brings us to the conclusion that ‘person’ as a moral concept is never a neutral notion.” Jaana Hallamaa, *The Prisms of Moral Personhood: The Concept of a Person in Contemporary Anglo-American Ethics*, Schriften Der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft A 33 (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1994), 257.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London; New York, NY: Verso, 2009), 43.

<sup>17</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 143.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> This concept is explored further in the chapters on Susan Frank Parsons, Catherine Keller, and Denise M. Ackermann.

women and men alike. Emancipation from subjugation is a primary goal of Christian feminist theology. Feminist theologians have challenged the patriarchal structures in Christianity, and have called for a re-examination of the role of women in religious institutions and in society as a whole. I argue that Christian feminism provides valuable resources for ethics, and that the discourse on ethics is enriched by invoking religious perspectives.

## 1.1. Aims and Research Question

In this dissertation I study and critically engage with Christian feminist ethics. The normative implications of different views of humans are a particular focus. Feminist theologians and philosophers have argued that the most familiar articulation of the modern subject can be attributed to René Descartes and his *cogito, ergo sum* rationalism.<sup>20</sup> Descartes' dualistic philosophy, centered on the separation of mind and body, has had far-reaching implications for how we conceptualize and engage with the world, ourselves, and others.

Thus, my dissertation concerns the “flawed” subject of today, and engages with how a dualistic framework has contributed to a hierarchical division of mind and body that has been used to legitimize various forms of oppression. By examining the intersection of Christian theology with feminist ethics, through this study I seek to challenge and dismantle these oppressive positions, thus contributing to a more inclusive and just understanding of what it is to be human.<sup>21</sup> The concepts of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality are central to an understanding that challenges today's hegemonic notions, grounded as they are in a dualistic perspective that lends itself to domination. I study what emancipatory resources Christian feminist ethics provides. Given the

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 7, 10–13, 28, 52, 63, 86, 204; Jacqueline Broad, “Early Modern Feminism and Cartesian Philosophy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone, Routledge Philosophy Companions (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 72–74, 78–80.

<sup>21</sup> When I state that “feminist theology believes” or “Christian theology believes” something, it is in relation to this non-representative sample, and should be seen in the context of *an* example, not *the* example *itself*.

prevalence of our human interconnectedness, this research aims to highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing the unique subjectivity of individuals, their inherent vulnerability, and the significance of relationality in ethics.

In this study, therefore, I aim to perform an in-depth critical and constructive analysis of how different intersecting conceptualizations of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality relate to the emancipatory potential of Christian feminist ethics. I argue that feminist ethics provides a compelling framework for challenging and dismantling oppressive positions that are legitimized by Cartesian dualism. It offers a more holistic and inclusive understanding of human beings as embodied, interconnected, and interdependent individuals. This research explores how Christian feminist ethics could contribute to a more inclusive and just understanding of what it is to be human—one that focuses on emancipation for all individuals, regardless of their gender, race, or other social identities. Questions of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality are complex and multifaceted, influenced by various social and cultural factors. Therefore, I analyze these concepts, drawing on relevant literature and engaging with diverse perspectives.

Different normative models for feminist ethics include different understandings of gender and different views of the human. I focus mostly on the latter to investigate the emancipatory potential of different models of Christian feminist ethics. *The aim is to develop a comprehensive understanding of how subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality intersect with and impact Christian feminist ethics, which seeks to promote emancipation for subjugated groups.*

In order to achieve the aim of this dissertation, I study three different models of Christian feminist ethics. Feminist ethics works actively with questions of equality and justice, which are central to the emancipation that is sought.<sup>22</sup> Feminism is central to challenging unjust gendered power relations in the contemporary world. However, feminism is both a debated and contested term.<sup>23</sup> Although feminism could be framed

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<sup>22</sup> Of course, there are various understandings of equality and justice. I view these as integral to an ethical discourse, but, owing to limitations in the scope of this dissertation, I am not able to elaborate on these concepts. However, I believe it will be evident throughout the study how I relate to these concepts and their role in Christian feminist ethics.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2006); Noëlle McAfee et al., “Feminist Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research



very differently, and feminists disagree on many issues, all forms of feminism are united in their rejection of the legitimacy of patriarchy. In Sarah Gamble's words:

But what, exactly, is feminism? A general definition might state that it is the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns. Within this patriarchal paradigm, women become everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be): where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on. Under this rationale, which aligns them everywhere with negativity, women are denied equal access to the world of public concerns as well as of cultural representation. Put simply, feminism seeks to change this situation.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, feminism is a multifaceted movement that aims to address and challenge societal gender-based inequalities. It recognizes that women have historically been marginalized and oppressed, and seeks to empower them. This empowerment is understood differently in various forms of feminism. As is well known, among the most prominent models of feminism are liberal feminism, which focuses on individual rights and equal opportunities; radical feminism, which seeks to dismantle the patriarchal system of power relations entirely; intersectional feminism, which examines the intersections of different forms of oppression; and eco-feminism, which explores the connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, feminism is not limited to the Western world, but has also expanded to address the unique challenges that women face worldwide.<sup>26</sup> Overall, feminism is a collective effort to liberate women from

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Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/feminist-philosophy/>.

<sup>24</sup> Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, vii.

<sup>25</sup> McAfee et al., "Feminist Philosophy"; Karen J. Warren, "Feminist Environmental Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2015), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/feminism-environmental/>.

<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Rivera Berruz, "Latin American Feminism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/feminism-latin-america/>; Dilek Huseyinzadegan et al., "Continental Feminism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab,

all forms of discrimination and oppression and to create a more equal and just society for all genders. The latter also include men, who are often acknowledged to be affected by patriarchal norms and expectations, even if they, as a social group, are not systematically marginalized or oppressed in the same way as women.

In light of this background and the aim of the study, the research question explores how contemporary Christian feminist ethics engages with issues of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. I investigate how different models of Christian ethics contribute to the feminist project of emancipation. Emancipation for the subjugated should be at the center of the feminist ethical discourse, as it seeks to dismantle oppressive structures and to provide normative claims for individuals and communities to live with dignity, agency, and equality.

The dissertation's research question is: *How do different understandings of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality relate to Christian feminist ethics and its emancipatory potential?*

To answer the research question, I explore how subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality are conceptualized in three prominent models of contemporary Christian feminist ethics: Susan Frank Parsons, Catherine Keller, and Denise M. Ackermann. Different theological, philosophical, and contextual perspectives mark these conceptualizations. By examining the interplay between subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality, I aim to uncover how various understandings of these concepts shape ethical frameworks and inform resistance to oppression.

## 1.2. Research Material

Susan Frank Parsons, Catherine Keller, and Denise M. Ackermann are three feminist theologians who have contributed significantly to exploring subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in theology. Their work has shed light on the intersection of feminism and Christian theology, providing various understandings of these complex concepts.<sup>27</sup>

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Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/fe-mapprroach-continental/>; Serena Parekh and Shelley Wilcox, "Feminist Perspectives on Globalization," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/feminism-globalization/>.

<sup>27</sup> I also wish to make a short remark about the issue of language. Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann write in English, whereas other sources are in different languages. Some

The selection was made to cover different positions and approaches in feminist theology, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann offer different models of Christian feminist ethics by defending different normative ethical theories, understandings of Christian theology, and approaches to subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality as an important element of their view of humans. Obviously, and most importantly, these three theologians differ in their understandings of gender and the nature of power.

Parsons provides a systematic study of gender and power relations that is firmly based in the natural law tradition. She defends a variant of virtue ethics and an essentialist gender theory. Keller is searching for a holistic approach, arguing against anthropocentrism and embracing constructivism in gender theory. Ackermann, deeply rooted in critical theory, provides a perspective that combines theory and practice, highlighting the importance of the dialectical relationship between knowledge and lived experiences. Additionally, these theologians have been widely recognized and cited in the field of feminist theology. By focusing on these three feminist theologians, I analyze various aspects of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in feminist theology, exploring the complexities of gender, power, and spirituality within the intersection of feminism and theology.

Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann were chosen as primary research material for their unique perspectives and specific areas of focus in feminist theology. Each of them provides critical insights and valuable contributions to the field in different ways. They write from different settings, offering a glimpse of the diverse feminist thought and activism across various contexts. The aim here is not to cover every aspect of feminist theology, but rather to allow for a focused and in-depth exploration of specific themes and perspectives within the field.

### 1.2.1. Susan Frank Parsons

Parsons is a British Catholic feminist theologian who was the Director of Pastoral Studies at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology,

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works are translated into English, while others may be referenced in their original language to provide a more comprehensive analysis. That said, it is essential to note that language translations may introduce specific nuances or limitations in understanding and interpreting the sources. A different selection of language choices would likely have produced other insights and implications.

Cambridge.<sup>28</sup> Parsons is also the editor of the academic journal *Studies in Christian Ethics*,<sup>29</sup> which is published by the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics.<sup>30</sup> Parsons thoroughly engages in several topics of interest to this dissertation, especially the ethics-related subjects of Christian ethics and gender theory.<sup>31</sup> Parsons writes from a context and time in which she sees the need to defend a unitary subject from constructivist and postmodern critique. Parsons was most active from the late 1990s to the early 2000s when the discussion on constructivism and poststructuralism in many regards was at a height. Here, Parsons focuses on the position of feminism, which is torn between modernism and postmodernism and internally divided on its future direction. The two main aspects of this theme are how feminism currently approaches the moral subject and how it should approach it, as well as understanding the enterprise of ethics itself—especially feminist ethics—within the transition from modern to postmodern thought.<sup>32</sup>

Parsons aims to defend a feminist position that is grounded in natural law and an essentialist position of both gender and subject. She has an Aristotelian understanding of ethics, which includes the following: 1) “ethics is a discourse concerning the good,” 2) ethics is to be understood as a “textual field,” and 3) “ethics is a deliberative practice.”<sup>33</sup> She also proposes that universal claims be made but interpreted in a particular social context. This latter part sits alongside her communitarian perspectives, in which she sees the Church as a role model for communal life.

A distinct feature of Parsons’ writings concerns the broad approach she takes when describing and criticizing various currents of contemporary feminism.<sup>34</sup> She distinguishes between three paradigms: liberalism, social constructivism, and what she labels “naturalism.” After

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<sup>28</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), x.

<sup>29</sup> “Studies in Christian Ethics,” SAGE Journals, accessed February 7, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sce>.

<sup>30</sup> “Society for the Study of Christian Ethics,” accessed February 7, 2020, <https://www.ssce.org.uk/>.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, New Dimensions to Religious Ethics (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Christine E. Gudorf, “Feminism and Postmodernism in Susan Frank Parsons,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 3 (2004): 521.

<sup>33</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

these encounters, she picks up the threads and moves forward with her account of how Christian feminist ethics should be approached. In addition to describing the paradigms as “atoms,” she shows that they overlap in their understanding. However, she is defending a version of naturalism and a virtue ethics within normative theory.

Parsons advocates a Thomist view, in which humans are regarded as created in the image of God, and women and men are separate in their particular “nature” but morally equal. Thus, she proposes a version of “difference feminism.” Through their unique knowledge of being marginalized, women can bring forward specific claims about equality that men cannot produce. Parsons’ view of personhood is constituted by a “moderate” relational formation rather than by a Cartesian atomistic subject, which she describes negatively, based on a “male rationality” that has been dominant since the onset of modernity. She is inherently critical of what she sees as a postmodern trajectory, in which the person or Subject is detached and no longer present as an entity. Instead, it is seen as only a function of systems without any “real” presence. Parsons asserts that Christianity interpreted through feminism is crucial for fostering a relational understanding that could bring about positive change in the world.

### 1.2.2. Catherine Keller

Catherine Keller is Professor of Constructive Theology at the Theological School of Drew University.<sup>35</sup> Her holistic project brings together many different areas, such as ancient symbols of divinity and how they play their part in an understanding of and togetherness for the planet we inhabit. She draws predominantly on ecological perspectives, gender politics, process theology and cosmology, and poststructuralist philosophy. Keller describes her own work as “both deconstructive and constructive in strategy.”<sup>36</sup> Since 1986, Keller has taught in the Theological and Philosophical Studies Area of Drew’s Graduate Division of Religion.<sup>37</sup> Keller performed her doctoral work at Claremont Graduate University with John B. Cobb, Jr., where she remains involved with the

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<sup>35</sup> “About Catherine Keller,” Drew University Faculty, Staff and Student Home Pages, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://users.drew.edu/ckeller/>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> “About the Graduate Division of Religion,” Drew University, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.drew.edu/theological-school/academics/doctor-of-philosophy/graduate-division-of-religion/>.

Center for Process Studies.<sup>38</sup> In addition, she has led the Drew Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium since it was formed in 2000.<sup>39</sup> Keller describes herself as a feminist theologian.<sup>40</sup>

Keller writes on many different topics, and my understanding is that first and foremost she addresses other theologians as a theologian. Keller does not present a clearly articulated ethical theory, but it is possible to reconstruct a normative ethical position from her works. It revolves around the notion that humans could transform the world from the current mode of domination if they imposed a critique and transformation of the self. Theology has a role to play in this holistic project of emancipation. Keller wishes to transform theology in a direction that would not lend itself to domination. She is critical, for example, of the imago Dei paradigm that tends to reproduce anthropocentrism.

When reconstructing Keller's ethical position from her writings, which cover many different themes, I try to present her (explicit and implicit) answers to the same questions I pose to Parsons. Parsons is explicit about her position in many aspects, and Keller is not.<sup>41</sup> Keller uses mystical, mythical, and poststructuralist resources, which makes her academic production different from the more precise, bare-boned style presented by Parsons.

### 1.2.3. Denise M. Ackermann

Denise M. Ackermann is a South African feminist liberation theologian who writes predominately on the intersections between practical theology, or "praxis" as she prefers to call it, and its implication for ethics. She taught at the University of Western Cape in Cape Town, and at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.<sup>42</sup> Ackermann is a member of

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<sup>38</sup> "About," *The Center for Process Studies* (blog), June 9, 2017, <https://ctr4process.org/about/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium at Drew Theological School," Drew University, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://depts.drew.edu/tsfac/colloquium/>.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 42.

<sup>41</sup> For a very brief but informative summary of some of Keller's works, please see: Rick Benjamins, "Apophatic Panentheism: Catherine Keller's Constructive Theology," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 60, no. 1 (2018): 103–21.

<sup>42</sup> Denise Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters From a Landscape of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI; Glosderry, Republic of South Africa: W.B. Eerdmans; D. Philip Publishers, 2003), back cover.

the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.<sup>43</sup> She has been a visiting scholar in the Women’s Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School.<sup>44</sup> Ackermann has also worked for the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s Institute for Christian Spirituality.<sup>45</sup> Ackermann wrote her dissertation on the anti-apartheid white feminist group called the Black Sash.<sup>46</sup> During the apartheid years in South Africa, Ackermann was a member of the *Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians*,<sup>47</sup> a group of woman theologians who opposed the racist regime. Ackermann is a self-proclaimed social democrat.<sup>48</sup>

Ackermann is a Christian feminist practical theologian who engages with feminist practical theology. She sees this as a critical Christian theology that is focused on the difficulties that women and marginalized groups face in religious traditions. This approach also explores the connection between human beliefs and actions, emphasizing the importance of tangible actions in religious communities.<sup>49</sup>

In her understanding of practical theology, Ackermann wishes to adopt a critical stance—as inferred from critical theory—that desires a radical transformation of society. She states that this could come about through changes that emerge from the practices of faith communities.<sup>50</sup>

Desmond M. Tutu, South African Anglican archbishop emeritus, describes Ackermann in the following way in his foreword to *After the Locusts*:

She wants to make sense for herself and her family, for her community, and really ultimately for all of us, her fellow Christians, just how it was possible for all the awfulness of apartheid to come from a people so

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<sup>43</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, “A ‘Spirituality of Risk’ For Christian Witness In South Africa,” *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 328 (1994): 123.

<sup>44</sup> “Denise Ackermann | Women’s Studies in Religion Program,” Harvard Divinity School, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://wsrp.hds.harvard.edu/people/denise-ackermann>.

<sup>45</sup> Murray Coetzee, Retief Muller, and Len Hansen, eds., *Cultivating Seeds of Hope: Conversations on the Life of Beyers Naudé* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), 251.

<sup>46</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, *Liberating Praxis and the Black Sash: A Feminist Theological Perspective* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Denise Ackermann, “Engaging Freedom: A Contextual Feminist Theology of Praxis,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 94 (1996): 44.

<sup>48</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey: Ordinary Blessings* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2014), 248.

<sup>49</sup> Denise Ackermann, “Engaging Stigma: An Embodied Theological Response To HIV And Aids,” *Scriptura* 89 (2013): 386.

<sup>50</sup> Denise Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology: A Feminist Perspective on Ministry,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 52 (1985): 36.

deeply religious and devout. She wants to come to terms with what it has meant to share in the privileges of power, even if she herself had repudiated them, privileges that came just because of her ethnicity and her skin colour.<sup>51</sup>

Tutu's summary mentions two important endeavors that Ackermann is pursuing in her works. First, she explores how the racist apartheid regime could emerge in a setting of Christians, where one would assume that they would follow some moral code that did not lend itself to domination. Second, she focuses on modes of domination as performed by groups, including how these relate to her position. The latter is of the essence in Ackermann's use of critical theory, where the Subject is already positioned within a particular discourse. On the topic of gender and domination, Ackermann writes: "As I grew up, I understood instinctively that patriarchy was about power and that power was for men."<sup>52</sup> Focusing on concrete forms of power and material needs, Ackermann provides resources that are of interest to my dissertation, since this perspective contrasts starkly with the positions provided by Parsons and Keller.

### 1.3. Previous Research

Research in feminist ethics is a lively and broad area of interest globally. The research on vulnerability, subjectivity, and relationality covers vast fields, and the selection below includes some essential works to outline the field and to provide context for the critical analysis performed in this dissertation. I wish to highlight a few perspectives, each on vulnerability, subjectivity, and relationality. Before focusing on them, however, I start with some of the true classics in the fields of feminist ethics and Christian feminist ethics.

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<sup>51</sup> Desmond M. Tutu, "Foreword," in *After the Locusts: Letters From a Landscape of Faith*, by Denise M. Ackermann (Grand Rapids, MI; Glosderry, Republic of South Africa: W.B. Eerdmans; D. Philip Publishers, 2003), xi.

<sup>52</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 5.



### 1.3.1. Feminist Theology and Ethics

*The Second Sex*<sup>53</sup> by Simone de Beauvoir is a seminal work of feminist theory that explores the societal construction of gender and its impact on the subjugation of women throughout history. By being excluded from domains such as education, work, and political participation, women are seen as inferior to men. Beauvoir makes the distinction between “sex” and “gender.” Where sex refers to the biological differences between men and women, gender refers to the socially constructed roles and expectations attached to each sex. Beauvoir asserts that gender is not “fixed” or “natural” but is fluid, and can be changed by performing it in other ways.

Another significant concept in the book is the idea of “otherness”. In patriarchal societies, women are defined as the “other” in relation to men—who are seen as the norm—which leads to women being viewed as different and inferior. Beauvoir argues that this process of othering is necessary to maintain the patriarchal social order. To address this, Beauvoir advocates for women to become autonomous subjects and to reject socially imposed roles and expectations. She asserts that women must be free to define their identities and to live as they see fit, and not be bound by societal norms that lead to their subjugation. Beauvoir asserts that true freedom for women can only be achieved through dismantling patriarchal structures and creating a society in which women are equal participants in all aspects of life. This book by Beauvoir is seminal for understanding contemporary feminist discourse, as she prominently addresses the intersection of gender, power, and societal structures that perpetuate inequality. By focusing on the othering of women in relation to men, it is evident that Beauvoir’s work sheds light on the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that hinder women’s autonomy and perpetuate gender inequality. In an all too apparent manner, much of this has still not changed: it is present in different settings and contexts, reinforcing the need for ongoing feminist analysis and activism. One such context is religious communities.

A seminal work that is especially important to Christian feminist theology is *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* by Mary Daly.<sup>54</sup> This groundbreaking book challenges traditional patriarchal interpretations of Christianity, and calls for a radical

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<sup>53</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

<sup>54</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1974).

reimagining of theology from a feminist perspective. Daly's work critiques the exclusive language and symbolism used in traditional Christian theology, arguing that it perpetuates the marginalization and oppression of women. Daly argues for including women's experiences and voices in theological discourse, and emphasizes the importance of women's liberation from patriarchal structures. In her work, Daly argues that the rise of patriarchy parallels the rise of monotheism, and that this connection has perpetuated the subordination of women in religious and societal structures. In an example that Daly gives, the Christian perspective of God has shifted from an abstract entity to being more in line with the masculine image of a father figure and of Jesus Christ as a male person. This shift has led to the exclusion and devaluation of women's experiences and perspectives in Christian theology, where the maleness of God has been prioritized and upheld as the norm at the expense of women's experiences.

Moreover, Daly critiques the concept of original sin and its portrayal as stemming from Eve's disobedience. Daly argues that it perpetuates the blame and condemnation of women that has taken place throughout history. This is an example of how religious language has been used actively to legitimize the suppression of women, who long for salvation but are never on a par with men. To counter this, Daly argues for solidarity and sisterhood, and that women must engage with religion and the Divine by focusing on the lived experience of women and their embodiment. For Daly, this is discussed in relation to the concepts of immanence and transcendence, where the latter have been given priority over the former. Daly also argues that one should deconstruct the current religious institutions to rebuild them in ways that genuinely value and empower women as equal with men.

Rosemary Radford Ruether is another hugely influential figure in Christian feminist ethics, with her most important work *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*.<sup>55</sup> Ruether critiques the traditional Christian understanding of God as exclusively male, and argues for a feminist reinterpretation of theology that includes gender justice. Ruether focuses on the core Christian doctrines and teachings, such as the creation story, the incarnation of Christ, and the Trinity, to challenge the patriarchal and sexist assumptions underlying these theological concepts. She uses a feminist hermeneutical approach to reinterpret biblical

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<sup>55</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

texts and traditions, highlighting how they have been used to justify male dominance and the subjugation of women. Ruether suggests that feminist theology must confront and dismantle the oppressive structures of patriarchy in religious institutions and reframe theological concepts in ways that affirm the full humanity and equality of women. One aspect that is central to Ruether concerns the language used to describe God, and that throughout history, religious language has been used to reinforce patriarchal power dynamics and to marginalize women. Ruether argues further that the understandings of Christ and Mary should be reimagined to advance gender equality. Aspects of interest here concern the role of Mary as a mother and how those experiences could be made visible to inform change. The teachings of Jesus could also be reimagined to focus on gender inclusion and equality. Ruether also investigates the importance of ecological and social justice—something she believes is closely intertwined with feminist ethics, and that has been neglected in traditional Christian theology.

One who has challenged the role of women in the early Christian Church is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, with her work *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*.<sup>56</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza focuses on reconstructing the role and significance of women in early Christian communities, based on historical evidence and feminist biblical interpretation. She argues that women played active and influential roles in the early Church as leaders, teachers, and prophets, but that their contributions have been marginalized and erased from the historical narratives. Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that it is crucial to reclaim and remember the stories of these women in order to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Christianity and to create a more inclusive and egalitarian religious community. By using feminist hermeneutics, Schüssler Fiorenza highlights the importance of reinterpreting biblical texts in light of women's experiences and perspectives.

Alongside this, Schüssler Fiorenza uses feminist historical analysis to re-evaluate the depiction of women in the New Testament, arguing that they were not passive followers but active participants and leaders in the early Christian movement.

Many contemporary Christian theologians have contributed to the project initiated by thinkers such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford

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<sup>56</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: Herder & Herder, 1983).

Ruether, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. In Sweden, several feminists have conducted valuable research on Christian ethics. One who has discussed the gender issue in Christian ethics is Sofia Mogård.

In her book *Att leva tillsammans—En studie i kristen och feministisk sexualitet*,<sup>57</sup> Mogård explores various aspects of sexual ethics within the framework of Christianity and feminism. By analyzing and comparing the viewpoints of different theologians and ethicists, Mogård presents a diverse range of perspectives on the subject. The book explores the significance of revelation, reason, love, and tradition in Christian ethics and their influence on the view of same-sex relationships and marriage. Through a meticulous examination of different interpretations of the Bible and of Christian tradition, Mogård underscores the importance of historical and cultural contexts in interpreting sexual ethics. Her work provides a deep insight into the complex issues surrounding sexual ethics, and offers a thoughtful reflection on how Christians and feminists could approach these issues reasonably and inclusively.

Mogård focuses on gender and its importance as a social construct. She emphasizes that sex and gender are not only biological or innate categories but are also socially constructed. This means that societal norms, expectations, and structures shape our perceptions of sex and gender. Mogård points out that there is a close connection between how we understand gender and how we understand sexuality: perceptions of gender often influence views of sexuality, and vice versa. Therefore, it would be essential to analyze and understand the connection between gender and sexuality to develop a more inclusive and fairer sexual ethics.

Further, she understands gender as a socially constructed identity that shapes our roles, behaviors, and expectations on the basis of sex. By questioning and challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes, Mogård promotes a more equal and inclusive view of gender and sexuality. By problematizing and exploring the understanding of sex and gender as socially constructed phenomena, Mogård contributes to a more nuanced and critical discussion of sexual ethics and relationships within Christian feminist ethics. By highlighting these aspects, a more profound reflection is opened up about how sex and gender affect our perceptions and norms in sexual ethics.

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<sup>57</sup> Sofia Mogård, *Att leva tillsammans: En studie i kristen och feministisk sexualitet*, Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 39 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2010).

The conclusions of Mogård's book concern the importance of integrating Christian revelation, reason, and human experience in discussions of sexual ethics. This also means that one needs to be aware of historical and cultural contexts when interpreting the Bible and Christian tradition since they are not independent entities.

Mogård's work underlines the importance of challenging traditional norms and structures that could lead to inequality and injustice in relationships. This is particularly relevant in the context of uniting Christian and feminist perspectives to create a more inclusive and just sexual ethics. Her research also highlights the need for ongoing discussions and exploration of different approaches and models of sexual ethics, thus fostering a greater understanding of and respect for various forms of love and relationships. By encouraging such critical thinking, Mogård's work paves the way for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of sexual ethics.

A most interesting study in Christian feminist ethics is *Violence, Power, and Justice: A Feminist Contribution to Christian Sexual Ethics* by the Icelandic<sup>58</sup> ethicist Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir.<sup>59</sup> Bóasdóttir focuses on the intersectionality of gender and power dynamics in discussions of sexual ethics in Christianity in relation to the male battering of women. Bóasdóttir examines various feminist theories to illuminate the complex dynamics of power, violence, and justice in intimate relationships. She argues that a comprehensive analysis of violence against women requires an understanding of its structural and systemic nature, which includes the role of patriarchal ideologies and power dynamics. By analyzing how traditional Christian teachings and interpretations have contributed to the perpetuation of violence against women, Bóasdóttir challenges the assumption that Christian ethics and teachings are inherently supportive of gender equality and justice. Instead, the idea of domination and subordination can justify male violence in heterosexual relationships. This also relates to the understanding of gender, as the social construction of gender plays a crucial role in perpetuating and reinforcing power imbalances. Additionally, Bóasdóttir argues that a feminist perspective is necessary for developing a more just and inclusive Christian sexual ethics.

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<sup>58</sup> Bóasdóttir defended her thesis at Uppsala University, Sweden.

<sup>59</sup> Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir, *Violence, Power, and Justice: A Feminist Contribution to Christian Sexual Ethics*, Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 20 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1998).

By focusing on gender construction, Bóasdóttir critically analyzes traditional Christian sexual ethics, and proposes a shift toward a justice perspective that addresses the realities of injustice in intimate relationships. She argues that marriage, which has traditionally been understood within Christianity to be a sacred and holy institution, can often perpetuate and reinforce patriarchal power dynamics, making it an unsafe environment for women. This also relates to a critical discussion of heterosexual norms and how they contribute to the oppression of women within intimate relationships, where marriage thus plays a central part in reinforcing and upholding patriarchal power structures. A critical feminist perspective is used throughout her work to make injustices visible; and, by focusing on the construction of gender in Christian sexual ethics and intimate relationships, Bóasdóttir highlights how women are marginalized and oppressed in these contexts. She proposes a view in which feminism is used to highlight the experiences and voices of women who have been victims of male violence and to challenge the power structures that enable and justify such violence.

By using feminist ethics, Bóasdóttir seeks social justice, equality, and empowerment in Christian sexual ethics. She emphasizes the importance of challenging societal norms, addressing power imbalances, and promoting justice in intimate relationships—for all.

Both Bóasdóttir and Mogård focus on understanding gender as a central aspect of their feminist critique. This gives them the resources to make patriarchal structures visible in their respective contexts and to reveal how injustices are constructed and upheld. To some extent, I continue with this work. However, I concentrate on a discussion of how different views of humans are constructed, either to legitimize or to critique patriarchy. I investigate how Christian feminist ethics could contribute to revealing structural injustices and patriarchal structures by combining gender theory with an analysis of the views of humans. Here, vulnerability, subjectivity, and relationality are the main objects of the study.

*Först när vi får ansikten*<sup>60</sup> is a thought-provoking book by Swedish theologian and ethicist Karin Sporre. In her work, Sporre performs an ethical analysis of the works of Chung Hyun Kyung of South Korea, Katie G. Cannon of the United States of America (USA), and Mary C. Grey of the United Kingdom (UK). She does this by inserting herself

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<sup>60</sup> Karin Sporre, *Först när vi får ansikten: Ett flerkulturellt samtal om feminism, etik och teologi*, Lund Studies in Ethics and Theology 9 (Stockholm: Atlas Akademi, 1999).

into a dialogue with the theological works of these feminist theologians, exploring their ideas, perspectives, and critiques of sexism and patriarchal structures. She focuses mainly on women's experiences and how their identities are shaped in religious and cultural contexts that are permeated by patriarchal norms. By concentrating on subjectivity in relation to agency, Sporre shows how the ability to act is limited by how women are perceived and understood in the contexts explored by the three theologians. Central to Sporre's analysis is how the context shapes the experience of injustice and subjugation, but at the same time she shows the universal character of these experiences, as women across different cultural and religious backgrounds share them.

Justice is understood as a process that aims to challenge and transform these oppressive structures, allowing women to realize their humanity and agency fully. In doing so, there is immense value in visions of another future. Visions can impact and transform subjects and their ability to act according to their desires and goals. Sporre shows the importance of feminist theology and of the work of feminist theologians in shedding light on how patriarchal ideologies and structures limit women's agency and perpetuate injustice. By highlighting the subjective character in relation to agency and universality, Sporre provides essential insights into how theological perspectives could inform and contribute to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and justice—and not just in the contexts at hand. Depending on the context, the limitations and constraints placed on women's agency in religious and cultural contexts can vary, but the underlying patriarchal structures and norms persist. These structures not only restrict women's ability to realize their humanity and agency fully, but also perpetuate injustice. Discourse often predefines the limitations and expectations of gender roles in each setting. Sporre's research is important in relation to my study, since she shows how patriarchal structures within religious communities are constructed and upheld, but are also challenged from a feminist theological perspective. Sporre focuses on agency, which relates to my research in this dissertation, since the perspectives concentrate on the production of subjects within patriarchal structures.

### 1.3.2. Subjectivity

An American political theorist, Anna Marie Smith, uses a feminist framework to explore the foundation of subjects and the subjectivation

process.<sup>61</sup> She presents a historical overview of how the subject has been constructed historically and an in-depth analysis of liberal feminism, anti-racist socialist feminism, and Derridean-Foucauldian theory-influenced feminism. A central aspect of Smith's work concerns how gender and sex interact with other categories, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and class, and highlights the complex ways in which systems of oppression intersect to shape subjectivity.<sup>62</sup> Smith proposes a view in which gender cannot be seen in isolation, and proposes an intersectional view when analyzing subject formation and gender justice. Smith emphasizes that subjectivity is not a fixed, static construct, but rather a fluid and contingent process that is shaped by various social, cultural, and political factors; all attempts to understand and analyze subjectivity must acknowledge individuals' contextual and relational nature within broader social structures. She also asserts the importance of critiquing power structures and the discourse that perpetuates inequality and marginalization, and of recognizing the agency of individuals to challenge and transform these structures.<sup>63</sup> Structural factors and limitations on gender roles and subjects are not static or universal, but are shaped by cultural, social, and political influences. They also vary over time, but are continually embedded throughout life. Subjectivation is an ongoing process that is influenced by power dynamics, social structures, and cultural context. The perspective of subjectivation as a process is applied in this dissertation.

Erica Burman, a critical development psychologist based in the UK, has argued that developmental psychology has been entrenched in a patriarchal and sexist framework that limits our understanding of human development.<sup>64</sup> To challenge this notion, she explores how feminist perspectives could offer a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of subjectivity and human development. Burman focuses on the discursive production of subjects in relation to gender, and highlights the need to consider the subjective experiences of individuals within their particular contexts. To truly understand and analyze subjectivity, we must recognize its fluidity and contingency, shaped by various social, cultural, and political factors. Burman focuses on children and adolescents, but

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<sup>61</sup> Anna Marie Smith, *Subjectivity and Subjectivation*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, Online ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 966.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 970.

<sup>64</sup> Erica Burman, "Feminism and Discourse in Developmental Psychology: Power, Subjectivity and Interpretation," *Feminism & Psychology* 2, no. 1 (1992): 45–59.



the general perspective is important for my work. Burman shows that subjectivities matter and that discourse plays a crucial role from a very early age.

So, how could subjectivity be perceived in relation to politics? Elisabetta Bertolino, a law researcher in the UK, argues that subjectivity should be understood as a dynamic and relational concept rather than as a fixed and isolated entity.<sup>65</sup> Although writing mainly from a developmental studies perspective, her points are also valid outside this discourse. Bertolino argues that the Western philosophical understanding of a “unitary” subjectivity is made on false premises, such that the subject is understood to be autonomous, rational, and detached from the political and social realities of lived experiences.<sup>66</sup> This understanding has been translated into the political sphere, reinforcing existing power structures and marginalizing alternative perspectives.<sup>67</sup> This unitary subjectivity has also influenced feminist theory, thus constraining it from fully challenging oppressive systems and creating radical transformations in women’s conditions. Bertolino suggests that one should challenge this notion of unitary subjectivity in order to open up new possibilities for feminist politics and resistance, mainly by using deconstructive theory and focusing on the uniqueness of the subjective experience.<sup>68</sup> Bertolino’s perspective shows how subjectivities interplay with politics and how these phenomena could be mutually reinforcing. By positing certain aspects of subjectivity as the norm, she shows how the political sphere is influenced (and vice versa) and how this reinforces certain power structures. A key takeaway from Bertolino is the importance of seeing direct relationships between subjectivity, politics, and power—which are all important components in my dissertation.

Shelley Budgeon, a sociologist specializing in gender studies in the UK, has argued that young women’s subjectivity emerges through embodied practices and interactions within specific socio-cultural contexts.<sup>69</sup> Budgeon traces various forms of feminist critique, and high-

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<sup>65</sup> Elisabetta Bertolino, “The Politics of Subjectivity in the Women, Law and Development Discourse,” *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 25, no. 1 (2006): 119–39.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 120, 133.

<sup>69</sup> Shelley Budgeon, “Theorizing Subjectivity and Feminine Embodiment: Feminist Approaches and Debates,” in *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, ed. Johanna Wyn and Helen Cahill (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2015), 243–56.

lights different theoretical approaches that have emerged in order to understand the complexities of gendered subjectivity and embodied experiences. Descartes' mind-body dualism is one of the foundational theories that is critiqued in feminist discourse, as it perpetuates the separation between mind and body and suggests that the mind is superior to the body.<sup>70</sup> Further, Budgeon argues that there has been a shift over time, such that feminist discourse has moved from a view of the body as a passive object to be transcended or controlled, to a recognition of the body as an integral part of subjectivity and agency—especially in the case of young women. By focusing on the critique of passivity, Budgeon argues for a non-binary view of the body and of subjectivity that recognizes the interconnectedness and mutual influence between them. Budgeon's conclusions are of importance for this dissertation.

One who has challenged the idea of making more-or-less historical divisions regarding subjectivity from a feminist standpoint is Sonia Kruks, a political philosopher from the UK.<sup>71</sup> Kruks engages in a critical debate about subjectivity, influenced by postmodernism within feminist discourse. She argues that the debate should be more nuanced, and recognizes the complex relationship between the Enlightenment and postmodernism in shaping feminist conceptions of subjectivity. Kruks fears that postmodernism may undermine the agency and political potential of feminist movements by rejecting notions of a coherent and stable subjectivity, especially in light of radical nominalism and constructivism, that challenge the objective conditions of women's lives and hinder feminist efforts to address material realities.<sup>72</sup> Further, some fear that postmodern feminists may contribute to the erasure of women's experiences and struggles by focusing on language and discourse rather than on concrete lived experiences and material realities. This could also create difficulties when advocating for women's rights, since one could be bound by the discourse in a deterministic fashion.<sup>73</sup> To address these difficulties and tensions within feminist discourse, engaging in a nuanced understanding of subjectivity and embodiment would be crucial. The theoretical standpoint offered by Kruks is relevant not least when I discuss the different perspectives on postmodernity that we encounter in Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 245–49.

<sup>71</sup> Sonia Kruks, "Gender and Subjectivity: Simone de Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 1 (1992): 89–110.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 90–91.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 106–7.

### 1.3.3. Vulnerability

Erinn Cunniff Gilson, a philosopher from the USA, has written on how vulnerability affects victimization in relation to feminist theory.<sup>74</sup> Gilson argues that vulnerability should not be understood solely as a characteristic of individuals, but rather as a relational and contextual phenomenon. This notion challenges traditional views that place the burden of vulnerability solely on the individual, particularly women.<sup>75</sup> She also explores how vulnerability has been related to the feminine, highlighting how societal constructions of gender influence our understanding and experiences of vulnerability. Gilson advocates a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of vulnerability in relation to victimization, especially with regard to the ambiguity of vulnerability, which cannot be seen as solely positive or negative.<sup>76</sup> By recognizing vulnerability as a multifaceted and ambiguous concept, Gilson encourages a shift in perspective that moves beyond simplistic dichotomies, such as victim/empowered or passive/active, and instead embraces vulnerability's complex and fluid nature.<sup>77</sup> These power dynamics are intricate, even more so when different phenomena are analyzed together.

One who has explored vulnerability from an interdisciplinary perspective is Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, a philosopher from the USA.<sup>78</sup> Ziarek focuses on how vulnerability affects individuals and communities, highlighting the interconnectedness between subjectivity, power relations, and ethics.<sup>79</sup> Ziarek argues that vulnerability is not simply a passive state of weakness, but is rather an inherent aspect of being human that exposes individuals and communities to potential harm and suffering, requiring ethical responses and relational approaches to address and mitigate these vulnerabilities. Vulnerability is not seen as a flaw to be overcome, but rather as a condition that requires ethical engagement and collective responsibility.<sup>80</sup> Ziarek argues that forming alliances between different groups and embracing vulnerability could challenge

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<sup>74</sup> Erinn Cunniff Gilson, "Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2016): 71–98.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 88–95.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–89, 91.

<sup>78</sup> Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability: Disrespect, Obligation, Action," *SubStance* 42, no. 3 (2013): 67–84.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–82.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

power structures to create more inclusive societies. She emphasizes the need for systemic change to address how gendered power dynamics perpetuate vulnerabilities, viewing vulnerability as both a producer of harm and a catalyst for change.<sup>81</sup> Change is important because it opens up new realities. By not viewing vulnerability as a state to be overcome, one could focus on the ethical responsibility to create spaces of care, support, and solidarity that acknowledge and honor the inherent vulnerability of individuals and communities. Similarly to Gilson, Ziarek shows how a critical discussion provides perspectives to navigate the complexities of vulnerability.

Martha Albertson Fineman, a legal and gender scholar from the USA, has thoroughly engaged with the subject of vulnerability. She argues that vulnerability is an inherent and universal aspect of the human condition, and is not limited to specific individuals or groups. Fineman has focused on how vulnerability and social institutions intersect and on how vulnerability could be mitigated through policy and legal frameworks.<sup>82</sup> She challenges the extent to which a state could reduce the impact of vulnerability. She emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals in society. She proposes a shift toward structural change that does not focus on individuals, but aims to encompass broader societal structures and systems that perpetuate vulnerability. Unfortunately, according to Fineman, states and societies at large often fail to address vulnerability adequately, and instead exacerbate it through oppressive norms, discriminatory policies, and structural inequalities.<sup>83</sup>

By addressing “vulnerable subjects,” Fineman hopes to move toward a more proactive change in society, in which state legislation would not only focus on reactive measures to individual instances of vulnerability, but also consider the broader societal structures and systems that perpetuate it.<sup>84</sup> Vulnerability thus holds a unique position in Fineman’s framework, as it serves as a starting point for understanding the interconnectedness of individuals and the systems that shape their lives. Vulnerability thus has a critical potential that could be of significant value. Fineman’s research is of interest to this dissertation for several reasons.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 81–82.

<sup>82</sup> Martha Albertson Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition,” in *Transcending the Boundaries of Law* (New Haven, CT: Routledge-Cavendish, 2011), 177–91.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 273–75.

A key aspect concerns the relationship between vulnerability and how to mitigate its negative outcomes, which calls for social and systemic changes.

How do the feminist theologians analyzed in this study relate the need for social change to the issue of human vulnerability marked by patriarchy?

Danielle Petherbridge, a philosopher based in Ireland, proposes that vulnerability could function critically by challenging traditional conceptions of power and by recognizing the interdependent nature of human relationships. Petherbridge proposes a view of vulnerability as an openness toward others, rather than focusing on the aspects linked to violence and mortality.<sup>85</sup> This view emphasizes the ambivalence and multiplicity of vulnerability, acknowledging that it can encompass both positive and negative states of being—especially in relation to violence and domination. She wishes to refrain from seeing vulnerability only in light of power, although she acknowledges the intricate relationship between the two in their mutual constitution of each other.<sup>86</sup>

Further, Petherbridge proposes a view in which vulnerability is not passive, but enables transformation and change.<sup>87</sup> Change can be of many kinds, both positive and negative. Change can be transformative, leading to positive growth and empowerment, or it can have negative consequences, perpetuating systemic oppression and marginalization. In either case, the respective change is always present within a larger discourse, where relationships and relationality are fundamental to understanding its impact on individuals and communities. Relationality, in the context of feminist discourse, has the potential to enhance our understanding of human experiences, and could serve as a transformative force. This challenges views of vulnerability as only negative, and instead shows how vulnerability lies at the core of change—both individual and societal.

### 1.3.4. Relationality

So, what role could relationality play in feminist discourse? In this dissertation I assume that relationality is a crucial element of the view of

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<sup>85</sup> Danielle Petherbridge, “What’s Critical about Vulnerability? Rethinking Interdependence, Recognition, and Power,” *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 594, 598.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 601.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 591.

human that influences how feminist ethics is framed. Some previous research is relevant to the choice of this starting point. Christine M. Koggel, Ami Harbin, and Jennifer J. Llewellyn, feminist theorists based in the USA and in Canada, have explored how relationality could enhance the understanding of what it is to be human.<sup>88</sup> They argue that humans are essentially relational beings and that our relationships with others shape our identities and moral obligations. Relationality, in the context of feminist discourse, could provide a framework for understanding and addressing power dynamics, social inequalities, and ethical responsibilities within various topics. Koggel, Harbin, and Llewellyn focus on different strands in feminist discourse, and highlight the need to refrain from individualism, instead emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals in social structures on various levels. They advocate a view in which relationality could serve as a transformative force in dismantling oppressive systems and promoting justice and equality.<sup>89</sup> They also opt for various forms of deepened relationships alongside a view of lived experience in order to validate the normative impacts of different theoretical understandings. Koggel, Harbin, and Llewellyn see modalities of resistance to oppression as fundamental to a feminist relational theory, and argue that relationality could provide a framework for understanding and challenging systems of power and oppression on all levels.<sup>90</sup> The research of Koggel, Harbin, and Llewellyn emphasizes the importance of taking relationality seriously, which is also important for my dissertation. They show how relationality interplays with social resistance to injustice, and thus how it could be a vehicle for change in the world.

From this selection of previous research on subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in relation to feminist discourse, it is evident that these concepts are highly interconnected.<sup>91</sup> Understanding and embracing the relationality of subjects would be crucial for advancing ethical theories and practices that acknowledge the interconnectedness of human experiences and the influence of power dynamics that are present throughout life. By foregrounding social dynamics and relations that

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<sup>88</sup> Christine M. Koggel, Ami Harbin, and Jennifer J. Llewellyn, "Feminist Relational Theory," *Journal of Global Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 1–14.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 9.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 5, 7, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810.

constitute subjects, rather than placing undue emphasis on the individuals themselves, we would better understand how power dynamics shape subjectivities. This tapestry provides a foundation for exploring further the complex and multifaceted nature of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in the context of Christian feminist ethics.

## 1.4. Theoretical Framework and Method

The study is performed as an analysis of three contemporary Christian feminist theologians: Susan Frank Parsons, Catherine Keller, and Denise M. Ackermann.<sup>92</sup> The theoretical framework that is used in order to analyze their views on subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality draws mainly on the works of Judith Butler and Hille Haker. The understanding of power, which is crucial in order to assess different models' emancipatory potential, focuses primarily on the works of Michel Foucault.<sup>93</sup>

Butler has made significant contributions to feminist theory by emphasizing the performative nature of gender and challenging binary understandings of identity.<sup>94</sup> Her work is seminal for the exploration and

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<sup>92</sup> Regarding the references in which Denise Ackermann appears, two different namings are used: "Denise Ackermann" and "Denise M. Ackermann"; both refer to the same person. She has sometimes included the "M." in her name, and sometimes not. I adhere to her use when making references. The same principle applies to "Catherine Keller" and "Catherine E. Keller."

<sup>93</sup> Even though Foucault is sometimes disputed among feminists, I believe that the American philosopher Margaret A. McLaren summarizes it well: "I read Foucault as an activist deeply suspicious of the dominant culture, traditional ways of thinking, and traditional politics. I believe his work is helpful to feminist politics because it articulates a complex notion of power and it accounts for oppression both through larger social structures and in terms of the identities produced by these structures without then taking the identities as static, or as the basis for changing the oppressive structures; in this way, it combines the best insights of socialist feminism, radical feminism, and postmodern feminism." Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>94</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th Anniversary ed (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Routledge Classics (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011); Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015).

understanding of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, Haker's work on feminist ethics provides a valuable perspective on the intersection of gender, ethics, and Christian theology.<sup>96</sup> Foucault was chosen for his insights into power dynamics and how they shape individuals' subjectivity and relationships. Further, Foucault is groundbreaking in examining the complexities of power and subjectivity in various settings, most notably in institutions and in discourses of power.<sup>97</sup> Including these theories and methodologies allows for a comprehensive and critical analysis of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in the context of contemporary Christian feminist ethics.

The methodology used in this study involves an in-depth reading and analysis of the writings of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann, focusing on their understandings of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. In the study I also use an intersectional lens to explore the interconnectedness of power dynamics, oppression, and liberation in Christian feminist ethics.

To answer the research question, I interpret and, in some cases, reconstruct three different understandings of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality from the writings of the three contemporary Christian feminist theologians. In the next chapter I introduce the theoretical instruments used in this dissertation in greater detail. I then evaluate the theologians' models of Christian ethics, using the criteria of how they contribute to emancipation for the subjugated. The interpretations consider the complexities and nuances inherent in subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in Christian feminist ethics, taking into account the

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<sup>95</sup> Butler, *Frames of War*; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York, NY: Verso, 2004); Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>96</sup> Hille Haker, *Moralische Identität: Literarische Lebensgeschichten Als Medium Ethischer Reflexion: Mit Einer Interpretation Der Jahrestage von Uwe Johnson* (Tübingen: Francke, 1999); Hille Haker, "The Fragility of the Moral Self," *Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 04 (2004): 359–81; Hille Haker, "Vulnerable Agency: Concepts and Contexts" (Monash University, July 3, 2016); Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*.

<sup>97</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983); Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, *The History of Sexuality* 3 (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1986); Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 1st Vintage Books ed, *The History of Sexuality* 2 (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1988); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge (Volume 1)*, trans. Robert Hurley (Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin, 2008).



intersections of gender, race, class, and other axes of power.<sup>98</sup> My aim is to highlight the tensions and possibilities in each theologian's work, examining how their perspectives on subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality contribute to a more inclusive and transformative understanding of ethics in contemporary Christian feminism. Differences between Parsons', Keller's, and Ackermann's respective ethical models, gender theories, and views of the human (where we particularly focus on subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality) are used to frame a more potent theological feminist ethics. This study's theoretical framework and methodology are explained in depth in the next chapter.

## 1.5. Disposition

After this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2 I present and outline the theoretical and methodological considerations that form the foundation of this study. In that chapter, I discuss my understanding of subjectivity, vulnerability, relationality, and power. Drawing mainly on the works of Judith Butler and, to a certain extent, Hille Haker, I examine their concepts and theories to provide a theoretical framework for analyzing the research material. I also outline the methodological considerations for the study, and present the analytical questions I pose to the three theologians.

In Chapter 3 I interpret and analyze Susan Frank Parsons' understanding of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in her work on feminist Christian ethics. I then perform the same operation on Catherine Keller in Chapter 4, followed by a similar analysis of Denise M. Ackermann in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 6 I compare the three feminist Christian ethicists discussed in Chapters 3-5, identifying common themes and points of divergence in their approaches to subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. Finally, I discuss the findings from the previous chapters and offer

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<sup>98</sup> Lennon, "Feminist Perspectives on the Body"; Amy Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/feminist-power/>; Ann Ferguson, Rosemary Hennesy, and Mechthild Nagel, "Feminist Perspectives on Class and Work," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/feminism-class/>.

a conclusion in which I highlight the importance of understanding subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in contemporary Christian feminist ethics and the potential for normativity and critique.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Method

In the study I aim to analyze critically the emancipatory potential in Christian feminist ethics. To do this, I study three Christian feminist theologians and their views of the human. To study these views, I focus on three concepts in the works of the three theologians: subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. To perform the study, I use several theoretical perspectives from Butler, Haker, and Foucault to shed light on the three concepts at hand.

The concepts presented are not separated but are intertwined in a more extensive understanding that relates to several areas of ethics. As shown in a hermeneutic spiral, they all follow, constituting and enforcing one another. I start by discussing the subject and subjectivity. This relates to the subject formation, how it is constituted, and some of its effects on the related concepts of vulnerability and relationality. Vulnerability is discussed as a profound part of the human condition, based on corporeality, how subjectivation works, and how it is a uniting phenomenon of all humans. Both the subject formation and vulnerability are constituted dialectically, based on involuntary and voluntary actions by others. The subject cannot choose how others act toward it, since almost no actions from others result from the subject itself. Therefore, the concept of relationality is of the essence. Further, a theory of power is essential to assess the emancipatory potential of the three theologians being studied, since it provides tools to reveal unjust relations and domination.

### 2.1. Vulnerability

Various proposals have been brought forward to define and understand human vulnerability. Regarding the definition of vulnerability, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds present the following two prevalent approaches:

There are two broad kinds of response to this question in the literature. The first links the concept of vulnerability to its derivation from the Latin word *vulnus* (“wound”) and to the capacity to suffer that is inherent in human embodiment.<sup>99</sup>

The second kind of response to the question “What is vulnerability?” also emphasizes the fundamentally social or relational character of vulnerability, but rather than understanding vulnerability as ontological it focuses on the contingent susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others.<sup>100</sup>

The latter view is expanded on as follows:

Although everyone is potentially vulnerable to such threats, what makes some persons or groups especially so is their lack of or diminished capacity to protect themselves. On this kind of view, then, vulnerable persons are those with reduced capacity, power, or control to protect their interests relative to other agents. Whereas the ontological response to the question “What is vulnerability?” stresses our common embodied humanity and equal susceptibility to suffering, this second response stresses the ways that inequalities of power, dependency, capacity, or need render some agents vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others.<sup>101</sup>

The perspective used in this dissertation combines these two approaches. As already touched on, the unequal distribution of vulnerability relates to its prevalence through the subject formation and present power relations.

Further, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds expand their taxonomy of vulnerability by adding more dimensions. They present three sources of vulnerability: *inherent*, *situational*, and *pathogenic*. Two different states of vulnerability are also presented: *dispositional* and *occurrent*.<sup>102</sup> These divisions provide a finer-grained perspective on vulnerability, and although the terminology differs from other conceptions, the understanding remains close to them. The *inherent* source of vulnerability relates to an ontological state, further elaborated below. The second

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<sup>99</sup> Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, “Introduction: What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?,” 4.

<sup>100</sup> Catriona Mackenzie, “The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability,” in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>101</sup> Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, “Introduction: What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?,” 6.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

source relates to certain conditions under which some subjects are more vulnerable, in that “[s]ituational vulnerability is context specific and is caused or exacerbated by social, political, economic, or environmental factors; it may be short term, intermittent, or enduring.”<sup>103</sup> The *pathogenic* source is to be understood as a subset when precautions have been in place to reduce or eliminate vulnerability but have failed to do so. This highlights that “[t]he notion of pathogenic vulnerability also helps to identify the way that some interventions designed to ameliorate inherent or situational vulnerability can have the paradoxical effect of increasing vulnerability.”<sup>104</sup> The latter also relates to a concurrent phenomenon of unwanted paternalistic behavior, especially in tandem with institutionalized responses to states of vulnerability. Here, one must be careful not to impose on others in unsolicited ways. The *dispositional-occurrent* divide relates to a possibility of vulnerability, or if it was already taking place; and both states relate to the inherent and situational types.<sup>105</sup>

The perspective used in this dissertation views the foundation of vulnerability as being our human corporeality, a shared experience that joins us in intricate ways. Not only does corporeality constitute a foundation for vulnerability, but it is also a mutual constituent in the address of the other regarding subjectivation.

As stated, this understanding of the mutual constitution of subjects—in its modern form—stems from Hegel’s understanding<sup>106</sup> of the act of recognition later used by many others.<sup>107</sup> Here, the subject seeks recognition of the other in a social context, where this Hegelian understanding also encompasses both the subject and the other, in that the need to be recognized is a mutual desire. The struggle, need, and indeed the idea of deserving recognition is a shared phenomenon, which in turn dislocates the subject from its current position, creating a rupture that moves the subject in a direction that has not already formed, since the current position—through the social acting—is not the same. The reciprocal act

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<sup>103</sup> Mackenzie, “The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability,” 39.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. M. J. Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 76–82.

<sup>107</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

of constituent recognition directs the subject to somewhere else, transforming—perhaps even in the slightest way—the subject, which also relates to the change through recognition. In asking to be recognized, the subject, in a sense, wants something different for itself in that there is a direction to be taken by the subject that translates into change.<sup>108</sup> Through the production of the subject, this change, and indeed this challenge, imposes vulnerability, since the heading of the move is never settled. In not knowing, one must be humble in the reciprocal exchange, since the opacity of the subject is very much present here—in the dual reciprocal form from the inside of the subject, from the inside of the other, and from both perspectives through each other. Not knowing a vulnerable connection already constitutes the foundation of the formation. As stated earlier, it could be seen as an ontological claim regarding the pre-social state formation of the subject as created through and with vulnerability present. This also translates to the corporeality of the human condition.

In essence, since our corporeality is constituted so that we can be harmed (we are not invulnerable gods), the very possibility of harm makes us vulnerable subjects. We come into this world as vulnerable, and from the moment of birth—and of course before that as well—we are cast into a reality not chosen by us but brought on us. From this moment on, and while we are part of this world, relationality will be part of what constitutes us. Vulnerability can present itself in an array of settings; and, to state it clearly:

Human life is conditioned by vulnerability. By virtue of our embodiment, human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives. As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and rights abuses. And we are vulnerable to the natural environment and to the impact on the environment of our own, individual and collective, actions and technologies.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 43–44.

<sup>109</sup> Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

Vulnerability does not occur equally in the life of all humans. Here, its prevalence is often considered a negative aspect of the human condition, whereas the opposite concept of *individual resilience* is promoted as a positive aspect. In this study, I wish to challenge the foundational claims of the negative aspects of vulnerability and the current societal production of the opposite ideal as a role model for human strife. The foundational aspect of vulnerability as stemming from human embodiment concerns a dual character of the vulnerability aspect, mainly since it not only produces the possibility of violence—physical or otherwise—but also, at the same time, inadvertently creates the space for moral responsibility—a topic on which I expand later. The unequal distribution of vulnerability concerns the cleavage produced in relation to social identities, where the promotion of individual resilience as an ideal must be seen in relation to the failures of a social community to provide adequate conditions for human flourishing.<sup>110</sup>

In Butler's work, the relationship between vulnerability and *precariousness* is extensive. I share the view of Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds in their account, that:

Butler suggests that precariousness—our human vulnerability to the actions of others—generates ethical obligations to ameliorate suffering and redress the inequities that exacerbate vulnerability. While emphasizing that precariousness is an ontological condition of human life, Butler also stresses that we are not all affected by it to the same degree. Some individuals and populations are disproportionately precarious, namely, those exposed to social and political violence and the ills associated with poverty.<sup>111</sup>

This dissertation highlights the concept of vulnerability, but precariousness also plays a significant role. As Butler argues, precarity refers to the politically induced condition of unequal or differentially allocated degrees of vulnerability.<sup>112</sup> The condition of precarity exposes specific populations to heightened risk, such as disease, poverty, displacement,

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<sup>110</sup> Sarah Bracke, "Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 52–54.

<sup>111</sup> Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, "Introduction: What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?," 3.

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin P. Davis and Eric Aldieri, "Precarity and Resistance: A Critique of Martha Fineman's Vulnerability Theory," *Hypatia* 36, no. 2 (2021): 321–37.

and violence, without adequate protection or redress. I argue that vulnerability is an ontological condition, while precarity is a socially and politically produced condition of the unequal distribution of vulnerability. Even though we all share vulnerability as part of our corporeality, various factors make vulnerability unevenly distributed, with factors such as disease and age, that can stem from randomness, but can also be induced through precarity and uneven social distribution—such as malnourishment as a result of poverty—something that can be socially mitigated.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the intersecting factors contributing to this unequal distribution of vulnerability. These factors may include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, ability, and other social identities. In this context, intersectionality becomes a crucial framework for understanding how different forms of oppression intersect and compound one another to create unique experiences of vulnerability and precarity for marginalized individuals and communities. Most influences are not chosen but are imposed on individuals and communities, which further exacerbates their precarity. To understand fully and address the issues of vulnerability and precarity, it is necessary to engage with the relational aspects of intersecting forms of oppression and power structures that contribute to the production and perpetuation of vulnerability and precarity.

There are several takeaways from this theoretical perspective when performing the study. So, how do the three studied theologians understand vulnerability? The theoretical perspective presented here provides resources for critically engaging with different understandings of vulnerability and with how they relate to other concepts in the theologians' writings.

## 2.2. The Subject and Subjectivity

In this dissertation, I refer to subjectivity as the personal experience of the subject or the self. In contrast, subjectivation refers to the process of forming or making the self in relation to the world.<sup>113</sup> Historically,

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<sup>113</sup> Thus, I do not mean subjectivity as the opposite of objectivity. For a discussion of the objective–subjective dichotomy, please see Arnold Baise, “The Objective–Subjective Dichotomy and Its Use in Describing Probability,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 45, no. 2 (2020): 174–85.



various perspectives have been presented to understand what constitutes the moral subject. For a long time, the idea of *an autonomous self* has been the prevalent understanding, stemming in its more modern form from Descartes.<sup>114</sup> Over time, the older concepts of subjectivity have been heavily criticized. Still, the idea remains essential in many disciplines.

The idea of the subject has been intensely criticized, but never abandoned, at least as a conceptual and textual reference, and today theoretical reflection is attempting to redefine it as a crucial element of social and political theory. Indeed, an idea of the subject is required in order to understand the resistance and the dialectics regarding what creates or surrounds the subject, hence it is necessary to social sciences as a critical and not merely a descriptive discipline.<sup>115</sup>

In this dissertation, I test how subjectivity, as an extension of the subject, presents us not only with questions of agency, mind, feelings, or what we believe *ourselves* to be. I suggest that our subjectivity must transcend the mentioned conceptions, and many like them as well, to form an understanding of the subject not as static beings but as continuously created in an array of dialectical relationships with both “our self” and the world surrounding us. The understandings of the self have varied over time in many academic disciplines,<sup>116</sup> but the concept of a “true” self is challenged by other ideas, such as embodied models and concepts of multiplicity.<sup>117</sup> I also contest the idea of a disembodied, unified self within the discipline of theological ethics. I believe that the Cartesian model should be challenged further, and different venues of critique should be posed.

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<sup>114</sup> René Descartes, “Selections from the Principles of Philosophy,” 1644, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4391/pg4391-images.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Paola Rebughini, “Subject, Subjectivity, Subjectivation,” *Sociopedia.Isa*, 2014, <http://www.sagepub.net/isa/resources/pdf/2nd%20Coll%20Subject,subjectivity.pdf>.

<sup>116</sup> Morris Rosenberg, “Self-Concept Research: A Historical Overview,” *Social Forces* 68, no. 1 (1989): 34–44; Georg Northoff, “Brain and Self – a Neurophilosophical Account,” *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1–12; Terje Sparby, Friedrich Edelhäuser, and Ulrich W. Weger, “The True Self. Critique, Nature, and Method,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 1–10.

<sup>117</sup> Albert Newen, “The Embodied Self, the Pattern Theory of Self, and the Predictive Mind,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 1–14; Stanley B. Klein and Cynthia E. Gangi, “The Multiplicity of Self: Neuropsychological Evidence and Its Implications for the Self as a Construct in Psychological Research,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1191, no. 1 (2010): 1–15.

The following perspective is predominantly based on the writings of Butler, who has written extensively on the moral subject. Also, the sections I address here are not all-encompassing; instead, this perspective is delimited to further the latter part of my study. In her presentation of subject formation, Butler draws on several thinkers, although Foucault plays a prevalent role. Referring to Foucault, Butler states that, in his earlier works, the subject was understood as an “‘effect’ of discourse”; she elaborates later in order to develop a more nuanced position:

The subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms and does so in ways that not only (a) reveal self-constitution to be a kind of *poiesis* but (b) establish selfmaking as part of the broader operation of critique.<sup>118</sup>

Here, the subject delimits itself in relation to the present contextual norms. The context is submerged in power relations, and the contextual scheme is always present in relation to the possibilities of certain framings that are present for the subject formation. This is, among other components, limited by the spatial and temporal historical setting in which it is present. Thus, for the formation of the subject, there is no self-constitution outside the act of subjectivation—that is, no self is *creatio ex nihilo*.

At the limits or barriers of the possibilities of this subject formation, there is inherent plasticity, making the moral subject a possible agent in relation to the testing and challenging of social norms. The challenge presented by the subject cannot transcend the limits per se, but will move the boundaries of them further away and thus change one’s relation to them and, in that, move oneself away. Understood as a form of critique, this notion makes the subject not only an effect of discourse but also modifies—at least to some extent—the discourse itself. The limits may not be readily identifiable, and this type of undertaking of critique may come at a cost. The process of limiting and challenging the boundaries could be understood as an aesthetic undertaking of the self, since the process is related to exterior norms and other limiting factors.<sup>119</sup> One example is the question of women’s ministry in Christian

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<sup>118</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

churches. In many contexts, the ordination of women is viewed as “impossible” and a genuine limiting factor. In challenging such a norm, there might indeed be a cost or the one opposing the view.

The subjectivation as an aesthetic project also relates to the “surface” of where it is located, since the subject is formed through the self-referential process in relation to exterior discourse. Thus, the subjectivation process constantly evolves through the subject, and is to be understood both as the “subject” and the “object” of the process itself, fully encompassed in it. This provides us with a powerful understanding of how to conceptualize the dynamic and transformative nature of subjectivity, as it is not a fixed or predetermined state, but rather an ongoing process that is shaped by contextual factors and power dynamics.

Owing to the limiting factors set both outside the subject and through the subjectivation process, the “freedom” the subject entails is always relationally present, but in the constituent acts of the subject while emerging in relation to the set of norms brought on the subject by the discourse. As stated above, this demeanor involves acts of self-limiting and critical endeavors of the limits and norms surrounding the subject; and, in a paradoxical way, both lay the foundations and provide a mutual fueling of the freedom that is present. Given the constraints already in place, the subject is not self-constituting, but maintains the level of freedom provided because of the lack of freedom that limits the subject’s actions.<sup>120</sup> In relation to the subject emerging in an already constituted world that affects it but does not wholly produce it, the foundation, so to speak, is opaque to the subject itself, since the constraints and norms working on it are not chosen. In a sense, the same is true in the process of subjectivation; since the act of subjectivation is opaque, stemming from constituting relationships that are not chosen, the self is also—at least partly—opaque in relation to itself, since it is not self-emerging. In understanding subjectivity as a dynamic and transformative process, it is important to recognize the mutually constitutive relationship between the subject and the norms and constraints imposed on it. These norms and constraints are not simply external forces acting on the subject; they also shape and influence the subject’s sense of self and identity.

For Butler, this is an important aspect of why people are morally responsible to one another and of what constitutes part of what she

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

names “ethical bonds.”<sup>121</sup> It is in this social, relational area that one can give an account of oneself that is reflexive in character, both chosen and not, and thus free and unfree at the same time.<sup>122</sup> Here, the norms and power relations exceed the subject, and in one instance they exceed the regulatory effects it has on the subjectivation process and the relation to the other.

The latter relates to how one is to treat the other, although it might be more apt to speak of it as how one is to meet the other, since the process of seeing or meeting the other is at least partly orchestrated by the norms that exceed the subject. Butler refers to this condition as “presocial.”<sup>123</sup> To convey this in relation to the social sphere, it both precedes it and is constituted by the social relations of the subject. There is no question of a simple either/or understanding, as the process is part of the constituting factors and the preceding ones. In a sense, there can be no “start” in this understanding, since the situation of the constitution is always placed temporally and spatially in the world.

Alongside this understanding, a cleavage is present in the accounts given by the subject that are directed toward the other. As the account is given, through discourse, it is not part of the self; they cannot fully express the self. Instead, they are presented through the limits of discourse at any given time. These limits are part of the same constituting factors that limit and precede the subject in the subject formation; and in that regard, whenever one gives an account of oneself as a response to the question *Who are you?*, the subjectivation process is in action. Thus, a normative dimension is present, since the account presented by the subject entails morality—forming a moral subject. Since the external constituent’s limit is the possibility of the account given and precedes and mediates it, the account given is never fully the expression of the subject. As the subject speaks, the address is what carries the message that no account is given outside of what limits it.<sup>124</sup> Since no account is fully owned by the subject, which correlates with the opacity mentioned earlier, Butler insists that this position should generate humility and forgiveness both toward the self and the other, since one

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. A similar account is presented by the Danish ethicist K. E. Løgstrup in K. E. Løgstrup, *Det etiske kravet*, trans. Margareta Brandby-Cöster (Göteborg: Daidalos, 1994).

<sup>122</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

cannot be responsible for what one cannot have known.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, the limits of the subject's self-knowledge should not be used aggressively to deviate from responsibility; instead, this limited self-knowledge correlates with the need to feel responsible for the other, since the other also cannot know what is opaque to them. In this way, the address of speech will be at least partly open to interpretation—but not radically so—since the limits of discourse are always present. This mediating act of speech—as directed to a subject in the form of *Who are you?*—through discourse, as mutually producing subjects, it can be thought of as a double reflexive process, in which open-ended relationships form, and in which pre-formed relationships exceed the contextual setting and are reminiscent of the subject's account. Still, the subject's account can never be the same as the account given by the subject.

Butler uses the Levinasian concept of *the other* and *the face* to induce a degree of responsibility that stems from seeing the other. For Levinas, the face grounds the ethical relationship and responsibility for the self. In the interview with Levinas, in answer to the question, “What role does your analysis of the ‘face’ (*visage*) of the other play in this disruption of ontology?”<sup>126</sup> he claims that:

The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility. As such, the face of the other is verticality and uprightness; it spells a relation of rectitude. The face is not in front of me (*en face de moi*) but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. Secondly, the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill. In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other. The celebrated ‘right to existence’ that Spinoza called the *conatus essendi* and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility is challenged by the relation to the face. Accordingly, my duty to respond to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival, *le droit vitale*. My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>126</sup> Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 23.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 23–24. This is preceded by a longer discussion in which the two preceding questions and answers are as follows: “[Question:] Is it possible to conceive of an eschatology of noncoincidence wherein man and God could coexist eternally without fusing into oneness?”

This understanding places the importance of the other's well-being on the subject. It translates from the shared reality of relationality to a form of dual exposure to the other, in that there is both a demand on the self and, at the same time, an urge to destroy the other. Later, after theorizing on totality as a mode of power production and on the need for a negative counterpart that surpasses the aspect of being only a negation of the concept itself, infinity, Levinas states: "This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder.'"<sup>128</sup> Here, Levinas mingles the freedom of the subject with a primordial urge to destroy the other, which is a necessity for ethical valiance to be possible. Without the other, there can be no self; and the demand on the self is created in the wake of the other by looking upon the face. Butler uses it so that:

I would like to consider the "face," the notion introduced by Emmanuel Levinas, to explain how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse. [...] It seems to be that the "face" of what he calls the "Other" makes an ethical demand upon me, and yet we do not know

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[Answer:] But why eschatology? Why should we wish to reduce time to eternity? Time is the most profound relationship that man can have with God, precisely as a going towards God. There is an excellence in time that would be lost in eternity. To desire eternity is to desire to perpetuate oneself, to go on living as oneself, to *be* always. Can one conceive of an eternal life that would not suspend time or reduce it to a contemporaneous presence? To accept time is to accept death as the impossibility of presence. To be in eternity is to be *one*, to be *oneself* eternally. To be in time is to be for God (*être à Dieu*), a perpetual leave taking (*adieu*).

[Question:] But how can one be for God or go towards God as the absolutely other? Is it by going towards the human other?

[Answer:] Yes, and it is essential to point out that the relation implied in the preposition *towards* (*à*) is ultimately a relation derived from time. Time fashions man's relation to the other, and to the absolutely other or God, as a diachronic relation irreducible to correlation. 'Going towards God' is not to be understood here in the classical ontological sense of a return to, or reunification with, God as the beginning or end of temporal existence. 'Going towards God' is meaningless unless seen in terms of my primary going towards the other person. I can only go towards God by being ethically concerned by and for the other person. I am not saying that ethics predisposes belief. On the contrary, belief presupposes ethics as the disruption of our being-in-the-world that opens us to the other. The ethical exigency to be responsible for the other undermines the ontological primacy of the meaning of being; it unsettles the natural and political positions we have taken up in the world and predisposes us to a meaning that is other than being, that is otherwise than being (*autrement qu'être*)." Ibid., 23.

<sup>128</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 199.

which demand it makes. The “face” of the other cannot be read for a secret meaning, and the imperative it delivers is not immediately translatable into a prescription that might be linguistically formulated and followed.<sup>129</sup>

Butler adds that, to respond to the face of another, we should not focus on the precariousness of oneself or of life itself, but rather on the precariousness of the actual other. This is what makes the response to the particular other important for ethics.<sup>130</sup> elaborating further on the views of Levinas, Butler refers to his concept of ““a passivity before passivity”,”<sup>131</sup> which is to be understood not as opposing terms of activity; instead, it refers to the precondition for the regulatory act found in the active-passive voice present in what is usually referred to as ontology, which is present in everyday life, in that,

What cross-cuts this field of ontology synchronically is the preontological condition of a passivity for which no conversion into its opposite is possible. To understand this, we must think of a susceptibility to others that is unwilling, unchosen, that is a condition of our responsiveness to others, even a condition of our responsibility *for* them. It means, among other things, that this susceptibility designates a nonfreedom and, paradoxically, it is on the basis of this susceptibility over which we have no choice that we become responsible for others.<sup>132</sup>

Again, the unfreedom or “not choosing” is what creates the space in which one emerges in relation to the other. As already ruled out earlier, this is not to be confused with the idea that the subject is an effect of the discourse. Also, the address by another, through discourse, is as cut off as the address by the subject itself—although it is not only constituted by it, but not constituted outside it either, since:

[...] the pre-emergent “I” that I am is nothing more at this point than a radical susceptibility subject to impingement by the Other. If I become responsible only through being acted on by an Other, that is because the “I” first comes into being as a “me” through being acted upon by an Other, and this primary impingement is already and from the start an ethical interpellation.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 131.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>131</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 87.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–88.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

This relation can be translated into a moral understanding or perhaps even into a moral position that the person cannot avoid—it is already chosen, imposed by the social acts of the other, but nonetheless univocally responded to by the subject. Here, the response as a narrative is also part of the setting in which the subject formation takes place, emerging in a spatiotemporal setting, but only as an act of expression by the subject, delimited in the making, but still—in the paradoxical sense—transcending the space given to her. The interpellation is in part related to the corporeality of human existence, creating a shared vulnerability at the very core of the subjectivation process. It precedes us in that it is projected upon us in a non-chosen way while we continue the process for as long as we live. This continuation of the subjectivation is ambivalent, making a case for the shared vulnerability and founding a moral stance in which one must heed the other.<sup>134</sup>

Continuing the above theme, Haker suggests it is unfortunate that the current ethical discourse in the West, which is still bound by the idea of autonomy as being separate from one another, does not provide ample room for what she calls “ethics after autonomy.”<sup>135</sup> A constitutive characteristic of identity is that there is no stable and “strong” self. Thus, the fragile moral self can only be understood in relation to others. Crucial to this notion of not having a stable self is the aspect of vulnerability, a concept similar to fragility. By retaining the notion through a discursive practice, one is engaged in practices even before a conscious act of morals might be performed. Emerging through a reflexive process in which the subjectivity of the self is both constituted and denied at the same time, creating a paradoxical state of being and in-being; the self thus both holds and is deprived of an (absolute) subjectivity.<sup>136</sup> This understanding resonates with the account of opaqueness toward the self, since the process of subjectivation is not self-constituting. This dialectical process is not limited here; instead it is projected on to an understanding of others in relation to the self, informing relational responsibility.<sup>137</sup> Drawing on Foucault, Haker stresses the interplay between aesthetics and the creation of the self as one aspect of the dialectical process, in which the former produces identity and the latter forms a *moral*

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>135</sup> Haker, “The Fragility of the Moral Self,” 359–60.

<sup>136</sup> Haker, *Moralische Identität*, 13–17.

<sup>137</sup> Haker, “Vulnerable Agency: Concepts and Contexts,” 14, 27–28.



*self*. Also, drawing on Paul Ricœur's work of *crossed reference* between fiction and reality, the self is understood in relation to the discourse in which it emerges.

The concept of vulnerable agency challenges the traditional idea of autonomy in ethics in several ways. Vulnerable agency recognizes that autonomy concerns independence, relationality, and mutual vulnerability.<sup>138</sup> The concept challenges the conventional view of autonomy as complete control over one's actions and decisions. Instead, it acknowledges vulnerability and openness to others as an integral aspect of agency. Humans are not isolated, and the shared interconnectedness is a significant part of what constitutes us as humans.<sup>139</sup> This includes the social settings and contexts that are often complex and multifaceted. By engaging in a discursive understanding of structures, Haker argues that vulnerability is not simply a state of weakness or fragility, but rather a fundamental aspect of human existence and agency mitigated in specific contexts.

Further, vulnerable agency sheds light on how structural vulnerabilities, such as discrimination and marginalization, can limit individuals' autonomy and agency. Haker calls for a deeper understanding of how social factors impact one's ability to act autonomously.<sup>140</sup> By integrating vulnerability into the concept of agency, the traditional understanding of autonomy is expanded to include the complexities of moral identity; and vulnerable agency recognizes the dynamic nature of moral interactions and the role of vulnerability in shaping ethical responses.<sup>141</sup> Vulnerable agency thus contests the individualistic focus of traditional autonomy by emphasizing the importance of social relationships, care, and solidarity in moral decision-making. It highlights the interconnectedness of agency and vulnerability.<sup>142</sup> This understanding of vulnerable agency disrupts the notion that autonomy is solely about individual independence and control, and instead recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of individuals in social contexts. As we can see, a keen focus on autonomy adds to the discussion after Butler, and I argue that this theoretical understanding provides crucial instruments to approach the theologians studied in this dissertation. What is their understanding of vulnerability, and how do they relate to autonomy?

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<sup>138</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 152.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

In her work, Haker highlights the importance of recognizing the aspect of response-ability in moral identity. “Response-ability” refers to the idea that individuals have the capacity to act and to bear the responsibility to respond to others ethically. Haker argues that response-ability is an essential component of moral agency.<sup>143</sup> Haker also suggests that moral agency is not only about autonomous action, but also involves being impressionable and vulnerable to the actions of others.<sup>144</sup> This vulnerability to the other’s actions is a crucial aspect of moral interaction.<sup>145</sup> In moral interactions, it is vital to acknowledge the other’s otherness and their plea to be cared for. This recognition goes beyond self-interest: it requires understanding the inevitable gap between oneself and the other.<sup>146</sup> Haker argues further that moral interactions are dynamic and involve uncertainties, passivity, and active responses. This dynamic interplay between passivity and activity on both sides challenges static roles and encourages a more nuanced understanding of moral engagement.<sup>147</sup> By broadening the concept of agency to include vulnerability, moral identity becomes more comprehensive, and recognizes the importance of social relationships, care, and solidarity when making moral decisions. This also concerns questions of responses and of how one responds to the impingements facing the subject.

With reference to Butler, the dialectical relationship between the self and the doing of a moral self is always constrained—that is, the reflexive self and the institutions that impose norms on the individual. This duality entraps both positions. From an aesthetic point of view, part of subject formation relates to the production of identity as a narrative, which, on Butler’s account, renders a moral self who is not responsible *for* herself, but rather for the *story* of herself, as presented above. Preceding the question of socially imposed structures, which can indeed be violent, the formation of the self (or the moral self, in Haker’s terminology) should be seen as a maintenance project rather than as a stable essence, by forming the question of “Who are you?” instead of focusing on *what* one is. In believing this, one escapes the possibility of violent

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 233–34.

<sup>144</sup> Haker makes this especially clear when discussing unaccompanied migrant children in relation to human rights. For a thorough discussion of this topic, please see Hille Haker and Molly Greening, eds., *Unaccompanied Migrant Children: Social, Legal, and Ethical Perspectives* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019).

<sup>145</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 238.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

ethics, since one always must be wary of the other in relation to oneself owing to the shared vulnerability of “unchosenness.” Since this is an unstable position, the fragility produces a form of self-vulnerability that must be considered when assessing the production of morals. The production of the self is a constant dialectic process of narration. Narrative forms through discourse: it is mediated through language; but aesthetics are present nevertheless, as long as the process is not to be understood as forming an authentic “self,” according to the previous remark. Therefore, I refer to “subjectivity” as concerning the production of the self and to “subjectivation” as the process in which it is constantly and dialectically formed.

The formation of the self is not a self-contained, individualistic endeavor. Instead, it is deeply intertwined with relationality, vulnerability, and power dynamics. This understanding challenges modernist Cartesian notions of individual agency, and highlights the role of external influences in shaping personal identity. Thus, the theoretical framework presented here emphasizes the complex and multifaceted nature of identity formation, and acknowledges that individual choices or experiences alone do not determine it, but that identity formation is also shaped by societal norms, cultural values, and power structures. By drawing on the work of Butler and Haker, we can see that subjectivity is not an inherent, stable essence, but rather a performative construction that is continually enacted and negotiated through linguistic and discursive practices.<sup>148</sup> This applies to all areas in which the subject is formed through discourse.

As already stated, Butler’s and Haker’s understanding of vulnerability and of its dialectical relationship to autonomy is used to interpret and scrutinize views of the human in the feminist ethics of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann.

### 2.3. Relationality

In light of the previous discussion, I argue that it is crucial that relationality play an integral role in understanding the dynamics of subjectivity, vulnerability, and induced precarity. Ideas about relationality emphasize the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals and

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<sup>148</sup> Rob Cover, “Performativity, Communication, and Selfhood,” in *Digital Identities*, ed. Rob Cover (San Diego: Academic Press, 2016), 29–70.

communities, highlighting that power relations are shaped by and negotiated through social interactions and discourse. By examining the interplay between subjectivity, vulnerability, and power within relational frameworks, we could gain a deeper understanding of how individuals are situated in social structures and of how these structures shape their experiences of vulnerability and precarity. These are sources of power that could be explored theologically and morally; and the theologians studied in this dissertation provide resources of value for a broader discussion of these topics.

When it comes to subjects, we are inherently linked. As Butler states: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”<sup>149</sup> Although Butler writes on grief here, the perspective she presents could be transferred to other realms as well. It is not limited to this sphere of human conditions only, but instead extends to the concept of relationality.

But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation.<sup>150</sup>

Here the concept of relationality relates to several spheres of human life: the shared condition of dependency, the social extension, and the formation of political and moral responsibility toward one another. What sets apart the relational aspects from the concepts presented earlier in this dissertation is the emphasis on the shared reality as a constituent. This perspective flows through the other concepts as well. In the case of subject formation, the focus was, as expected, the sole subject at hand, whereas here the focus is on the collective formation and aggregate identity that goes beyond the individual subject—even as constituted in a relational fashion. Because the subjects are part of a larger social aggregate, this sociality creates the space for political engage-

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<sup>149</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–23.

ment. The subjects' shared vulnerability provides a foundation of mutuality that could translate into resisting asymmetrical power relations.<sup>151</sup>

In light of this discussion, I return to the importance of corporeality as fundamental to subjectivity. Naturally, corporality is an essential issue for Christian theologians, and I investigate how Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann interpret it and relate it to social relationality. My starting point is Butler when she states:

The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. Indeed, if I deny that prior to the formation of my "will," my body related me to others whom I did not choose to have in proximity to myself, if I build a notion of "autonomy" on the basis of the denial of this sphere of a primary and unwilled physical proximity with others, then am I denying the social conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy?<sup>152</sup>

The answer to the latter question should be in the affirmative, but in a sense that interrelates the corporal subject to the social sphere. The subjectivation process, in the formation of the self, the constituent by others, through the shared vulnerability, creates the space for hindering the subject from any attempt to separate itself from discourse. The connection between the subject and discourse, as earlier, is reciprocal while still not manifesting itself as equal in all relations; it works differently, depending on the present contextual setting, and my constituent is not the same as the constituent imposed on others by me. Discourse works structurally by limiting the factors of what could be perceived and thought of in each context; and experiences and traditions all play their part. Since there are many relations at the same time, they interact with and change one another. Social extensions and formations go beyond the sole connections of two individuals, and it is in the multitude of the social that the larger formation takes place. Aggregate aspects, through

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<sup>151</sup> Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>152</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.

social formation, interplay with other aspects of society, especially institutions. Institutions such as governments shape the world in many senses, transforming power relations and creating spaces for social and subject formation,<sup>153</sup> where social formation is understood as a broader category that includes, for example, social movements. Just like subject formation, social formation functions in a similar manner, albeit on a different scale, with a larger number of relations present.

One aspect of the importance of social formation is the duality of framing in relation to the discursive setting in which the subject formation is possible and to the conditions that apply and situate the subject as a moral agent. Here, the moral position of a subject is both self-constituting and mediated through the discourse, although not entirely limited by it. Instead, the moral agent's responsibility for the actions taken is shared between the subject and her surroundings. This is not to relieve anyone of their responsibility; but one has to consider under which circumstances negative or hostile actions are made, especially in the area of violence against others. Butler states:

Those who commit acts of violence are surely responsible for them; they are not dupes or mechanisms of an impersonal social force, but agents with responsibility. On the other hand, these individuals are formed, and we would be making a mistake if we reduced their actions to purely self-generated acts of will or symptoms of individual pathology or "evil." Both the discourse of individualism and of moralism (understood as the moment in which morality exhausts itself in public acts of denunciation) assume that the individual is the first link in a causal chain that forms the meaning of accountability.<sup>154</sup>

The relational aspects thus interplay in the formation of the subject, as seen earlier, as well as being the delimiting factor in which one can perform actions and make moral judgments. This theoretical perspective is aimed at asking the questions about the conditions under which the individuals acting negatively against others are formed. In a sense, this is a social critique that precedes the questions of *why* or *how* contingent or subsequent patterns of actions are to be recognized, but asks rather how the framing and discursive formation relate to the production of both society and individuals. Butler proposes that we understand the

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<sup>153</sup> Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London; New York, NY: Verso, 2016).

<sup>154</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 15–16.

dialectical relation between social conditions on the one hand and moral responsibility on the other as conditionality:

To ask these questions is not to say that the conditions are at fault rather than the individual. It is, rather, to rethink the relation between conditions and acts. Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned.<sup>155</sup>

Rethinking conditions and acts in this way opens the space for a deeper and more profound critique of the setting in which negative deeds arise and are performed. This understanding also resonates with the idea of relational autonomy, in which the subject is formed in relation to others and to the contextual setting. Butler's approach means, however, that persons ought to extend listening to others who are often unable to speak.<sup>156</sup> In this particular regard, Butler is challenged by others. Profoundly unequal power relations make speech impossible for the subjugated, as eloquently proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>157</sup> For Spivak, subalternity cannot be resolved by means of listening. This critique is serious; and I approach it, although indirectly, when interpreting and scrutinizing the positions of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann. Are there theological resources we could use in order to recognize profound forms of subalternity?

I argue that an important notion concerns the dialectical relationships between social formation and subjectivities. This also translates into the ethical responsibility that is created by the relational aspect of both subject and social formation in the discursive setting. One cannot think of the ethical question in isolation; rather, the question of responsibility can only arise in a relational way,<sup>158</sup> when one understands that the subject is intertwined with the context, still not only bound by it, and when the dialectical formation goes beyond the notion of individuality as detachment.

Using Levinasian phenomenology, we could state that moral obligation moves beyond the self, in that the vulnerability is shared by all. This also limits the freedom of the subject in the relationship created by the constituting factors of the other—that is:

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 17–18.

<sup>157</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Communications and Culture (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).

<sup>158</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46.

To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom of a “moving force,” this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder. The “You shalt not commit murder” which delineates the face in which the Other is produced submits my freedom to judgment. Then the free adherence to truth, an activity of knowledge, the free will which, according to Descartes, in certitude adheres to a dear idea, seeks a reason which does not coincide with the radiance of this clear and distinct idea itself. A clear idea which imposes itself by its clarity calls for a strictly personal work of a freedom, a solitary freedom that does not put itself in question, but can at most suffer a failure. In morality alone it is put in question. Morality thus presides over the work of truth.<sup>159</sup>

Butler has adopted this thinking from Levinas, and in her writings, this understanding is directly intertwined with vulnerability, especially in relation to the self, but also the shared vulnerability that stems from human corporeality. One could see vulnerability as the foundation for ethical responsibility, a shared reality concerning our corporeality. This, in relation to the opaqueness of human conditions, should induce humility and the pursuit of equality—justificatory and distributive, among others. Since the body is formed in a social context, as well as the subject, the relational dependency on others cannot be underestimated. By being formed by relationships that are partly or mostly opaque to us, we are enmeshed in a web of relationships that make us dependent on one another, since our very formation is relationally constituted. There are ethical implications from this because of the relationality of the subject. By being formed through relationships, mostly unchosen, we are opaque to ourselves since we cannot know how they, in turn, were constituted. Following this, the subject’s ethical bonds are in place of this very opacity, since we have obligations toward others—but cannot know (fully) the source of those relationships.<sup>160</sup> This should be seen in relation to the dependency of others, where vulnerability is one complementary factor.

Vulnerability as a shared force can constitute subjects that, although formed by the discourse, long to transcend the limits of the discourse for herself and for others. This is often seen at the fringes of dispositional accounts relating to the formation itself in a dialectical self-referring process.

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<sup>159</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 303–4.

<sup>160</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 20.



Thus, I believe that Butler's dialectical approach to the moral subject takes social injustices seriously and opts for change. Although the subject is destabilized in her theory, it is still the responsibility of persons to challenge contextual injustices. The relational subject (this new form of moral subject) must, in a sense, always be political in that it is not merely an effect of discourse. Drawing on the relations with others, especially when seeing what is not visible through conventional norms, social injustices can be revealed and scrutinized. Thus, one can reshape the account of vulnerability into political or ethical projections.<sup>161</sup> As the subject is changed, it can, in turn, affect discourse—albeit often to a very small degree. A crucial aspect could be social formation, where the dialectics of subjects can act together to bring about larger political change.

In what follows I interpret and scrutinize the feminist ethics of Parsons, Keller and Ackermann using the understanding of relationality presented above. How do Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann understand relationality? How do they frame the dialectics of subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability? And, most importantly, do their understandings provide potent resources for emancipation from patriarchal structures? To answer this question, I need criteria to judge “emancipatory potential.” In a context of feminist ethics it is reasonable to look for such criteria in a theory of power, to which I now turn.

## 2.4. Power

Understanding power and how it operates and manifests is essential for any critical feminist inquiry. Feminist ethics wish to reveal and dismantle unjust power structures; and, to do so, power as a phenomenon must be thoroughly studied. Understanding power and how it perpetuates subjugation is crucial for assessing the critical potential for emancipation of the resources offered by the three theologians being studied.

Power is an ever-present phenomenon that permeates the social fabric and shapes the dynamics of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. Power operates as a pervasive force that influences the construction of subjective identities, the experience of vulnerability, and the formation of relational dynamics—intersecting perspectives in the work of

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<sup>161</sup> Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 12–14.

Michel Foucault.<sup>162</sup> Feminists have long critiqued power structures and explored how power operates in various contexts, including interpersonal relationships, institutions, and society at large.<sup>163</sup> They have highlighted the ways in which power can be oppressive, hierarchical, and asymmetrical, leading to inequalities and injustices. Different models of power have been explored and suggested for understanding power dynamics, including the concept of power-over and power-with.<sup>164</sup> I use an understanding of power that stems from Foucault and his extensive work on power relations,<sup>165</sup> although the view presented here relies mainly on his later work. A prime reason for my choice is the integration of subjectivity in Foucault's understanding of power.<sup>166</sup> Subjectivity was always at the fore for Foucault, and, in many regards, he made subjects visible.<sup>167</sup> Butler also uses Foucault, which makes integration with other parts of the theoretical framework viable.<sup>168</sup>

Power is a fundamental aspect of social formations and political action, and is intricately linked to subjects and their vulnerabilities.<sup>169</sup> In my view, it is important to recognize that power is not a fixed or static entity, but rather something that operates and circulates within discourses and relationships. Drawing on the relational and intersectional perspective, power is understood as a dynamic force that shapes not only individual subjectivity but also the social structures and systems

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<sup>162</sup> Jonathan Schofer, "Subject Formation and Subjectivity," in *Encyclopedia of Religious Ethics*, ed. William Schweiker (Wiley, 2022), 1052–58; Fiona Walls, "Of Subjects, Subjectivity, and Subjectification: Subjects Made Visible," in *Mathematical Subjects*, by Fiona Walls (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2009), 3–12.

<sup>163</sup> Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power."

<sup>164</sup> Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

<sup>165</sup> Gary Gutting and Johanna Oksala, "Michel Foucault," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/foucault/>.

<sup>166</sup> Neve Gordon, "Foucault's Subject: An Ontological Reading," *Polity* 31, no. 3 (1999): 395–414; Couze Venn, "Narrative Identity, Subject Formation, and the Transfiguration of Subjects," *Subjectivity* 13, no. 1–2 (2020): 39–59.

<sup>167</sup> Walls, "Of Subjects, Subjectivity, and Subjectification."

<sup>168</sup> Kim Sang Ong-Van-Cung, "Critique et Subjectivation. Foucault et Butler Sur Le Sujet," *Actuel Marx* n° 49, no. 1 (2011): 148–61.

<sup>169</sup> Aniceto Masferrer and Emilio García-Sánchez, eds., *Human Dignity of the Vulnerable in the Age of Rights: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, vol. 55, *Ius Gentium: Comparative Perspectives on Law and Justice* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

in which individuals are situated. In this sense, when I write, for example, of “the subjugated” or from “a subjugated position,” this should be seen as part of an intersectional understanding. I do not endorse a binary understanding in which a person is either subjugated or privileged. Instead, various dynamics and relations enmesh humans, and—depending on the perspective—a person can be simultaneously privileged and subjugated. However, from a structural point of view, there are often prevalent themes and interconnections that restricts persons to certain positions of power in their context.<sup>170</sup>

Here, power is primarily considered a relational phenomenon, always present and manifesting through the discourse and context relating to the subjects it encompasses. Foucault defines power as a complex network of relationships between individuals or groups rather than as a single force. He emphasizes that power is not simply a possession but a system of interactions that shape and influence behavior. According to Foucault, power relations differ from mere communication relationships, as they have a distinct nature that can generate effects in the realm of power. He suggests that, to analyze power effectively, one should focus on understanding *how* power is exercised rather than attempting to define its origins. This approach allows for a critical examination of power dynamics, emphasizing that power only exists when enacted, and that it is always situated in broader contexts of possibilities and social structures.<sup>171</sup>

As stated, Foucault has worked thoroughly on the intersection of power and subjectivity. By acknowledging that power works on and structures subjects both from within and without, the perspectives of Foucault enhance our understanding of the power–subject relation. This becomes especially prominent concerning relationality, where power structures subjectivity from within and without. For Foucault,

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and

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<sup>170</sup> For further perspectives on this topic, please see, for example, the section on “Intersectional Approaches” in Allen, “Feminist Perspectives on Power.”

<sup>171</sup> Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 217–21.

tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.<sup>172</sup>

Power is mainly thought of as a technique—that is, how power relations operate rather than “what they are”; and in this case, it concerns mainly political power as instantiated through discourse. This focus on power as a dimension of subjectivity also relates to discourse, since the formation of the subject—In Foucault’s words, *truth regimes*—are part of the discourse that prevails through the subject formation, which she imposes on herself, always in mediation with the discourse as an external projection area. In this two-tier presentation, inter- and intra-power are not separate phenomena; instead, they are two aspects of the same process in which the mediation is located. The context, discourse, and thus truth regimes interplay in an intricate way that is imposed on the body before the subjectivation process can be internalized by the self. Therefore, the saturated setting in which the subject’s *loci* are to be found cannot be abstracted from this spatiotemporal in relation to the body *or* subject formation, since it always affects it, through it, and is affected by it.

Continuing this perspective: “The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others.”<sup>173</sup> Here, power is directly presented as situational, while power can also be understood more abstractly. The former version is most fruitful for social critique when focusing on the actual settings in which the subject is construed. The latter, a more abstract concept of power, can still be present as a possibility in and through different structures manifesting themselves in the world. Still, they are not per se what most often pertains in the subsequent discussion. Another aspect of power analyzed by Foucault relates to the concept of vulnerability by emphasizing that subjugation is not a matter of rational choice.<sup>174</sup> Power does not function as a voluntary transference of rights, nor in that many position their agency in the hands of a few. Of course, it could also take this form; but that would be an exception. This also ties in with the subjectivation process presented earlier, since this *unchosenness* is saturated with power relations that are at first external to the subject but later are often self-imposed as well by the

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 219–20.

acceptance of the truth regime at hand. Power is exercised; that is, it manifests through relations and human actions. The multitude of possible actions is affected by the discourse, although their manifestation relates to subjects—individual and collective—and the actuality of power manifests itself in the actions that structure others' actions. Power can never be present in a unitary form.

On the other hand a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that “the other” (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up.<sup>175</sup>

Such an understanding of power stands in contrast to violence, which acts on something that is passive. This is crucial, since power relations, uneven as they may be, must, in a sense, also be part of the discourse that forms the subject and allows it to act—thus being part of what constitutes the subject. By being part of the power relation, there is space for the subject to act, and this cannot be done in isolation. Owing to the formation through discourse, the physical structure and institutions can enhance the inequality; nonetheless, power is relational and, from time to time, also made possible precisely by the subject to whom the exercise of power is directed.<sup>176</sup> This could be through consent, previously or permanently given—with or against a better understanding—which does not change the formulation of it. Harsh as it may seem, this creates the possibility of an ethical answer to concrete forms of power or resistance.

This tangible understanding of power in relation to the actions of subjects that structure other actions as “actions on actions” manifests itself in the relational sense—not as an abstract entity “above” the subjects at hand, but always between them.<sup>177</sup> Power is not a theory or a concept, but rather a present condition that structures *actions through other actions* in a relational way. The agency of the subjects from which the actions are directed and received is conditioned by the discourse—

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>176</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, 1st American ed (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980), 72, 74, 89–90, 96–98, 104–8.

<sup>177</sup> Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 222–23.

but not an effect of it, in the same sense that the subject is not an effect of it—in what is possible. Given the performativity, the discourse is unstable, and the multitude of actions present in it that conform to it and at the same time constitute it are also what makes it dependable and susceptible to change. Change is present, although the direction may also change in relation to the actions and visions of the subjects. Those who form a society or context can take part in various forms of political formation. In each political formation, change is possible, and the political process itself becomes a part of the discourse, in turn transforming the subjects. The existing power relations of any society are not a necessity per se, and fatalism should not be seen as an adequate response; instead, the ongoing engagement in disseminating power relations lies at the very core as a political task.<sup>178</sup>

This relational understanding of power emphasizes the human agency in both shaping and resisting power relations.<sup>179</sup> Therefore, I believe that using Foucault's approach is suitable when I interpret and scrutinize the feminist ethics of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann. Power is of the essence for feminist theorizing; and the perspective on power as a relational and ongoing process might highlight how power operates in different theological contexts. Furthermore, recognizing power as a relational and ongoing process challenges the static and hierarchical notions that are often associated with power in theological discourse. This is of the essence, since the feminist theological struggle frequently seeks to resist power hierarchies in churches and in society. It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge the relational nature of power and the agency of individuals to challenge and transform these power dynamics. By revealing how power manifests and is structured in different contexts, new insights could be gained into how power operates and into how it could be resisted and transformed.

So, how do Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann understand power? How do their understandings of power affect, and how are they affected by, their views of ethics, gender, and, most importantly, human subjectivity? These questions are posed throughout the study, as described further in my method.

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 140–42.

## 2.5. Method

With the theoretical framework in mind, I study how each theologian views the human and what emancipatory potential there is in their positions. The view of the human of the theologians studied here comprises the most interesting perspectives on subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality—or so I argue. I interpret and scrutinize the normative ethical models that Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann defend. How do models such as the naturalistic ethics of virtue in Parsons or a critical theory of justice in Ackermann relate to different views of the human? Naturally, I also discuss each theologian's understanding of gender, and relate each of them to the dynamics of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality.

I will interpret and analyze the ethical resources in the material. As an ethicist working at the intersection between philosophy and theology, I am especially interested in the theological dimensions of the feminist ethics in Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann.

By interpreting and critically evaluating three distinct understandings of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality, I aim through this study to assess their potential to contribute to practices of emancipation of marginalized individuals and communities.

I perform an in-depth reading of the theologians' works and offer interpretations of their positions on gender, ethical normative theory, their view of humans, and Christian feminist theology. In some cases, I suggest one of several possible interpretations of articulated positions, such as Parsons's view of Christian feminist ethics. In other cases, such as Ackermann's normative ethics, it involves reconstructing a theoretical model from her writings. Additionally, the theoretical framework allows for an exploration of subjectivity and vulnerability within the theologians' perspectives, such that the theological framework can provide insights into how subjectivity and vulnerability intersect with ethics. Both Butler and Haker provide resources for the moral implications of ethics.<sup>180</sup>

Several questions are posed to the theologians to clarify my interpretations. These questions are derived from the outlined theoretical perspectives, and all relate to the theologians' understanding of the human.

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<sup>180</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7–8, 18, 20, 31, 85, 89–103, 135–36; Haker, *Moralische Identität*.

1. *What normative ethical model is defended by the theologians?* 2. *What kind of feminist ethics is advocated?* 3. *How is gender understood?* 4. *What characterizes the view of the human being presented?* 5. *How are subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability understood?* 6. *What theological contributions to ethics do the three theologians make?*

Let me elaborate on each of these questions in turn. Regarding ethics, it is crucial to understand how each theologian views the discipline, especially from her theological perspective. I interpret the three theologians' ethics and suggest how their normative ethical positions are to be understood. This includes reconstructing their positions when necessary and showing how the normative ethical position of each is constituted. I also discuss and compare their different ethical positions in relation to the questions mentioned earlier. In my analysis, I use normative ethical models such as deontological ethics (such as Kantianism), consequentialism (such as utilitarianism), and virtue ethics (such as Aristotelianism). I also include care ethics as a form of virtue ethics, which is the common typology.<sup>181</sup> These can vary and intersect with other understandings, such as focusing on humans only (anthropocentrism) or including a broader scope. Natural law theories also play a role in some theological and ethical models, while others opt for a constructivist approach. Other understandings include seeing ethics as a critical discipline in which the subjugated is placed in the center. I interpret, reconstruct (when necessary), and outline the normative ethics proposed by each theologian. These understandings also intersect with other positions and beliefs, such as how they view what is human, the understanding of gender, power relations, and theological understandings.

For many feminists and feminist theologians, there is no difference between *ethics* and *feminist ethics*, and the terms could be conflated. From an analytical standpoint, I believe that studying them as two, often integrated, parts provides greater clarity—especially concerning how ethics as a discipline has often focused on perspectives that render any feminist notion invisible.

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<sup>181</sup> Elena Namli and Carl-Henric Grenholm, *Etik* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2019), 51–54. However, there is a discussion on whether care ethics is a form of virtue ethics or a distinct normative theory. For a brief discussion of this, please see Maureen Sander-Staudt, “The Unhappy Marriage of Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 4 (2006): 21–39; Ruth Groenhout, “Virtue and a Feminist Ethics of Care,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 481–501; Maureen Sander-Staudt, “Care Ethics,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed September 13, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/care-ethics/>.



Feminist ethics is a field of inquiry that has developed further in the last few decades, drawing on traditions of feminist philosophy and feminist theology to revise and re-envision existing ethical theories, perspectives, and approaches. When exploring the feminist ethics of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann, I try to unpack exactly what makes their ethics feminist and how this relates to their understandings of gender, and how they understand what it is to be human. By emphasizing the feminist character of their ethics, I foreground how their approaches contest mainstream, often masculinist, understandings of ethics. I study how they advocate a perspective centered on the lives and experiences of women and other marginalized groups in their writings, which is central to understanding what is important to them. Further, they all write from different contexts and with different aims and goals. Their various contexts and feminist vantage points also inform their ethical stances, as the issues at hand have varied. All three theologians wish to reconstruct theology and Christianity in a more inclusive and emancipatory fashion, which also translates into their ethics. I study and engage with their understandings of where the feminist struggle is, or was at the time of their writing. This should allow me to situate their ethics better in the broader feminist theological and philosophical landscape. By doing so, I aim to represent their distinct yet related voices and contributions, to see how they converge and diverge on key ethical issues, to situate them in relation to the current discourse of feminist ethics, and to see what emancipation should look like today.

It is crucial to comprehend how each theologian understands gender, since it is a foundation for their feminist theology and ethics. The understanding intersects with the understanding of anthropology and the more comprehensive feminist agenda of emancipation for the subjugated. An in-depth understanding of gender enables the critical study of how gender roles, stereotypes, and expectations are formed and reinforced in society. By scrutinizing the construction of gender, one can question and dismantle harmful gender norms and encourage greater equality and respect for all individuals, irrespective of their gender identity or expression. Butler proposes a view of gender as performative, or an anti-essentialism, which denotes a radical view of constructivism where not only gender but also sex is seen as a performative construction. Variations on the constructivist views exist, and there are softer and more hardcore models. Other models include forms of essentialism;

but the way in which different forms of essentialism are understood varies. Biology is sometimes proposed as a foundation, but “biology” is not a single entity, and numerous variations and understandings exist.<sup>182</sup> Various perspectives can intersect, such as constructivism regarding certain aspects and essentialism regarding others. This also relates to questions of the gender/sex distinction, which can vary, or questions on nominalism, such as whether there is something called “woman” or just many different women.<sup>183</sup> Narrative understandings can also play a role here and intersect with essentialism and constructivist perspectives. I look for each theologian’s model of gender, and relate it to its implications for a normative position in relation to emancipation.

When studying the theologians’ understandings of gender and anthropology, questions of power and intersectionality emerge: how do they recognize how gender intersects with other social categories and power dynamics? The theoretical perspective derived from Foucault provides ample resources for posing questions about power.<sup>184</sup> Questions of relationality are of the essence, since they highlight the interconnectedness between individuals, communities, and larger social structures. The theoretical framework provides insights into how to approach questions, and their potential implications for feminist ethics and theology. The structural perspectives adopted from Foucault, relying on questions of structure and discourse, are adequately suited for guiding my approach here.

From Butler and Haker I can draw on perspectives that emphasize bodily and subjective dimensions of human existence, which is crucial for understanding the normative content of their gender models. The central focus is the three theologians’ engagement with the theme of the human and the gendered body, and on how these motifs intersect with their overall theological and ethical concerns. Butler provides a model of non-essentialism, in which gender is seen as performative and constructed, rather than as a fixed or natural identity. Another position concerns essentialism, in which gender is seen to be grounded in a biolog-

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<sup>182</sup> Mari Mikkola, “Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/feminism-gender/>.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Foucault, “The Subject and Power”; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge (Volume 1)*; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

ical reality. These diverse perspectives on gender and their anthropological models must be carefully explored in order to grasp the full nuance of their ethical frameworks, since all three theologians write in particular contexts in which their understandings of gender are an essential part of their theology.

The view of the human and the gendered body is a central theme that runs through the work of all three theologians. How they conceptualize the human person, including the significance of vulnerability, relationality, and subjectivity, is crucial in understanding their ethical and theological frameworks. Here I ask questions such as these: How do they understand human embodied existence and the meaning of the body? How is the gendered body understood, and what role does it play in their theologies? Key to this analysis is to examine their engagement with philosophical ideas about embodiment, particularly in relation to feminist perspectives. Further, I also study how they understand the dynamics of power, oppression, and social structures as they pertain to gender and the human person. The core focus is on the analysis of their understanding of the human and the gendered body and the implications for ethics and theology. In this instance, questions of power and the experience of oppression are examined. How do they conceptualize the human in relation to sociability, relationships, and questions of autonomy?

Ultimately, by carefully analyzing the three theologians' perspectives on gender and the human, and their implications for ethics and theology, I aim to provide a critical understanding of their work. Vulnerability is an essential part of being human; but how do the three theologians each understand the role of vulnerability, and how does this intersect with their views on gender, subjectivity, and the human person? I investigate how their distinct approaches to these themes lead to divergent moral visions and proposals. I ask questions about how they see the relationship between embodiment and vulnerability, how it informs their theology and ethical understanding, and how this speaks to issues such as gender equality, justice, and the common good. I also explore the relationship between personal vulnerability as an ontological dimension of the human condition and cultural, social, and political structures that create and maintain conditions of vulnerability and oppression.

I also study how they view subjectivity and how subject formation intersects with the gendered body and questions of power. To what extent is the subject socially formed, and what are the parts and sources of human agency and autonomy? How is the question of autonomy framed? Is it peripheral? To what extent is it personal, and how does it intersect with the social dimension of life? Subjectivity can also imply forms of embodied, embedded, and relational existence that might challenge notions of the autonomous, disembodied self. How subjectivity informs their normative positions is important to analyze, since it is part of their broader theological and ethical position.

Another point of central interest concerns relationality, both as the concept itself and how it is situated within their broader theological and ethical frameworks. How do different understandings of relationality link to their views on gender, vulnerability, and subjectivity? For example, how do their perspectives on the nature and meaning of relationality shape their views on gender and the human person? By analyzing their treatment of relationality, I wish to discern how it connects to their theological and ethical positions, including their proposals on justice, solidarity, and the common good. Relationality can take many forms and be understood in various ways. I explore how each approach conceptualizes this crucial dimension of human existence and how it relates to the Creation as a whole. By using the critical perspectives of Butler on relationality, I also examine how power dynamics and social structures shape and constrain relational existence in their work. Additionally, Foucault provides insightful frameworks for understanding the influence of discourse and power on subjectivity and embodiment.

Concerning the three feminists' theological contributions to ethics, I analyze their distinct perspectives on theology and how those perspectives inform their writings' ethical discourse. I look specifically at how they see the relationship between theology and ethics, and how their normative ethical framework draws on theological resources. They are from different Christian communities, and careful attention needs to be paid to how their Christian theological commitments and feminist orientations shape their overall ethical visions. Further, they engage with multiple philosophers and theorists, and I examine how they use these theoretical resources to develop their positions and arguments. In this sense, I study their relationship with both theology and philosophy.

Regarding their theological focus, I consider whether it aligns more with either a traditional or a more critical understanding of Christian

theology. Will they focus closely on concepts such as the human as God's image (*imago Dei*)? Or do they emphasize theological themes like empowerment, praxis, and liberation? Is their theology primarily focused on humans, or do they include a broader environmental and ecology perspective? Perhaps all of Creation is of equal value, or are there distinct hierarchies? How do Christology and pneumatology factor into their ethical considerations? Another topic of interest from a theological perspective concerns eschatology: How is eschatology used in the theologians' discussions of ethics and the human condition? Questions such as these provide a window into their theological foundations and how these influence their ethical frameworks. The theologians' engagement with various philosophers and social theorists is also crucial to analyzing their positions fully.

As part of the study, I am especially interested in their theological contribution to philosophical ethics. I believe that the theologians' perspectives could challenge some traditional ethical frameworks, particularly those concerning power, vulnerability, and relationality in feminist thought. Particular emphasis is placed on theological contributions, making the case for a dialectical approach that combines feminist and theological perspectives to enrich our understanding of ethics. To deepen the analysis, anthropological and human nature questions will be explored, examining how the theologians' perspectives on gender and intersectionality shape their understanding of the human person and ethical responsibilities. In Keller's case, she invokes a view grounded in the apophatic process panentheism that emphasizes creativity and open-mindedness as core values. Any hindrance to creativity and open-mindedness is thus seen as unjust, since the hinderance would dominate others and hamper open creativity. Even though I do not emphasize each theologian's understanding of God, it is essential to consider how their theological frameworks and beliefs about God may inform their ethical views and how they understand and approach issues related to gender, power, vulnerability, and relationality.

Butler provides insights into the construction of subjectivity and the performative nature of gender, Haker offers an ethical framework that centers on vulnerability and relationality, and Foucault's concept of power and knowledge illuminates how social structures and discourses shape ethical norms.<sup>185</sup> Incorporating the perspectives of these theorists

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<sup>185</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, NY; London: Routledge, 2004), 31–32, 49, 215–17.

allows me to examine critically how the theologians' views on ethics, feminist ethics, gender, anthropology, subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability resonate with and challenge these theoretical frameworks.

Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann write from different ethical perspectives and theological traditions, exploring the diversity in feminist ethics. When the theologians being studied are explicit, I compare their views, identifying points of agreement and tensions between them.

The comparative analysis of the theologians' views should shed light on the diverse perspectives in feminist ethics and highlight each theologian's contributions to the discussion. This includes interpreting their writings in light of my theoretical framework and the methodology presented here. When the theologians are unclear on a particular issue, I reconstruct their position. When they are ambiguous, I suggest interpretations that are generous and coherent with the theologians' projects as a whole.

When assessing the theologians' various positions, I do so in relation to their emancipatory potential. To engage with the questions of emancipatory potential, I place special emphasis on what types of oppression each theologian's theory makes visible and on what is not revealed. Since the different theologians write under particular circumstances, both regarding place and time, different strengths and shortcomings are discussed. When studying diverse forms of oppression and how they are made visible by each theologian, the question of patriarchy is in the foreground, since the feminist characters are central to my study. In relation to the visibility of patriarchal oppression, I also discuss and evaluate each theologian and the respective forms of their theoretical position that challenge that form of oppression. The contextual position from where they write is essential; but my evaluation in relation to the visibility and challenging of oppression includes the trans-contextual potential of their theories. In this way, I try to be both context-sensitive, but also to study how each theologian and her respective theoretical position functions today. The normativity of each position is crucial in relation to emancipation and the role normativity plays in challenging oppression. This relates to my understanding of ethics as a critical discipline, in which critique is central to my study.<sup>186</sup> By critiquing both the discursive setting and the theoretical positions being examined, I aim to engage with the question of how to take further the discussion

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<sup>186</sup> Namli and Grenholm, *Etik*, 9.

on feminist theological ethics. This links directly with Foucault's theoretical contribution about power, since it provides valuable tools to reveal and assess how power operates. By focusing on how power functions, the critique and assessment of the emancipatory potential is highlighted. Understanding how power operates is central to revealing patriarchal forms of domination and oppression, and by making this visible in each theologian's writing, I can show how they deal with this question.

Feminist ethics is understood as a subsection of ethics that focuses on gender, sex, and women's experiences. It arose as a response to the limitations of traditional ethical theories in dealing with gender issues.<sup>187</sup> Feminist ethics examines how gender and power dynamics impact moral reasoning and ethical judgments, making it account for numerous positions and perspectives.<sup>188</sup> It critically analyzes the intersection of gender and ethics to understand better how ethics should address gender-related concerns. Feminist ethics also stresses the significance of acknowledging the viewpoints and experiences of marginalized groups, particularly women, who historically have often been neglected or made invisible.<sup>189</sup>

Further, it acknowledges that ethical evaluation needs to consider the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which moral decisions are made, making relationality part of the practice. It highlights the importance of a comprehensive and often intersectional approach to ethics, considering the different aspects of themes such as identity and oppression when making moral claims. Foucault provides useful perspectives on the relationship between power and discourse, especially in relation to political formation, which is of importance here.<sup>190</sup> The same concerns the intersection of power and language and how political formations are possible. Butler also provides useful resources on narration and discursive practices of change.<sup>191</sup> Feminist ethics goes beyond addressing individual moral issues; it also aims to challenge and transform oppressive social structures, including those related to gender, race, and

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<sup>187</sup> Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender."

<sup>188</sup> Kathryn Norlock, "Feminist Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/feminism-ethics/>.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*; Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power."

<sup>190</sup> Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 236, 245–46.

<sup>191</sup> Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 12, 24–27; Butler, *Frames of War*, 64, 67, 75, 104–5, 123–24, 133–35.

class, to end the status quo and to further equality and emancipation for the subjugated. At its core, it has a steadfast social and political dimension, and advocates gender equality and social justice for all—women and men alike.<sup>192</sup> This also relates to the importance of understanding gender and how each theologian uses this category in their writings. Again, this is to highlight the importance of gender in theology and ethics and to bring forward the unique character it entails and how this relates to the normative positions provided in the research material.

Drawing on the theoretical framework presented previously allows me to analyze critically and interpret the theologians' views on feminist ethics, gender, anthropology, subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability, and their theological contributions to ethics. By using these questions and the theoretical framework, I aim to uncover each theologian's unique perspectives on and contributions to feminist ethics. To achieve this, a philosophical research methodology is used. This methodology involves closely examining the writings of each theologian, analyzing their arguments and concepts, and interpreting them in light of the theoretical framework. To conduct this analysis, I use a hermeneutical approach, which involves interpreting and understanding the texts in relation to one another. By adopting a hermeneutical approach, I can explore the deeper meanings and implications of the theologians' work, exploring how their perspectives on ethics intersect with feminist thought and reshape traditional ethical frameworks. Understanding is not free from the researcher's historical and cultural background; rather, it is possible because of it. Preconceptions should be re-examined in light of new experiences, and our knowledge should be revised accordingly. Acknowledging power dynamics and being aware of preconceptions can inspire humility and sensitivity to differences, leading to revised opinions and knowledge.<sup>193</sup>

The study's integration of and approach to dialectics aims to bring together the concepts of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in

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<sup>192</sup> Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 18, 29, 40–41, 46–47, 68, 106–7, 232.

<sup>193</sup> The Swedish theologian Teresa Callewaert uses a very similar approach to hermeneutics. For elaboration, please see Teresa Callewaert, *Theologies Speak of Justice: A Study of Islamic & Christian Social Ethics*, Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 48 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2017), 49–58; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, rev. ed ed., Continuum Impacts (London; New York, NY: Continuum, 2004), 269–72, 350–57.



Christian feminist theology. This approach acknowledges these concepts' interconnectedness and mutual influence, recognizing that they are deeply intertwined. For example, subjectivity is not a static or isolated entity, but rather emerges and evolves in a person's relationships with others and in response to various contexts and experiences of vulnerability. In a similar way, vulnerability is an inherent aspect of human existence, and it is through relationships and connections with others that individuals navigate and experience their vulnerability. Relationality shapes and is shaped by the subjectivities and vulnerabilities of individuals. In a sense, the content of the categories is defined by how they are placed in relation to other categories.

Thus, the different concepts in this study's material are not seen in isolation but as interconnected and mutually influencing one another. They form a dialectical relationship, in which each concept contributes to the understanding and development of the others. This also translates into the methodology used in this study, since it actively pursues positions in the material that seek to deconstruct the conventional feminist fear of vulnerability instead of agency and emancipation.

Focusing on the moral subject and on the view of the human in the material brings a new perspective on feminism compared with a more traditional and entirely plausible focus on the understanding of gender. Emphasizing constructions of the moral subject provides a tool for analyzing the complex dynamics of identity and power in various contexts—or so I claim.

My theoretical framework recognizes and engages with multiple perspectives, and emphasizes the importance of a dialectical and self-reflexive approach incorporating diverse viewpoints. I use this approach to interpret and scrutinize the complexities of subjectivity, vulnerability, relationality, and power in the context of feminist theological ethics.

One key aspect is the intersection of vulnerability and autonomy. Butler and Haker challenge the traditional notion of autonomy as a feature of the abstract, disembodied moral agent. Instead, they emphasize the influence of social dynamics, power structures, and physical, psychological, and social dependencies on individuals' identities and relationships. This reconceptualization of autonomy leads us to consider an understanding of subjectivity that recognizes the inherent vulnerability and interdependence shaping human experiences and identities. It challenges the dominant narrative of individualism and self-determination,

emphasizing the importance of contextualizing identity within broader social, political, and cultural frameworks.

Overall, this framework offers a theoretical approach that allows me to move beyond simplistic understandings of subjects as isolated entities and to acknowledge the intricate web of social relations that shape experiences and identities. This approach aligns with a feminist understanding, and is consistent with feminist critiques of individualism that emphasize relationality, interdependence, and the intersectionality of power structures.<sup>194</sup>

In light of all this, I examine each theologian's emancipatory potential. When appropriate, I contrast them to show the differences between their positions. After a discussion of each, I provide a normative account of how to construct a Christian feminist ethics that has emancipatory potential for the subjugated. Since each of the three theologians engages with questions of theology in distinct contexts, I provide a contextualized analysis of their contributions to the broader conversations on feminist theology, power, and emancipation. By grounding the discussion in their respective context, I highlight the unique perspectives and challenges they offer, as well as the potential contradictions or tensions between their views. This includes the aims and goals of their respective theological projects, the methodological approaches used, and the broader intellectual and institutional contexts shaping their work. At different times and in different places, the patriarchal structures and systems of oppression may take on different forms, requiring distinct approaches to unsettle entrenched power relations. Because the varied forms of patriarchy and oppression reveal themselves in different circumstances, a contextualized analysis of these theologians' perspectives could shed light on viable strategies for emancipatory praxis in the Christian tradition. This includes studying the theologians' differing diagnoses of the root causes of oppression and the corresponding remedies they propose to foster greater justice, equality, and liberation. How well do they reveal different modes of domination and the corresponding pathways to emancipation? Questions such as this are crucial to answer in order to compare their emancipatory potential.

The analysis weaves together the different perspectives, identifying points of convergence and divergence, as well as places for possible

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<sup>194</sup> Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," 787, 790-791, 799-800, 804-7.

reconciliation or further fruitful dialogue. Ultimately, the goal is to construct a feminist theological ethics that empowers subjects, recognizes and embraces vulnerability, and cultivates emancipatory relations of power. The emancipatory potential is examined in light of the earlier discussion of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. I look specifically for factors that either enhance or constrain the liberatory aims of their theological projects.



## 3. A Divine Telos of Relations: Susan Frank Parsons

In this chapter, I analyze the ethical and theological position of Susan Frank Parsons, a renowned scholar in the field of ethics. I pose the following questions: 1. *What normative ethical model is defended by her?* 2. *What kind of feminist ethics is advocated?* 3. *How is gender understood?* 4. *What characterizes the view of the human that is presented?* 5. *How are subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability understood?* 6. *What theological contributions to ethics are presented?*

### 3.1. Christian Feminist Ethics

According to Parsons, ethics has three main components: 1) “ethics is a discourse concerning the good,” 2) ethics is to be understood as a “textual field,” and 3) “ethics is a deliberative practice.”<sup>195</sup> In the manner of ethics as a discourse of the good,<sup>196</sup> her view of communities as a center for human flourishing is anteceded. Still, it is also presented concerning her understanding of embodiment in more than one capacity, namely that we should embody the good we are seeking.<sup>197</sup> This figurative use of the word is, of course, related to the ‘Golden Rule’ of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, often exemplified by the following two statements: in Luke 6:31, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” and Matthew 7:12, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” The connection between feminism and the Christian ethical tradition is mutually beneficial because they complement each other and engage in a deliberative

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<sup>195</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 9.

<sup>196</sup> This should be seen in relation to her Thomistic and Aristotelian view, and how she focuses on the good rather than on the right.

<sup>197</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 10.

process in which each dynamically enhances the other.<sup>198</sup> Alongside the former, it is also clear that Parsons relies on an Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition when engaging with and understanding ethics. The discussion on ethics revolves around the discourse on what “the good” is, which is seen as a deliberative praxis based on socially internal positions and formations.

As a Christian feminist ethicist, Parsons positions herself by outlining what she describes as three main paradigms: the liberal paradigm, social constructivism, and naturalism.<sup>199</sup> Parsons challenges these paradigms because, in her view, they do not adequately capture the complexities of gender identity, relationality, and the role of religion in morality.

When describing the liberal paradigm, Parsons states that it focuses mainly on individual rights and emphasizes the autonomous moral subject with little to no consideration of social context. The liberal paradigm seeks to establish universal ethical principles that can be applied across different contexts and that provide a framework for consistently addressing moral issues. By advocating individual rights and freedoms, the liberal paradigm can serve as a catalyst for social change, promoting reforms that enhance gender equality and challenge oppressive structures. This paradigm draws heavily on the thinking associated with the Enlightenment.

Parsons critiques the liberal paradigm for its strong individualism, which, she states, overlooks the importance of social contexts and relationships in shaping morality. Parsons states that this may lead to an inadequate consideration of communal values and collective experiences, since the liberal paradigm highlights the individual at the cost of the collective. The liberal approach may fail to address adequately the systemic inequalities and power dynamics that affect women’s lives, often by concealing them under the formal premise of equality. Parsons points out that the liberal paradigm may not fully account for the diverse experiences of women in different cultures and social contexts. Again, this stems from the notion of formal equality that does not consider, for example, social factors. Parsons also critiques this paradigm for its tendency to overlook the complexities of social contexts and relational dynamics, and argues that its individualism may neglect communal and contextual factors that are significant in ethical considerations.

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<sup>198</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 13.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–174.

Regarding the social constructivist paradigm, Parsons outlines how it highlights the contextual, non-essentialist, and fluid nature of gender identity. The paradigm focuses on how oppressive institutions shape women's lives. It highlights the role of social structures in determining moral knowledge, behavior, and decisions. This paradigm is characterized by a structural critique of patriarchy and a dedication to social change, rooted in the firm belief that anti-essentialist perspectives are needed. The social constructivist paradigm that Parsons discusses is represented by the works of feminist thinkers such as Juliet Mitchell, Rosalind Coward, and bell hooks and by theologians such as Dorothee Sölle.

While Parsons sees value in this approach, she contends that it can sometimes overemphasize the constructed nature of gender to the exclusion of what she describes as its biological and existential elements. The social constructivist paradigm critiques the idea of fixed moral truths, suggesting that knowledge and ethics are constructed through social interactions and power dynamics in which language is the primary tool. Parsons points out that, while this paradigm provides valuable insights into the influence of societal structures on morality, it can sometimes lead to a problematic relativism. She fears that an overreliance on social constructivism may dilute the transformative potential of the Christian tradition, since it would lose its universal grounding. Additionally, Parsons fears that social constructivism does away with metaphysics all together and that there is no real substance in human subjectivity: instead, subjects become ephemeral, devoid of any clear identity or agency of their own.

The third paradigm that Parsons examines is naturalism, which grounds moral claims in human beings' biological and evolutionary dispositions. This paradigm emphasizes the innate and universal aspects of morality that are rooted in our shared nature as human beings. The naturalist paradigm posits that moral behavior is grounded in human nature, suggesting that there are inherent qualities that define ethical conduct. This perspective often draws on the writings of feminist thinkers such as Lisa Sowle Cahill, Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, Margaret Fuller, Emma Goldman, and Virginia Woolf. Parsons notes that this paradigm often makes sweeping statements about "woman's nature," which can be contentious. However, depending on the interpretation, such generalizations can either reinforce stereotypes or empower women's moral perspectives. Parsons acknowledges the value of this

perspective in establishing a common foundation for ethical reasoning, and the naturalist paradigm can thus empower women by celebrating distinctly female values, as represented in the works of feminist theologians such as Mary Daly. This recognition can foster a sense of identity and community among women, and by acknowledging the biological and embodied aspects of human existence, the naturalist paradigm can provide a grounded understanding of moral behavior that resonates with lived experiences.

However, she is concerned that this paradigm may neglect the role of culture, history, and individual agency in shaping moral thought and behavior, that it may reinforce binary distinctions between genders, and that it relies on patriarchal notions of human nature. Parsons warns that the naturalist paradigm could be misused to justify oppressive ideologies. Historical interpretations, such as those of Aristotle, have often turned biological arguments against women's interests, reinforcing patriarchal norms. This also relates to what Parsons sees as an oversimplification of human nature and the lack of consideration for the socio-cultural context: people tend to be seen as stereotypes rather than as individuals.

Parsons's use of the three paradigms—liberal individualism, social constructivism, and naturalism—allows her to engage with the various philosophical and theological perspectives that have shaped the discourse on gender and ethics. The three paradigms that Parsons discusses represent the intellectual climate to which she responds in her work. From a broader feminist perspective, the setting from which Parsons writes could be understood to represent the flowering of poststructuralist thought and its influence on feminist theology, which she thought would lose its grounding if the poststructuralist notions were to dominate fully. In this sense, there is genuine merit to her argument about carving out a space for a renewed theological vision that can both recognize the insights of social constructivism and naturalism and maintain a strong sense of the Christian tradition. However, there are shortcomings in her position: among others, that she positions herself in relation to others in a way that could come across as reactive rather than proactive. In my view, Parsons returns to a modified essentialism rather than finding a position that is distinct from the three paradigms she criticizes.



A central tenet of Parsons' work concerns the mother–child relationship, which she sees as a fundamental role when approaching ethics.<sup>200</sup> Parsons believes that the mother–child relationship is a vital lens through which to understand moral development and the construction of feminine identity. It could also be used to re-envision ethical frameworks, which are then grounded in the lived experience of women rather than in abstract notions of reason. By bringing women's experiences to the center of ethics, Parsons hopes to challenge the patriarchal biases that have dominated Western moral philosophy until this point. Parsons argues that the maternal relationship offers a crucial pathway to understanding the interplay between autonomy and relationality, individuation, and connection. Parsons understands the mother–child relationship as a primary normative example of how one should view relationships with and care for the other as like a mother's love directed toward her child. For Parsons, this is also in line with the divine telos, and thus holds part of the emancipatory potential for a person. In Parsons's view, God wishes us to love other people and to care for them like a loving mother. This confirms that Parsons understands gender and identity as innate and essential human aspects that stem from the divine order of Creation. Parsons sees motherhood and female traits as vital to the actualization of the divine plan for humanity, and believes that, by reclaiming women's unique moral standpoint that is rooted in the maternal, women could find liberation and empowerment.

Accordingly, Parsons could be seen as a care ethicist<sup>201</sup> who focuses on the moral salience of care, empathy, and relationships in women's moral lives. Parsons views moral theology as an inherently relational endeavor, in which the self is constituted through dynamic encounters with the other. To this end, she advocates a care ethic that is grounded in a Christian understanding of the human person as inherently relational.

Care ethics holds valuable moral insights. Parsons' approach represents an important contribution to Christian moral theology by drawing attention to the moral significance of caring relationships and interdependence. By starting with personal relationships, which could function as a facilitator to challenge injustices, one avoids the liberal emphasis

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<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>201</sup> I categorize care ethics as a form of virtue ethics. Parsons's focus on care and relational caring has such a primary role that I find it more apt to describe of her as a care ethicist.

on individual rights and autonomy. Further, by emphasizing the maternal relationship, Parsons challenges the patriarchal biases that historically have shaped Western moral philosophy. At the same time, I believe that Parsons' perspective needs to be complemented by a more robust consideration of the social and structural dimensions of injustice to ensure that ethics does not become depoliticized or limited to the private sphere. As many critics have demonstrated, there is also a broader problem with care ethics approaches that tend to romanticize or idealize the maternal relationship without fully acknowledging how such relationships can also be sites of oppression and unequal power dynamics.<sup>202</sup> There is a grave risk that the dominant part of the caring relationship infantilizes the other. In this sense, there is a risk that Parsons' approach may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles and the subordination of women to domestic caregiving functions rather than create what is needed to challenge patriarchy. While care ethics could be of great importance in a smaller setting, I am not convinced that it contains the components that are needed to challenge injustices on a structural scale. Care ethics could function as an important complement, but not a full replacement, of other ethical frameworks that focus on social and political dimensions of justice.

Further, central to Parsons' position is her context-sensitive universalism. She opts for a universalism that could be adapted to various contexts. In Parsons' chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* titled "Redeeming Ethics," she focuses on St. Catherine of Siena's "Dialogue" with God.<sup>203</sup> Here, she uses the dialogue as an interpretative frame for discussing ethics from a particular perspective. Using a prayer by St. Catherine of Siena,<sup>204</sup> she argues that, in ethics, one

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<sup>202</sup> See, for example, Ann Marie Pooler, *De-Romanticizing Care: A Critique of Care Ethics* (Madison, WI: Dissertation, 1999); Michelle Mattson, "Mother's Care? Models of Motherhood and Their Ethical Implications in Post-WWII German Literature," *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 1 (2009): 101–30; Barbara Maier and Warren A. Shibles, "Care: A Critique of the Ethics and Emotion of Care," in *The Philosophy and Practice of Medicine and Bioethics: A Naturalistic-Humanistic Approach*, ed. Barbara Maier and Warren A. Shibles (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 201–26.

<sup>203</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 206–23.

<sup>204</sup> Parsons cites it as follows: "A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God's honour and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness toward her, since on knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it." In *Ibid.*, 207. From St Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke OP, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980). Dictated and written in 1377-8.

should reach out toward what is to be known, the highest possible—God—and in that be ‘clothed’ in God’s presence. So accordingly, “there is a desire to be turned into this goodness herself.”<sup>205</sup> Parsons states that this aspiration rests on a long history, notable since Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>206</sup> In Parsons’s presentation, St. Catherine of Siena presents a form of universalism, referencing herself as not differing, thus also claiming representability. Parsons writes of the ‘quest’ in ethics becoming something else concerning God, beyond what constitutes the contextual good. She states:

Furthermore this is a quest that has to do with salvation. It is assumed in this prayer that self-understanding and concern for others are inseparable, that the deepening of insight into one’s own existence and experience is also a growing in the knowledge and love of others. For how could she know the goodness of God to her own life unless she was also claiming this for others. So there is no hesitation in Catherine’s assumption that her experiences are common. There is nothing extraordinary about her life or character that she sets up before God, and certainly no reason for her to insist upon her own uniqueness.<sup>207</sup>

This universalism also emerges in other places in Parsons’ work, perhaps most notably in a chapter titled “Towards an appropriate universalism.”<sup>208</sup> When decentralizing the particular self, one claims universality and reciprocity. For Parsons, this implies a perspective of justice based on a view in which the other is always important. The subject’s perspective is also highlighted here, since the proposed subject formation equates to the self’s need to grow in companionship with others, thus embarking on a reciprocal and communal journey that leaves behind the atomistic “rational-detached” self of the Enlightenment. Parsons’ conception of the atomistic “rational-detached” self is congruent with the understanding of “male rationality” that is present, but not limited to, in the Enlightenment and onwards. The concept entails that the dominant model of thought from the philosophical construction labeled “the Enlightenment” stems from many sources, the main one of which is the theory of Descartes that separates mind and body (the so-called

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<sup>205</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 207.

<sup>206</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford; New York, NY: Clarendon Press, 2006).

<sup>207</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 207.

<sup>208</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 180–99.

“mind/body dualism”).<sup>209</sup> For Parsons, this is an idealization that is used to portray the mode of thought prevalent in Western culture. A fault that stems from this perspective, which is criticized by Parsons, is how the idea of rationalism and individualism becomes an ideology that spurs divergence from other modes of thought that would better suit the understanding of the embodied subject.<sup>210</sup> According to Parsons, the split and, therefore, the hierarchical thinking prevalent in the West can be directly linked to the separation of mind and body in Descartes’s thought.<sup>211</sup>

I share Parsons’s concern about the Cartesian dimension of hierarchical thinking. It is obvious that a dichotomous separation of mind and body, reason and emotion, and self and other is deeply problematic. Parsons rightfully points out that this mode of thought has been used to legitimize the subordination of women, the devaluation of care work, and the privileging of an atomistic, disembodied rationality. Her way of showing how generalization functions, especially through the use of theology to inform the ethics discourse, provides an example of how theology and ethics inform each other.

For Parsons, the undertaking for feminist ethics is the becoming of the redeeming act—not only for the self (women, humans), but also for the world. Translating this into power and into the current situation, the need change is dire, since the world is in a state of upheaval. The upheaval is seen throughout the world, where humanity is not yet engaging in the self-transformation that the love of Christ has the power to convey. Relating the current challenges to the history of feminism, Parsons pins the earlier feminist agenda to the situation of the Enlightenment.<sup>212</sup> Here, she states that the “person” portrayed by Descartes<sup>213</sup> as the rational mind was not a sexed one, and that this constrained women in their project of emancipation.<sup>214</sup> For a long time, women sought to engage themselves in the pursuit of “becoming” rational persons with rights within the paradigm just described, sometimes claiming success.

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<sup>209</sup> Gary Hatfield, “René Descartes,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/descartes/>.

<sup>210</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 202.

<sup>211</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 61.

<sup>212</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 209.

<sup>213</sup> Descartes, “Selections from the Principles of Philosophy.”

<sup>214</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 209.

Still, over time, they felt that the situation's eroding presence did not grant them the justice for which they hoped.

Thus feminism begins as a demand for inclusion in what appears as already and entirely inclusive, and is stirred to action in the application of basic humanist principles, also to analysis and to change women's economic, social and political conditions.

At the same time, there is astonishment that these apparently obvious conclusions need to be demanded, a gap between theory and practice which is to be filled with explanations of patriarchal precedents and of structural sin.<sup>215</sup>

In a sense, the idea was that there could be other ways of presenting what the human could encompass, looking further than "male rationality" veiled as "human rationality." Carol Gilligan had challenged the idea of uniform reason in her famous psychological experiment in which girls and boys reasoned differently when confronted by moral dilemmas.<sup>216</sup>

Thus, Parsons looks for a new concept of personhood that is not bound by the biased perspective found in the paradigm of male rationality. This perspective adopts on itself an understanding that acknowledges how the body comes to matter, not only as ruled by the mind but also as the source of knowledge.<sup>217</sup> Parsons states that such knowledge comes to matter in relation to the Divine, since it carries a unique intimacy.<sup>218</sup> Parsons also notes that there is, and has been, an ambivalence in the writings of feminist thinkers in their discussion of relationality as implying care ethics. Proponents of the relational aspects of care ethics want to show the "otherness" of womanhood and establish it as positive, while the ones who are negative about this understanding expect it to result in the reproduction of the traditional division of power—namely that women in their caretaking should be restricted to household chores,

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<sup>215</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, ed., *Challenging Women's Orthodoxies in the Context of Faith*, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion, and Theology (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 5.

<sup>216</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>217</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 211.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

nursing children, and the like.<sup>219</sup> Parsons responds by reclaiming the importance of care ethics as transformative, not only for a person but for society. In her view:

To take this charge seriously is to challenge in a basic way the epistemological assumptions at work when impersonal objectivity, detachment, and rule-oriented thinking take precedence over personal involvement, passionate attachment, and a quite practical everyday respect for the happiness of those with whom one has dealings. It is also to consider the transformation of social structures that will be required, not least in the collapse of boundaries between the public and private realms, in order to follow this way of justice. For not only the heart, but the whole of the body of society is to manifest care.<sup>220</sup>

This view ties in with the communal perspective of deliberative ethics found in Seyla Benhabib; and for Parsons, these concepts go hand in hand. Parsons stipulates that “one must care for others in a way that does not foster dependency or compromise dignity.”<sup>221</sup> Further, the relational aspects of humans and God are proposed to stand as a model for caring.

Parsons claims that in the postmodern context, as exemplified in the social constructivist paradigm, care is used instrumentally and that an apparently caring touch might disguise a more gruesome reality: that people do not care for one another. One example she uses is in sales, where people are taught to act “caring” toward customers, while this is indeed only to lure them into a sense of caring to increase their spending. This results in a cynical use of what, in Parsons’ depiction, is in fact a fundamental good. In a sense, care is seen as an attribute that is added to commodities rather than a good in itself.<sup>222</sup> Here, Parsons also makes a stark critique of what she labels “late capitalism,” stating that capitalism, the media, and “branding” are invading all spheres of society and breaking apart genuine social connections, thus transforming them into something else: a perverse version in which commodities are supposed to bind persons together rather than kinship. She again states that the natural state of the family is bound by kinship, in contrast to what is increasingly becoming the case.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

A problem here is that, on the surface of relationships that are based on commodification rather than on kinship, there seems to be a caring touch in all of it, while, as mentioned, in reality it is not caring, since the capitalist logic only endorses monetary gain as the ultimate goal. However, the latter remark diminishes the possibilities for what she calls a “redeeming ethic” by asking how one could take care seriously and promote its value in a way that did not lend itself to this increasingly hegemonic form of late capitalism.<sup>223</sup> The family formation, as seen in Parsons’ perspective on kinship, is important. The family is seen as the natural grounding for the person.<sup>224</sup> Parsons’s ethics is a form of feminism of difference, and includes the belief that women, owing to their character, have specific contributions to make to communal life.<sup>225</sup> Parsons argues that, in modernity and postmodernity, women cannot become completely relational subjects, since the “male rationality” rules supreme by depriving women of this possibility. In that deprivation lies a strong emphasis on change, since this hindrance ties into Parsons’ view of how to become divine, thus making a case for a feminist ethics of theological importance.

I fully endorse Parsons’ perspective of highlighting how gender structures form many, or perhaps even most, aspects of our lives. However, I have concerns about the essentialist character of her approach. While I agree that gender is a crucial lens for moral and theological reflection, I worry that Parsons’ emphasis on the “natural” and “feminine” qualities of women could inadvertently reinforce restrictive gender norms rather than challenging them.

The danger of essentialism, as I see it, is that it can reify certain characteristics as immutable, making it difficult to envision or enact meaningful social change. Suppose that we accept that women have inherent traits that make them uniquely suited for certain roles, such as caregiving. In that case, we risk perpetuating the very patriarchal structures that feminism seeks to dismantle. True transformation, in my view, requires a more fluid and contextual understanding of gender that opens up new possibilities rather than confining us to traditional expectations. Here, Butler’s constructivism provides ample resources for reconceiving gender beyond the male/female binary perspective. In my view, this also

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ralph McInerney and John O’Callaghan, “Saint Thomas Aquinas,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aquinas/>.

<sup>225</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 206.

correlates with the lived experience of women and men alike, as we all embody a complex interplay of “masculine” and “feminine” qualities, regardless of our biological sex.

Additionally, I believe that Parsons’ Thomistic approach, although modified, is too rigid to accommodate the full diversity of human experience. As a natural law theologian, in practice Parsons presents the Christian model of genuine relationships as universally valid. This approach leaves insufficient room for the voices and perspectives of those who do not share her specific religious commitments. A more inclusive ethical vision, in my opinion, would engage with a broader range of theological and philosophical resources. Parsons’ position is compelling in many ways. Still, I believe that a more intersectional and contextual approach is needed to address the complexities of gender, power, and social change in our time.

### 3.2. Gender and Anthropology

A central question for Parsons is how gender influences, draws attention to, and structures certain aspects of our lives. Being situated between critiques of what she labels “modernity” and “postmodernity,” her dialogue and deeds reach into both distant parts and others that are closer to home. Parsons’ view of gender reaffirms certain parts of Butler’s approach, as she is critical of the subject as “already positioned” when engaging, for example, in thinking about and doing ethics. This also includes the self-reflexiveness directed towards traditional theologies, in which the posited openness to critique is evaluated. One such example is when, in the introduction to *The Ethics of Gender*, she describes how “thinking with gender” can disrupt the conception of theology and become a transformative subjective perspective. The search for such thinking follows her throughout her writing.<sup>226</sup> For Parsons, the challenge for many theologians before her has been *not* “thinking with gender” as a significant category when approaching subjects such as theology and ethics.

The “rational man” of modernity, who is the object of Parsons’ critique, is presented as seeing himself detached from the need to engage in questions of gender solely for the reason that, for *him*, gender was

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<sup>226</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 151–67.



never an issue. In part, this is traced back to the earlier days of modernity when Descartes and his conception of mind-body-dualism led to a perspective that gave precedence to certain forms of thinking over others.<sup>227</sup> The thought emerging here has later developed into several forms of feminist critique.

For Parsons, relationality is central to understanding gender and humanity. The transformative character of genuine and valuable relations is also highlighted. The relational theme in Parsons' writing—notably later in her work too—includes the relationship of humanity and God, such that faith is not only the subjective experience of the individual believer. Rather, it is based on the broader relational aspirations of religious communities.<sup>228</sup> Like several other concepts that Parsons uses, transformation is teleological, in that humans are regarded as naturally striving to further God's telos.

On the larger scale, I believe that Parsons is correct when she states that gender is a category of significant interest that structures a large part of the world. By challenging a perspective that highlights this category, especially in conjunction with the historical and structural subjugation of women, one could provide a transformative instrument for approaching moral conventions. This is supported by the critique of modernity and the Enlightenment in Parsons' work. What is problematic, however, is the essentialist perspective that Parsons endorses. The main problem with essentialism is the fact that it can be used to suppress progressive change rather than to enhance it. By appealing to the truth value of essentialism, change is suppressed. This holds especially true in the case of gender theory. A notable feature of Parsons' theory of gender is that the uniqueness of the genders becomes static and is not open to change that could emancipate the subjugated. A defense of Parsons' view might be that there are essentialist gender traits, but that they have become distorted during times of gender inequality; the patriarchal system unevenly distributes power to the sexes and, by its logic, always make the male sex come up on top. However, I do not believe this to be the most fruitful endeavor when challenging patriarchal structures. I argue that a constructivist approach to gender could provide more emancipatory and transformative ways to approach the subject of gender in

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>228</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 203–4; Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 84–86.

theology and ethics. Just as Parsons has drawn inspiration from the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomistic thought, I believe that a constructivist approach could find inspiration in the work of Butler, whose deconstructive methodology has shown how gender as a category can be used to challenge and renegotiate existing power structures in a productive way that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism.

Parsons' essentialism entails the notion that humans, through faith, should strive for perfection and be the "full" selves they are intended to become. This position is part of *Lumen Gentium* (Latin for "Light of the Nations"), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, one of the central documents of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 21 November 1964.<sup>229</sup> In this document, the Catholic Church states its belief that every person should strive for perfection. This is performed through faith and deeds, by the grace of God.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Rediscovering Vatican II (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2006).

<sup>230</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter V, The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church Paragraph 40 states: "40. The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples of every condition. He Himself stands as the author and consumator of this holiness of life: 'Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (216)(2\*). Indeed He sent the Holy Spirit on all men that He might move them inwardly to love God with their whole heart and their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength (217) and that they might love each other as Christ loves them (218). The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received. They are warned by the Apostle to live 'as becomes saints,' (219) and to put on 'as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience,' (220) and to possess the fruit of the Spirit in holiness (221). Since truly we all offend in many things (222) we all need God's mercies continually and we all must daily pray: 'Forgive us our debts' (223)(3\*).

Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; (4\*) by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history." "Lumen Gentium," The Holy See, accessed August 13, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

For Parsons, perfectionism should be combined with essentialism because the perfect state is the hallmark against which all temporal states are to be compared. This makes the historical factuality one that can improve itself and strive for natural perfection. What makes this position special is that the end goal—the perfect state—is not open-ended, but instead is already in place as specified by God.<sup>231</sup> Importantly, Parsons' teleology recognizes the social nature of humans. To learn what kind of gender relations are genuine takes being part of community. Parsons states:

To speak of gender is to attend to the ways in which to be woman and to be man is to be as one formed in the midst of the polis, and so as one made up of the many interests, values, structures and practices that comprise this complex network of common life.<sup>232</sup>

This should be seen as correlating with her relational understanding of the subject; but it is, in one respect, deeper and more open to a constructivist perspective. By making the web of intertwined actions visible, a more significant degree of gender production is moved from the person herself and toward a discursive understanding.

Parsons makes a similar effort in her discussion of natural law. She defends the doctrine, and adjusts it to her understanding of Christian feminism. In Aquinas, as explained by Mark Murphy:

[...] there are two key features of the natural law, features the acknowledgment of which structures his discussion of the natural law at Question 94 of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*. The first is that, when we focus on God's role as the giver of the natural law, the natural law is just one aspect of divine providence; so the theory of natural law is from that perspective just one part among other theories of divine providence. The second is that, when we focus on the human's role as recipient of the natural law, the natural law constitutes the principles of practical rationality, those principles by which human action is to be judged as reasonable or unreasonable. So the theory of natural

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<sup>231</sup> In a sense comparable to the Platonist theory of forms or theory of ideas. Richard Kraut, "Plato," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/plato/>.

<sup>232</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, "To Be or Not to Be: Gender and Ontology," *The Heythrop Journal* 45, no. 3 (2004): 328.

law is from that perspective the preeminent part of the theory of practical rationality.<sup>233</sup>

Practical reason is thus universal, communal, and the main instrument of the critique of conventions. Parsons agrees with the theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill about how the natural law and rationality should be understood as in agreement with each other, being mutually reinforcing for the case of revelation as part of human rationality.<sup>234</sup>

Parsons' endorsement of natural law is difficult to reconcile with constructivists such as Butler, who views the subject—and gender—as a process that foregoes the “substance” of subject itself.<sup>235</sup> By adhering to this constructivist perspective on both subject formation and gender, one dodges the problem of essentialist traits that bind the gender to a fixed category and thus risk making it static. Constructivism offers a prospect for gender creativity, in which radical change and transformation can occur to further the emancipation of the subjugated. This does not downplay the importance of the body, but rather understands that there is a dialectic between bodies and the social. The subject is already gendered when forming, but is not bound by it, since the ongoing process is open-ended and is not closed in the manner of a predefined nature.

One aspect of Parsons' Christian foundation, which is highlighted well when it comes to the anthropology she endorses, is found in the functioning episteme of what she describes as “naturalism as hermeneutics.” She is critical of using naturalism because it so quickly leads to “foundationalism”<sup>236</sup>; instead, as in many other areas, she seeks a middle ground where one is inspired by the challenge that a particular perspective provokes and, at the same time, one is not interested in the other extreme. Whether or not this is an apt description of how one should understand different views is not addressed here.<sup>237</sup> Often, social

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<sup>233</sup> Mark Murphy, “The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/natural-law-ethics/>.

<sup>234</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 128.

<sup>235</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17.

<sup>236</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 158–59.

<sup>237</sup> “Naturalism” is most often seen as not having a stable meaning in contemporary philosophy. For a more engaging view, please see David Papineau, “Naturalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/naturalism/>.

constructivism is seen as opposed to naturalism, but it may be more fruitful to see it not as a linear extension on a one-dimensional scale. Part of Parsons' method is in undermining dichotomies—which for her are false dichotomies—or in arguing that there is a third position for which one could opt instead of finding oneself in one of the previously given positions. For Parsons, there is something in the question that feminists adhering to the naturalist paradigm should consider. She presents the foundationalist view being implied by naturalism as too simplistic to cover the complex modalities that shape human life, especially the physical aspects.<sup>238</sup> Parsons writes:

Essential to the appropriation of this paradigm within feminism will be its capacity to be accepted as constituting of a hermeneutic of nature, rather than a law of nature imprinted on the mind or the body, and, in so far as it is a hermeneutic, to be able to participate, women and men together, in delineating its outlines and implication.<sup>239</sup>

Parsons proposes a view in which women's and men's respective natures are valued and endorsed. Parsons' perspective is informed by the theorist Sabina Lovibond, who understands naturalism to be mediated through a language game in a Wittgensteinian fashion.<sup>240</sup> This position is Parsons' attempt to answer the criticism posed by constructivists, in that the mediation takes place through language, which is used and understood only from a local standpoint. This method does not exclude translation, but instead roots the centrality of the understanding in a given community. For Parsons, this middle ground understanding, based on a community, resides well with her overarching sense of what should be pursued when reconstructing the world for the better. Also, engaging in ethics is a way to re-model the general understanding of how gender comes to matter as a form of critique, whereby positioning the question of gender in a central place opens a space for the transformation of the power hierarchies that feminists seek to change.<sup>241</sup>

In this sense, I believe that Parsons' position contains valuable insights, in that thinking of gender and feminism in a theological and ethical setting could pave the way for a critique of existing structures that

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<sup>238</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 158–59.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 157–58.

<sup>241</sup> Parsons, "To Be or Not to Be," 328.

uphold gender hierarchies. By confronting foundationalist forms of naturalism, Parsons opens up a space for gender as a critical analytic lens. However, I remain cautious about Parsons' reliance on an essentialist understanding of gender, which in my view could limit the transformative potential of her theological framework. That essentialism, here partway maintained, runs the risk of rigidifying gender categories and being less open to change. Instead, I suggest that a constructivist approach rooted in the work of Butler provides a way to rethink gender in theological-ethical terms in a way that is more open to transformation and to the dismantling of oppression.

A central aspect of the feminist ethics that Parsons proposes is related to what constitutes the human person. For Parsons it is important that relationality is constitutive of humans. She writes:

A second central theme of feminist ethics has been the significance of relationship, for within ties of biological kinship and communal association the human person is born, nurtured, and fulfilled. To attend to relationships is thus to do what is believed most necessary for a person to be at all, and so it is with this attentiveness that feminists have sought to undergird the detached intellect by reminding it of home.<sup>242</sup>

Parsons' anthropology depicts human as part of the community, larger or smaller, that is implied by biological kinship and other forms of communal relationships. This view also ties in with the governance perspective, later expanded on, in that social formation is best understood from this set of relationships.<sup>243</sup> This is in congruence with the traditional Catholic understanding of human sociality, in which the heterosexual nuclear family holds a privileged position, especially since marriage (matrimony) is one of the seven sacraments.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 212.

<sup>243</sup> The following excerpt illuminates part of the Aristotelian-Thomistic view regarding the relational aspects of human: "It might be noted that when Thomas, following Aristotle, says that man is by nature a social or political animal, he does not mean that each of us has a tendency to enter into social contracts or the like. The natural in this sense is what is not chosen, but given, and what is given about human life is that we are in the first place born into the community of the family, are dependent on it for years in order to survive, and that we flourish as human beings within various larger social and political communities. The moral consists in behaving well in these given settings." From McInerney and O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas."

<sup>244</sup> Please see the heading, "The Sacrament of Matrimony" in the "Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church," The Holy See, 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium\\_ccc/documents/archive\\_2005\\_compendium-ccc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html).

The latter view also translates into Parsons' view of theology and her proposal that feminist theology should be viewed as a form of dogmatic theology. For Parsons, this perspective of feminist dogmatic theology is founded in the experience of women, and is brought forward in a particular theological anthropology that is interconnected with the human; to speak of the Divine is also to speak of the human.<sup>245</sup> The basics of a dogmatic theology are found in the human experience of God; and since this is an experience-based foundation, its provision must be continually tested. In the case of women, this is part of what makes feminist theology valuable, since it departs from the view that the male rationality is universal and should continue to take precedence over other forms of rationality.

Feminist theology as envisioned by Parsons can make room for perspectives beyond traditionally male-centered theological views. By invoking the perspective of women, there is the possibility of a more pluralistic and inclusive theological landscape. This in turn could spur on the emancipation of the subjugated, since patriarchal dominance could be challenged and, one would hope, subverted.

To speak of gender is to engage in questions of power; the gender discourse itself is a "voice of power."<sup>246</sup> By making the duality of women and men operational in a hierarchy of power, the appearance of sin becomes present in humanity. Parsons writes: "This radical sin of our humanity is lodged in a set of dualisms which it is the work of feminist theologians to expose."<sup>247</sup> She does not advance a radical subjectivity here; rather, it is a form of intersubjectivity, inferred from subjective experience and objective knowledge. This correlates with her broader account of ethics as a universal project rather than a particularistic one. For Parsons, at some point women theologians must propose general normative statements,<sup>248</sup> a topic in line with the universalism she endorses. The duality of women and men is still carried through, though; but for Parsons, the dominance of male rationality in the sphere of theology must be ended, and she does not mince her words about men when she writes:

There is little of comfort here for our brothers, from whose reflections this pattern of theological discernment has emerged in the tradition, but

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<sup>245</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 116.

<sup>246</sup> Parsons, "To Be or Not to Be," 329.

<sup>247</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 117.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

who have mistakenly and even perversely installed themselves alone into the middle of it.<sup>249</sup>

Thus, by invoking the women's perspective, using feminist theology, one displaces the centrality of the power of men. In Parsons' terms, this is directly linked to the anthropology of humans as created in the Divine image. A central aspect of Parsons' theological perspective is her emphasis on the importance of the Creation. The act of Creation is foundational to her ethical framework and understanding of the Divine. She argues that a proper appreciation and reverence for the created world and for humanity's role in it is crucial for developing robust theological ethics. Here, Parsons is stating part of her beliefs about the human nature of women and men, which she later follows up on as both being images of God, linked but different, in that:

One of the issues that lies at the heart of feminist theological concern is how we are to understand our humanity—as persons made in the image of God, and as women and men who are in some way related but different.<sup>250</sup>

For Parsons, there are inherent differences between women and men; and so she could be described most aptly as adhering to 'difference feminism.'<sup>251</sup> This also translates into anthropology and into how women and men in different ways come to embody the image of the Divine. Her feminism is therefore not a project to dissolve gender differences, but one to combat the patriarchal hierarchies that are in place. Arguing against postmodern constructivism and defending a view of human as the image of God, Parsons writes:

Yet, if gender is an effect of our thought about what is human, rather than its prior determinant, are we not thrown back rather fundamentally

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>251</sup> "Difference feminism" is used to describe a strand of feminism that holds that there are inherent differences between women and men but that makes no value judgment about it, as stated by Gilligan in Carol Gilligan, *Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History and Online Archive Project*, interview by Leeat Granek, Video, September 15, 2009, <http://www.feministvoices.com/assets/Feminist-Presence/Gilligan/Carol-Gilligan-Oral-History.pdf>. Also, one does not have to accept the difference between women and men as a form of essentialism, although it is not uncommon to do so.



onto the question of whether there is an original form of humanity at all?<sup>252</sup>

Parsons does believe there is an original form of humanity that women and men express equally but differently.<sup>253</sup> In the context of theology, she wants to change the focus: “It could be that the question for dogmatic theology is not that of what a human being is, but, rather, of what it is to be human.”<sup>254</sup> In line with her essentialist position, Parsons wishes that dogmatic theology would not question the original form of human beings. Thus, she emphasizes further a position that is taken for granted concerning what the difference between genders encompasses.

For Parsons, the state of the world today, and even more so certain aspects of it, needs redemption. Here she is concerned with several topics, of which one notable aspect is gender inequality, which she sees as plaguing the world. At the core of both Parsons’ Christian belief and her feminist aspirations lies the wish to liberate “woman and man” from their current limitations—and to become complete in the grace of God. Propelling her feminist inquiry is the vision of betterment, in which humankind could break free from its current state. Central to her thought is the idea of “thinking with gender,” and much of her aspiration is found in her words when she states:

Thinking with gender seeks a liberation of humanity into a more authentic relation with God in which each of us, woman and man, may find ourselves more truly reflected in the presence of God.<sup>255</sup>

Here, Christian relationality is again brought to the fore, in that humankind wishes to flourish but can only do so in the grace of God. Also, the point presented here relies on the notion of an anthropology in which women and men can only flourish in relation to their creator.

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<sup>252</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 126.

<sup>253</sup> Here, Parsons’ refers back to several post-structural theorists, and (for example) directs the argument toward theorists such as Butler when she writes “[...] gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself.” In Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 21.

<sup>254</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 127.

<sup>255</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 5.

Parsons is critical of using theology as a mere technique. She references Mary Daly in her warning to feminists that one should not succumb to the “male rationality,” which she labels “methodolatry,” since:

[...] to approach things in this way is to assume that theology is a project by which something is to be worked out and then accomplished in the world. It is to assume theology to be fundamentally a technique.<sup>256</sup>

Instead, one should look at this theology from a wider perspective, in that one is not ever finished and must look forward in hope—through theological engagement—and not get stuck in dealings that are not long-lasting. This is a form of self-reflexive standpoint, which she endorses and views in a much more organic fashion than she understands traditional “male” theology has done. This is also part of the reason why one should “engender” theology,<sup>257</sup> since the earlier perspectives do not give breathing space to the task of religious engagement, which is not static but instead projects itself forward; and:

[...] to understand that redemption cannot be something fabricated for the sake of the world, but is the possibility for human beings, women and men, to be themselves the birthplace of the Divine. To attend to this phenomenon is to recall feminist theology to its most demanding dogmatic task—to articulate the coming of God in the world today.<sup>258</sup>

Parsons looks for a communal view in which theology could flourish. Even though the world is in a state of upheaval today, through Christian feminist ethics she hopes for a better world of tomorrow. In a chapter titled “Subjected in Hope,”<sup>259</sup> Parsons defends the view that a foundational part of the Christian faith is found in the concept of hope, such that the believer devotes herself to God so that the future will be better, and makes herself work for the sake of it. Parsons argues that one should not focus on presenting the identity of the person she is today, but instead focus on who one hopes to “become in God.”<sup>260</sup> As stated, this is part of the transformative character lodged in her view of what to (be)come.

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<sup>256</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 130.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 124–25.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>259</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 151–67.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

Here, one problem arises if the view of the subject at hand diverges from the communal view in which she is situated. In other words, how could communitarian ethics secure the possibility of a critique of conventional views? This is not to state that all ideas in a community are problematic, but rather that divergent views do arise and that tightly knit communities, especially those that endorse a relatively closed view of what the telos should imply, do not lend themselves to the many drives that are present in their members. To an extent, the picture that Parsons has derived from Benhabib could be a remedy here; but it is unclear at what level she understands it to be adopted. My reading of Benhabib is focused on the cosmopolitan primacy that she endorses<sup>261</sup>—although one could, of course, use her work in the delimited way of more enclosed communities. Still, the problem with smaller communities is that the flexibility of thought might not be of the extent sought after by its members.

### 3.3. Subjectivity, Vulnerability, and Relationality

Parsons' understanding of subjectivity and relationality is positioned in her critique of modernity and postmodernity. She especially emphasizes that women have had to conform to certain practices of reason. While modernity risks presenting "masculine reason" as the center of humanity, postmodernity risks losing the substance of the subject altogether.<sup>262</sup> Parsons writes:

So that it becomes possible in postmodernity to ask what has been unthinkable before – in what sense the agent subject is a real presence, and the network of relationality, the posited and thus already virtual reality that makes its appearance possible.<sup>263</sup>

Again, one can see that Butler's understanding of subjectivation is referenced here.<sup>264</sup> Parsons is critical of how Butler understands the subject as lacking a "real presence," being only a function of language. Parsons

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<sup>261</sup> Benhabib is an avid advocate of porous borders as stated in this interview at Berkeley University in "Conversation with Seyla Benhabib," accessed June 6, 2020, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people4/Benhabib/benhabib-con6.html>.

<sup>262</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 215.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> Please see the section on the subject and subjectivity in the theoretical chapter, as it references, for example, Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 89.

also relates this to Foucault, in that his writings on power, concerning the perspectives of a sexed body as reinforcing power, have inspired how many come to view identity in modernity.<sup>265</sup> Parsons' view of postmodernists is that they produce an understanding that:

To be a woman is thus no natural phenomenon, but rather the end product of a process of cultural and linguistic formation in which what it is to be a good woman has also been learned.<sup>266</sup>

She closely analyzes this (in her view) problematic constructivist position further, stating:

To follow the trajectory of gender construction through modern ethical thought has been to expose problems in the founding assumptions of feminist ethics. One of these is the assumption that a person is ontologically prior to its appearance in assigned social roles, that a person is an internally coherent subject distinguished by a capacity for reason, or by moral responsibility for a fabric of relationships. Feminists have claimed their inclusion in this notion of subjectivity by insisting upon their equal status as persons, and even upon their greater capacity as women for ensuring the subject's realisation in the most expansive vision of its context of life. Yet if this priority of the subject is questionable, what will happen to the shape and the task of ethics generally, and of feminist ethics in particular?<sup>267</sup>

For Parsons, this perspective from the writings of Beauvoir<sup>268</sup> and onwards—through thinkers such as Foucault—poses real problems for the foundations of feminist ethics. In Parsons' view, one primary problem is the postmodern notion of destabilizing the idea that a person is ontologically prior to her appearance in the world. Thinkers in postmodernity have, of course, had diverging views here. However, for several, the discursive production of the person entails a form of anti-essentialism that clashes with Parsons' understanding of the very foundations of ethics in general and of feminist ethics in particular.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 215. Parsons here references Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, 1st American ed, *The History of Sexuality 1* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978); Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*; Foucault, *The Care of the Self*.

<sup>266</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 215–16.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>268</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

<sup>269</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 216.

How then does Parsons understand the substance of subjectivity that is both predefined and changeable? She clarifies that the issue is not that one should long for the past—something she does not propose—but how to counter the critique so that it paves the way for new subjects, woman and man alike. The subjectivation she hopes for is new, in which humanity is rid of the ‘unauthentic’ situation imposed on them today. For Parsons, this longing for authentic subjectivity has a profoundly theological grounding, based on her conviction that social communities are not immune to criticism, but view deliberation as a way to progress. As she has discussed in her work, part of the inspiration here comes from the open-ended deliberative ethics of Seyla Benhabib.<sup>270</sup>

Parsons sees a real problem with deconstructing the subject as fashioned in certain postmodern discourses: that ethics is losing its grip on the subject and itself. Here, the disintegration of the subject, in being part of what ethics is supposed to help, free, or improve its situation, turns the same capacity of redeeming ethics upside down, since the agency is displaced from itself into a system rather than personal responsibility. She concludes: “No one is *responsible* for being co-opted by this system, for we have all already been fashioned in its image.”<sup>271</sup> Thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and Butler are referenced; whereas the former wrote of economics as the main basis of the subject, the latter is understood to explore the subject as “an ideological structure.”<sup>272</sup> Parsons is critical of Butler who, in her view, makes the subject totally dependent on the social standards around her that have already been established.

Even though Parsons is critical of Butler’s constructivism, she takes Butler’s critique of traditional understandings of gender and of subjectivity into account. She states that secular feminists have often been at the forefront of questioning the categories that are defined by men and imposed on women.<sup>273</sup> That said, Parsons maintains a more essentialist notion of the feminine in her theological feminism, since otherwise she would question the very concept of the *imago Dei* on which she grounds her ethical vision. Most importantly, Parsons’ particular Christian view is at play in her understanding of human subjectivity as directed to opt for the outmost: God.<sup>274</sup> Her view of ethics is that it should enable future

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<sup>270</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 209–11.

<sup>271</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 216.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 189–90.

<sup>274</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 216–17.

actions rather than dwell on the current state. She assumes the direction of it to be normative rather than descriptive, which relates to her view of how a person becomes an intelligible subject. For Parsons, “the agent subject has made itself known through speaking its mind,”<sup>275</sup> and she argues that, if instead the subject was only spoken through, as an effect of language, the agency would be diminished, since there would be no “real” presence of the subject acting as the agent. So, by speaking, the subject—which is already present—makes itself known and is thus in place as a real presence before the act of speaking. This also translates into self-determination, such that others should acknowledge one’s view. The latter is essential when considering the many perspectives at hand that have been silenced earlier when not fitting into the dominant male rationality. This can be a precarious moment, though; and the action of speech provides the possibility of openness toward the possibility of “coming,” here understood in line with the reaching toward one intended goal through the divine telos.<sup>276</sup> The latter is still not a constructivist stance, but rather an extension of the relational aspect of speech that Parsons endorses, and that is congruent with the presence of what she labels a “real” subject.

For the subject, self-determination could be part of a specific type of freedom that is normatively preferential, according to Parsons. The freedom to do good and to choose the right thing corresponds to her view on the divine telos, in which one should strive to come closer to God. In my interpretation, Parsons’ view means that, by using language, by speaking, one can engage in feminist ethics and work for change, while, on the other hand, if one is not in control of what one wishes to say, the words themselves are bearers of intentionality; then one becomes only a performance through language.<sup>277</sup> The latter is a form of critique directed at what Parsons labels postmodernist thought, exemplified by Butler for one, in that the subject is a consequence of language rather than an entity that precedes the speech act.<sup>278</sup> To an extent, this is a subtle but essential critique from Parsons’ point of view. For Parsons, the subject becomes intelligible through speaking its mind, but it is there before the speech act. For Butler, the subject formation is already in process, perhaps best understood analogically as a form of

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>276</sup> Parsons, “To Be or Not to Be,” 340.

<sup>277</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 217.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 215.

emergentism.<sup>279</sup> By being bound to modes of power at the very core of the continuous formation of the subject, Parsons understands such a position as vulnerable, since the prospects of the subject being already formed need to be aware of powers one has not chosen.<sup>280</sup> For Butler this is also the case, but a necessary one, while Parsons wishes to depart from the notion—in Butler’s case, derived from Foucault—that the subject need not be restricted through power. This is part of Parsons’ critique that is directed toward her understanding of postmodernity since it becomes chaotic and caught up in power struggles rather than being directed toward “the good” (as ethics is partly understood in her case).<sup>281</sup>

Parsons wishes to ground the subject, and feels that a poststructuralist understanding of subject formation is harder to grapple with. A problem that I see with Parsons’ perspective, where Butler—and to an extent Foucault—provides some insight, is the question of how ethical action itself becomes intelligible. Parsons sees the subject as relational, in that she is relationally formed, but always as an essential subject, entangled yet to a degree autonomous. I think that two things are at stake here: the subject as an ethical agent, and the power dynamics at play in relation to that. First, if the subject is formed relationally, through discourse and modes of power, being intelligible through language provides greater critical potential when seeing it in relation to emancipation than does Parsons’s perspective. By wishing to bridge the gap between essentialism and (at least to some extent) constructivism, I fear that Parsons ends up with a middle position that is diluted and does not hold the critical potential that I wish to see from such an examination. By persisting with the notion of “a real presence,” Parsons seems to cut off the analysis of subjectivity at a certain point—as if the subject is already formed, shaped coherently “before language.” For me, this is an unintelligible position, since it means that we can find an original position for the subject that is present before any language act. This coincides with a second point, namely that the formation of the subject is always bound to power relations, which is a central point for Foucault and Butler. Here, it seems as if the position for which Parsons opts is one in which

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<sup>279</sup> Timothy O’Connor and Hong Yu Wong, “Emergent Properties,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/properties-emergent/>.

<sup>280</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 53.

<sup>281</sup> As stated earlier, my view of ethics is that it concerns a critique of morality.

power and discourse do not play a central role in the formation and intelligibility of the subject as an ethical agent.

Parsons is critical of the state of late capitalism, which she sees as increasingly destructive of human relationships. The logic of capitalism converts everything into commodities that are assigned a price and that can be bought and sold. By extending this logic to new domains, so that not only manufactured commodities are part of capitalism, but also entities such as time, religious experience, and memory, these are also incorporated into the logic of capitalism.<sup>282</sup> This impacts the lives of humans. For Parsons, her critique of capitalism is part of her critique of what she sees as postmodernity; and she hopes for another type of society that is rid of this. Here, one could also include the view of vulnerability, in which different types of exploitation are at the core of distorting the divine telos that is needed for humanity to flourish. By imposing the societal structure and ideological system of modernity and of postmodernity, dialectically manifested and reinforced by late capitalism, the communal aspects and logical space for humans to improve themselves are severely limited. By not living according to what Parsons understands as the universal good, considering the natural law tradition, it is not hard to see that humans become increasingly vulnerable, in a sense “trapped” outside what is needed for them to live flourishing lives. Although here she does not explicate the body as bound to vulnerability, the situatedness of bodies, both earlier and in more contemporary examples, plays a role in her thinking.<sup>283</sup>

Parsons’ view is that, when humans are deprived of what is needed to live flourishing lives, there is a risk that, as bodies, they are exposed to precariousness in specific settings. Reinforcing the state of alienation from what matters, Parsons views the nihilism of postmodernity as an especially serious deceiver, since, when living under conditions governed by it, the subject becomes increasingly disillusioned and resigned to “reality,” since its foundations are not thought of as real, but instead of as mere constructions.<sup>284</sup> This leads to vulnerability since, once again,

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<sup>282</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 128. Since Parsons wrote this, the trajectory of late capitalism has gone even further. A pertinent analysis is made by the American author and scholar Shoshana Zuboff of how the digital aspects of life have paved the way for what she labels “surveillance capitalism”; please see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

<sup>283</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 60–77.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.



the state of affairs constitutes a hindrance to seeking what is in line with the divine telos, and deprives humanity of the possibility of living in the grace of God. Parsons refers to Pope John Paul II and his two promulgated encyclicals, *Veritatis Splendor*<sup>285</sup> and *Fides et Ratio*,<sup>286</sup> in which she points to the urgent need to oppose nihilism, since it runs the risk of ruining the human subject.<sup>287</sup> The case made here refers mainly to how John Paul II writes:

John Paul II was explicit about his concern for nihilism in his later encyclical *Fides et ratio*, where he took it to be ‘at the same time both a rejection of all foundations and the negation of all objective truth’. Further, nihilism means ‘the denial of the humanity and the very identity of man, even before it opposes all the demands and doctrines that belong particularly to the word of God’.<sup>288</sup>

This plays into Parsons’ critique of Nietzsche and of a profound loss of morality for humanity. As a moral theologian, Parsons believes that the foundation of faith is at risk here.

I agree with Parsons’s view of late capitalism as being increasingly destructive of human relationships. The spread of capitalist logic into all areas of life, including the family and personal relationships, has indeed had a corrosive effect. Commodification in all areas of life devalues the intrinsic worth and dignity of human beings and of our relationships, making it harder to engage with one another in a truly mutual, loving, and fulfilling way. Parsons rightly points out how capitalism’s emphasis on individualism, competition, and the pursuit of self-interest undermines the communal ties and sense of shared purpose that are essential for human flourishing. Similarly, the moral nihilism of today poses a threat to any genuine challenge of and resistance to patriarchy. By being disillusioned, people stop resisting injustices. Here, there is a need to find meaning and purpose beyond the constraints of capitalism and nihilism, which stifle our sense of agency.

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<sup>285</sup> John Paul II, “*Veritatis Splendor*,” The Holy See, August 6, 1993, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_06081993\\_veritatis-splendor.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html).

<sup>286</sup> John Paul II, “*Fides et Ratio*,” The Holy See, September 14, 1998, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html).

<sup>287</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, “*Usus Gratiae: How Am I to Hear the Sermon on the Mount?*,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 1 (2009): 13–15.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Another aspect of vulnerability found in Parsons stems from her understanding of the sexual difference between women and men, which is directly linked to her difference feminism. Women and men are seen as complementary to each other, needing each other to become complete in their humanity and subjectivity.<sup>289</sup> This is not to be confused with the “general” relationality described earlier, in which the communal aspect of the world is positive. Instead, women and men as ideals play a crucial role in their mutual constituting that leads to becoming full.<sup>290</sup> This, just as other forms of separation from one another, underpins a state of vulnerability in which detachment is always a risk for the person—and of such a character that it should be minimized, preferably through holy matrimony. By being united through the love of the other, one can become whole, as loving care is an expression of God’s love through faith. This understanding also plays into a larger framework in which Parsons’ relational understanding of subjectivation is of the essence, since it is only through the opening up of the subject that one can discern the state of grace as given by God.<sup>291</sup> The vulnerability at risk is thus two-fold, since it interferes with the subject’s ability to become whole and to be given a state of grace through God—both of which are interlocking.

Yet another aspect of vulnerability can be traced through Parsons’ understanding of relationality as congruent with the divine telos. The philosopher S. Kay Toombs exemplifies this vulnerability in the Catholic context:

We live in a world where success is measured by the ability to shield ourselves from potential harm. We strive to be “financially secure,” “emotionally protected,” self-reliant, free from external limitations, eternally youthful. Power, wealth, professional success, celebrity, and beauty are all desired means through which to achieve personal invincibility. At the same time, however, we sense that this struggle for invincibility and protection from harm isolates us and cuts us off from relationships. In the context of such a culture, emotional security can only be achieved through distancing oneself from others, the need for self-reliance renders dependence on others undesirable, the goals of

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<sup>289</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, “Ad Imaginem Dei: Is There a Moral Here?,” in *Authorizing Marriage?: Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions*, ed. Mark D. Jordan, Meghan T. Sweeney, and David M. Mellott (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 146–47.

<sup>290</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 135.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

power and wealth often demand a commitment to ruthless competition, the emphasis on such characteristics as physical “beauty” and youthfulness segregates us into different (and often opposing) social groups, and the end goal of professional “success” many times consumes our waking hours, robbing us of close family involvement. Yet, in spite of all our efforts, vulnerability inevitably intrudes into our lives.<sup>292</sup>

Although Toombs focuses on illness and injury in the context given above, the underlying notion of vulnerability as detachment and as directly linked to what Parsons describes as the male rationality of the Enlightenment is apparent. This understanding becomes key when reconstructing Parsons’ view of vulnerability, since “fear of vulnerability” is so prevalent in society today. By not exposing oneself to the vulnerability of relationality, one cannot become full. The autonomous ‘man’ who has defined himself as the supreme ruler throughout the ages is unable to change, cutting himself off from the direction of the divine telos. As we have seen, this is a recurring theme for Parsons, one that is present throughout her thinking.

Further, although Parsons does not use this term, there is an uneven distribution of vulnerability in action, often directed toward women and children, which thus develops into a state of precarity (again, this is part of my reconstruction of Parsons’s position). Seeing this division, Parsons’ understanding of vulnerability is that it is an underlying condition that all humans share, and that detachment from relationships—both with the other and with God—is a risk here. Alongside this is the uneven distribution that affects groups of people differently, in which the context enhances the vulnerability, resulting in a more direct state of precarity. Only very briefly does Parsons mention the body as vulnerable, and this is in the case of Catholic saints, who through their physical manifestation are seen as in a precarious state, since:

A saintly life discloses to us the astonishing possibility of an intimacy-in-difference of divine and human being, giving us reason to hope that such also will be ours. Their tender awareness of the precariousness in which this likeness to God is held in frail earthen vessels, and their insistence that what is created is redeemed, are signs that it is the future which is “already”—not the past. Through them we may discern that

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<sup>292</sup> S. Kay Toombs, “Vulnerability and the Meaning of Illness - Reflections on Lived Experience,” in *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology*, ed. Carol Taylor and Roberto Dell’Oro (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 119–20.

what is made known *to* faith is true and it becomes true *in* faith, and that there is a necessary circularity in truth's rooting itself in the human soul.<sup>293</sup>

Being part of Parsons' understanding of the futural character of faith, there is an openness to fragility, since the saints are embodied in "frail earthen vessels," which implies a vulnerable state. There is no reason not to believe that the same fragility is shared by other humans as well as by these saints. Although brief, there is an openness in Parsons' writing to seeing the body as vulnerable. This is one example where my reconstruction of Parsons's theoretical perspective could be enhanced; and I believe that this is a fruitful addition that is well in line with her basic position.

Parsons is critical of what she sees as a typical feature of modernity, namely that individualism has precedence over other forms of understanding humanity.<sup>294</sup> Parsons endorses a view that tries to remove false dichotomies or to support a middle ground. For example, she views the individual as a social being who is linked to the communal, in that the individual good aligns with the communal good in a mutually enhancing way, and thus she does not posit a view in which they stand in contrast. To be genuinely individual is only possible in relation to a community. She describes this dialectic as singled out by feminists, as it led to the promise of freedom and minimal interference in the autonomy of the modern subject.<sup>295</sup> Here, she believes that there is an inherent ambivalence between the self as relational and still pursuing separateness for women so that hierarchies of unequal power would no longer bind them. The postmodern state is directly linked to increased precarity in being detached from others—thus, for Parsons, subjectivity and vulnerability are intertwined concepts.

Parsons's position is thus ambivalent, acknowledging the benefits of individuation and autonomy while also recognizing their limitations and the need for an increased emphasis on the communal and relational aspects of human existence. However, unlike many proponents of communitarianism who sometimes tend to romanticize community at the expense of individual rights, Parsons is careful to maintain a balance, recognizing the value of both individual autonomy and communal belonging.

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<sup>293</sup> Parsons, "Ad Imaginem Dei," 150.

<sup>294</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 200.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

On the epistemological plane, Parsons discusses how one could move from the ideal of objective knowledge about moral matters, past a subjectivist account, to some form that is in between them in being more generalized than a merely subjective perspective but still not making the same types of claim as one who believes that they have objective knowledge would. She refers to what Benhabib calls “interactive universalism,” in which a fundamental moral knowledge arises from moral norms that provide equality and reciprocity.<sup>296</sup> This moves from the person-to-person encounter and translates into a communal understanding that provides a creative setting in which deliberation is used to enhance the understanding of ethics. In this setting, again referring to Benhabib, one should not only see the “generalized other,” but rather the “concrete other,” since what constitutes us is particular experiences through embodiment.<sup>297</sup> In this understanding, the person is profoundly social, and the communal aspect cannot be overstated. Thinkers such as Nel Noddings<sup>298</sup> are referenced here, since her theoretical work emphasizes women’s particular experiences in this world.<sup>299</sup> By having these experiences, just as Parsons implies in other places, women have a unique set of understandings that should contribute to communal life. Their experiences occupy a privileged position in delivering and enhancing what is needed for human life to flourish in its communal form.<sup>300</sup>

Parsons points out several intersections between feminism and what she calls “new communitarianism.” For Parsons:

In all of these ways, feminism traces a path alongside the new communitarianism, and, at several points, the concerns of both overlap and are interwoven. Feminist writings have been affirmative of communal life, as the place of personal and moral formation, and in that sense, have some sympathy with the Hegelian critique of Kant. To be able to formulate moral issues at all presumes a shared context, or *Sittlichkeit*, from which a common language of discourse and a set of values emerges, and thus morality is historically shaped and created.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Among her various works, perhaps her most famous is Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>299</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 207.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 208.

Parsons continues the discussion with a more general note on how the situation of women affects their production of knowledge in specific settings by being a situated rather than a “disembedded” self.<sup>302</sup> Following this, one has to take care not to indulge in an unjustly discriminatory practice toward the communal life at the expense of the individual. The key is interpreting the nuances in which both individuals and communities can find a balance.<sup>303</sup> In essence, Parsons states this very clearly: “To provide a description of moral reflection that is true to a relational view of the self, is the challenge of feminism.”<sup>304</sup> In line with the suggestion from Benhabib, Parsons re-affirms the notion that one has to be careful not to conflate different perspectives of conventional morality with philosophical inquiry, resulting in a walking away from the need to challenge injustices that have arisen from specific roles between women and men. Trying to find a way beyond the dichotomy presented by the polarity between individualism and community, Parsons turns to Iris Marion Young, stating that dichotomies often negatively present the other.<sup>305</sup>

Returning to Young, the same pattern can be seen in communitarianism, where the same logic of bundling diversity into unity is found on another scale.<sup>306</sup> In Young’s terms, though, the ideal society is a loosely woven web of relationships in which one can have multiple points of interaction and build sustainable relationships while at the same time not being coerced by any one of them.<sup>307</sup> It is an urban landscape on several levels, which holds the capacity for democracy and is open when different voices speak.<sup>308</sup> Parsons does not follow this all the way.

Parsons relates to Young’s critique of essentialism while questioning her firm rejection of metaphysics. Parsons seems to prefer Benhabib’s universalism as a way to reconcile Christian ethics and feminist projects. Parsons believes that a transcendence of the human perspective is

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 209–10.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 211–13.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>307</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 238.

<sup>308</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 213–14.

crucial, in that it offers hope, through prayer, in building the communal.<sup>309</sup> One cannot overstate the importance of the Christian perspective in Parsons' writing about what underpins it all. Even though a large portion is dedicated to the debate of feminist theory, the foundation is inherently Christian. Not just any theory would be suitable for Parsons; any theory must be compatible with her Christian ethos.

One way to counteract misrepresentation of the other is to question particular assumptions of the liberal paradigm to which women often succumb when diversity is rounded up, resulting in a false unity that does not give a fair voice to the parts that are enclosed.<sup>310</sup> For women, this often results in the logic of becoming like men to have their moral contributions count. During the Enlightenment and the era that followed, one such thinker was Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>311</sup> Parsons states: "Wollstonecraft believed that, through the use of reason, we are able to discover principles of behavior which apply to all human beings, and which are to be consistently used in moral decisions."<sup>312</sup> She follows this with the idea that seeking truth is the most significant goal of human rationality.<sup>313</sup>

Another aspect of interest here is Parsons's reference to Luce Irigaray, that "[w]oman is effectively sealed up in philosophical constructions, which reveal only the outline of her absence."<sup>314</sup> Parsons believes that this adds to the contemporary debate in feminism and its rejection of metaphysics.

To enter this debate about human nature is to recognise the huge intellectual scepticism about metaphysics in which contemporary feminism is caught up. The subject around which this controversy revolves for feminists is that of difference. For we have inherited a metaphysics of difference, which is based upon the normative male human being, in the context of which the female will, of necessity, be devalued and constituted by what she lacks.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 216–21.

<sup>310</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 228–29.

<sup>311</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 18–21.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 235. In the reference to this sentence on p.265, Parsons writes: "Irigaray: Speculum. The entire book is a demonstration of this thesis throughout the history of western thought," and thus references Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>315</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 233.

Again, this should be seen concerning the “man of reason,” who has created himself as the one normative order. For Parsons, as for Irigaray, women must establish a new subjectivity for themselves. This subjectivity implies a different kind of metaphysics:

One step in this process is for woman to rediscover, as a woman, her relation to the divine. Man has defined himself as a distinctive gender, by reference to a God, who serves as the horizon of his identity, to ‘orient his finiteness’, and to guarantee his free and autonomous subjectivity.<sup>316</sup>

“Women” must thus not be seen in relation only to men, but as true subjects in themselves. This also ties into the difference feminism that Parsons endorses, in that women—by the simple fact of being women—possess specific knowledge about the world and the Divine that will enrich both the Church and the world. There is debate over the extent to which Irigaray is an essentialist about the sexual difference between women and men. Still, it seems that Parsons reads her as an essentialist, even though she might not be one.<sup>317</sup>

In summary, Parsons endorses a type of subjectivity that is informed by feminist perspectives and bound to be enhanced by relational perspectives in which the mother–child relationship is presented as a model. She is critical of the “subject of modernity,” in which “the male

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 235. Parsons here references Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 61–61.

<sup>317</sup> In one discussion on the topic of Irigaray’s essentialism, Helen Fielding writes: “Often at the heart of feminist concerns around Luce Irigaray’s project is an uneasiness over her insistence on sexual difference, even as it is this difference that informs her oeuvre. Irigaray scholars agree, for the most part, that her work is not essentialist, in other words, that this difference is not grounded in biology; instead, they argue that it is culturally asserted in a symbolic and an imaginary that have excluded women, their subjectivity and their desire. But the uneasiness over her prioritizing of sexual difference remains, since this prioritizing can only be grounded in the “universality” of a sexual difference rooted in nature, which suggests not only a heterosexual bias, but also a discounting of other differences such as race and class. This uneasiness, I would argue, arises out of an inherited cultural understanding that posits nature either as unchanging organism or as matter that can be ordered, manipulated and inscribed upon. Hence, the concern over essentialism is itself grounded in the binary thinking that preserves a hierarchy of the One over the Other, mind over matter, culture over nature. Merely emphasizing the other side of the dichotomy, that of culture, does nothing to break open the dichotomy itself.” In Helen Fielding, “Questioning Nature: Irigaray, Heidegger and the Potentiality of Matter,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 36, no. 1 (2003): 1.



rationality” has had dominance. This has led to the idea of an autonomous individual subject, which has been further driven by postmodernity, resulting in fragmentation and the loss of a communal setting of what constitutes the basis for good. In a sense, this profound detachment has led to a state of vulnerability, where the loss of meaning and of kinship work in conjunction.

The relationality is informed by a state of grace, by what Parsons sees as coming from God. Here, the convergence of hope and the person is strengthened by the divine telos, and one can become complete in a relationship with God. One should see the other not as “generalized” but as a “concrete other,” so that the situatedness enriches the subject’s experience. At the same time, it minimizes the risk of the exploitation and domination of others. The last is part of her feminist undertaking in which, like many others, she wishes to emancipate currently subjugated persons—most often women and children. It would also emancipate men, in that their distorted view, manifested in the autonomous “male rationality,” would no longer stand in their way to advancing communal living and seeing the light of God.

I endorse Parsons’ critique of the “male rationality” of the Enlightenment. Her view of modern subjectivity as limited by Cartesian dualism is also reasonable. One aspect lacking in Parsons’ perspective is how the formation of the subject takes place. By making the mother–child relationship a primary model for the relational aspect of subjectivation, Parsons’ understanding appears to be what I call a “moderate” relational understanding of the subject formation. The communal elements, concerning those of kinship, are indeed a break with the Enlightenment subject, and this view is located between modernity and postmodernity in respect of how the perspective is to be categorized, while it deviates from what I describe as a “fully” relational formation of the subject. The problem is that the subject seems to be already constituted outside the relationships that affect it. A fully relational formation of the subject would instead leave no part of it outside relationality. A missing piece of information on the relationality of subject formation might be found in a theological perspective, even if speculative, in which one is subjectivated in relation—relationally—to the other and to God. This would imply that God is *a* or *the* primary Other, a necessity that creates the space and upholds the possibility of the Creation from within where the human other could (co-)form the self. This would also relocate the discursive field that is necessary for forming and creating

the space in which humans co-create one another. Such an understanding would also emphasize the vulnerability aspect of the subject. Parsons' understanding of vulnerability revolves mainly around the loss of not becoming fully human through detachment from others. This is a part of her understanding of where one is meant to live in line with the divine telos and natural law.

The concept of vulnerability is vital and central to a good understanding of relational subjectivation, since it can create a common ground for caring for the other. For Parsons, this is the case to a large extent, since she thoroughly emphasizes the relational aspect of becoming what one is meant to be, considering the divine telos. From a Christian perspective, the idea of structural sin could serve as one interpretation of how vulnerability works in conjunction with the finiteness of the human embodiment. Parsons discusses, for example, how finiteness is related to the body, and thus to the woman, when talking about Irigaray's position, and contrasts it with the autonomous subject of man, which focuses on the mind.<sup>318</sup> Further, though, it could also provide a backdrop to how humanity becomes trapped in structural sin after the fall of humanity.<sup>319</sup>

Ultimately, while ambivalent in its stance regarding the full relational formation of the subject, Parsons' position is a significant contribution to the discourse on the self and the other, especially in the context of ethics and theology. However, I believe that it would benefit greatly from a more explicit and comprehensive theological framing of the subject formation alongside the relational and feminist perspectives that Parsons so eloquently uses. The same concerns her account of vulnerability, where a more explicit ontological grounding would strengthen her argument and provide a more substantial foundation for the challenges she poses to the Enlightenment conception of the self. I believe that the emancipatory potential contained in Parsons' perspective on vulnerability could be enhanced by providing a full relational understanding of the subject formation. Such a position would be more apt when considering the complexities of power relations that impose themselves structurally. By advocating a fully relational subjectivity, the vulnerability inherent in the human condition could be better ac-

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<sup>318</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 235.

<sup>319</sup> I chose this gender-inclusive terminology for what is usually referred to as "the fall of man," "the fall of Adam," or simply "the fall," in Genesis 3.

counted for. Such an account would provide greater emancipatory potential, since it would liberate not only subjugated others but also the autonomous subject of the Enlightenment from its own distortions and limitations by totally forgoing the idea of an independent, self-sufficient self derived from the Cartesian mind/body dualism. In this sense, Parsons' essentialist position entails too much of the Enlightenment's presuppositions, and a fully relational account would be better suited genuinely to challenge and move beyond the problematic features of modernity.

### 3.4. Theological Contributions to Ethics

Parsons sees Christian feminist theology as an answer to how to find redemption in this world. For Parsons, redemption is living in line with the divine telos, and thus acknowledging the presence of God in this world. Here, when describing women and men as the birthplace of the Divine,<sup>320</sup> Parsons is essentially describing divinization through faith.<sup>321</sup> This is once again part of her critique of what she labels "the liberal paradigm," in that it sought to center its project on the idea of freedom as the fulfillment of human dignity, in the autonomy and the rational choices made by humans, and, in that, securing liberty for all. In the current day and age, this view is decisively challenged, and the promised freedom for all has not arrived.<sup>322</sup> Instead, the paradigm has paved the way for postmodern encounters, which have further promoted the

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<sup>320</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 131.

<sup>321</sup> In the Catholic creed this is for example referenced in Catechism of the Catholic Church article 460: "The Word became flesh to make us "partakers of the divine nature":<sup>78</sup> "For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God."<sup>79</sup> "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God."<sup>80</sup> "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."<sup>81</sup>" where the notes refers as the following: (78) 2 Pt 1:4., (79) St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 19, 1: PG 7/1, 939. (80) St. Athanasius, *De inc.* 54, 3: PG 25, 192B., and (81) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusc.* 57, 1-4. "Catechism of the Catholic Church - Article 3, 'HE WAS CONCEIVED BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND WAS BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY', Paragraph 1. THE SON OF GOD BECAME MAN," The Holy See, accessed August 25, 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P1J.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1J.HTM).

<sup>322</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 42.

modern project of human autonomy, but at an alarming rate—something that later created both social disintegration and immense fragmentation. Parsons describes the loss of grand narratives as problematic. Although what was before will never return, the current state is not where one should linger, especially not since the overturning of grand narratives during the 20<sup>th</sup> century caused a profound loss of hope, in that it projects itself as the end of history. This state, a state of nihilism, is to Parsons a sign of the loss of transcendence, in that “man” now believes that “God is dead.”<sup>323</sup> She also states that nihilism is part of the general state of understanding that is prevalent in postmodernity. This becomes especially prominent, since the truth of coming close to God becomes impossible to achieve because people do not seek the truth. Still, power takes them away from this path, essentially depriving them of the possibility of divinization.<sup>324</sup>

In opposition to a kind of Nietzschean postmodernity, Parsons endorses community and tradition, albeit in a transformative feminist version. She envisions communitarian practice beyond the unjust power hierarchies that have subjugated women. Parsons suggests that community should be the central tenet of Christian ethics, believing that the primary goal is the renewal of the social fabric and the restoration of right relationships between persons. This must be devised through a “redemptive ethic” rooted in love, empathy, and mutual recognition of our shared humanity and dignity.<sup>325</sup> Through our relationships, we can more fully realize the transformative power of the Christian faith that acknowledges human brokenness yet offers the promise of redemption.<sup>326</sup> By being open to genuine relationships, God can work through humanity, bringing one another closer, and forming a vibrant, hope-filled community.<sup>327</sup>

Parsons criticizes Protestantism, which she argues endorses the liberal paradigm. She states that the liberal paradigm promised emancipa-

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<sup>323</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109, 119–20.

<sup>324</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 129.

<sup>325</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 214–16.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>327</sup> Parsons, “To Be or Not to Be,” 340.

tion through reason—a central idea of the Enlightenment that she believes was never fulfilled. In this sense, she believes that the Protestant ethos places a misguided focus on reason. Parsons adds:

The Protestant emphasis on a direct approach to God by each individual frees all persons from what had come to be understood as the tyranny of institutional authority. Each person knowing God in the quiet reason of his or her own heart and mind is a way of liberating individuals from tradition, mediation between themselves and God, and hierarchical structures. In such turning to God, the believer has come to realise the futility of human action *per se*, the pretentiousness of any attempts to be good, and is therefore able to accept in complete humility and emptiness the grace of God. Theological writings share with philosophical and scientific ones the same optimism in human possibilities for true knowledge, available to the Christian through faith. Such knowledge from God transcends the partial and limited viewpoints of this world, and offers to the believer an opportunity to affirm what is ultimate. In this affirmation are found the roots of Protestant humanism, with its emphasis on individual responsibility before God.<sup>328</sup>

Thus, there is an inherent connection between Protestantism, individualism, and the “male rationality” of the Enlightenment that she criticizes.<sup>329</sup> Parsons suggests a communal view in which the human is seen in relation to others, the family plays a central part, and the concept of the *imago Dei* is central. For Parsons, the Protestant tradition is too bound up with the reason of the Enlightenment, and does not offer the communal aspects offered by Catholicism.<sup>330</sup>

One of the perspectives she pursues is the reinstatement of a contextually bound universalist perspective derived from Benhabib, even though she adheres to a communitarian view on how ethics and morality are formed and endorsed. Recalling this, the foundation is a form of essentialism, in that the Divine presents itself in a certain way, and that there is a *telos* for humanity in light of the Divine, as the *imago Dei*.<sup>331</sup> Parsons, though, is reluctant to give due credence to the current theological debate, since she believes it to be distorted by contemporary and past misbehavior and by diversions from what should be a perspective

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<sup>328</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 17.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 240–41.

<sup>331</sup> Parsons, “*Ad Imaginem Dei*,” 149.

of equality; thus, “their” views that have led to the current state of neglect and misogynistic behavior are problematic for her.<sup>332</sup>

Still, Parsons vigorously critiques post-Christians and post-traditionalists, as already seen; and this makes for a fascinating case regarding the nuances she pursues that could “redeem” ethics and save the need for the Divine. This is particularly prominent in her critique of modernity and postmodernity, which is often aimed at what she sees as the inference of nihilism by Nietzsche. Another problem for her is how socialization has projected itself regarding negative views of women—more so when she considers metaphysics (a topic not commonly recurring in her works), from which she also critiques postmodern feminists, since, in her understanding, they are caught up in a “metaphysics of difference,” stemming from modernity—in which women are always the “others” of men.<sup>333</sup> Her response to this question is directed toward a theological perspective, consisting of what Parsons understands to be a renewed interest in “natural law,” as well as aspects of the “godliness” of women in the *imago Dei*.<sup>334</sup> Finally, Parsons returns to the notion of Christian feminists as having a unique contribution to make to the current state of understanding of women and of power hierarchies. She believes that it is only within this tradition that what could propel women’s place in this world forward is to be found.

Lastly, it is within this tradition that a positive understanding of our everyday life and culture may be found, for it is clear that Aquinas finally equates ‘the true good of the individual and the common good in such a way that the highest natural good of the individual consists in participation in a just community’. This may offer to feminism a positive way in which to hold together the importance of ‘truly loving oneself’, with a commitment to ‘the common good of her community.’<sup>335</sup>

Community and the individual are interconnected; again, women are seen to have a special place that is implied by their knowledge of and relation to the Divine. By engaging in this pursuit, a woman could also come to love herself—something that is not accessible in the state of today, according to Parsons.

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<sup>332</sup> Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, 227.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 240–41.

Returning to liberation, and thus to emancipation, the authenticity of woman and man also relies on the understanding of human capacity; and in this matter, Parsons' view of relationality as modeled after the Trinity is of great importance. It does not abandon the idea of the human subject—far from it; instead, it relies on the interdependence of the individual, the group, and God. For Parsons, individual thinking is not in itself harmful. However, many forms of it have been harmful to the degree that one cannot only change it, but must either reject it or incorporate it into a more extensive way of communal thinking. She criticizes the earlier strands of individual thought in feminist philosophy, and sides with the ones who seek an understanding of the self as interdependent with others.<sup>336</sup> This also brings to the fore her concept of the Divine as relational. As noted earlier, one must not only adhere to the caring aspect of relationality as superficial, but instead find a deeper meaning. Parsons states that, for many, “The networking of computer-literate consumers can quite happily subscribe to this rhetoric, which is harmless enough [...],”<sup>337</sup> but that, as stated earlier, people should dwell deeper. Even if many persons could accept this more superficial version, most likely without dwelling on the subject further, there would still be much to be done before the transformation through faith could bring about the change that is sought.

Following the critique of individualism, even in later strands of feminist ethics that are built on the notion of relationality, grounding ethics in a network of relationships can be problematic if it does not relate to God. Here, Parsons defends the view that relationality is profoundly Christian and that the relationship of the Trinity is used as a model for people's lives in this world.

There has still been a lurking suspicion amongst feminists that the Christian creed is incompatible with this relationality, in some fundamental way that those who call themselves post-Christian or post-traditional have been seeking to establish, through a critique of the notion of transcendence.<sup>338</sup>

To further this argument, she seeks to formulate a description so that one does “[...] not to speak of God in a way that gives privilege, or expresses power, or reinforces hierarchies, or establishes exclusions,

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<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 200–203.

<sup>337</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 214.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

but rather to speak of God like that in which our commonness as human beings is created and upheld.”<sup>339</sup> Parsons understands the bond between persons as a possibility for receiving God’s grace, in which the relational aspect opens one to deepening love.<sup>340</sup> This argument attacks persons of post-Christian and post-traditional understanding, since, in her view, they do not give enough credence to the formation of relationality found in the Trinitarian God.<sup>341</sup> She names, for example, feminist philosopher and theologian Grace Jantzen as one who succumbs to a language that grounds the self not in its origin beyond this world but instead in it. For Parsons, this perspective points toward a Nietzschean understanding of the death of God, so that only here is situated the formation of the self. She also critiques the understanding of ontology of the philosopher of religion Don Cupitt as only intra-world for a similar reason, in that she sees him being influenced by Nietzsche and his nihilism.<sup>342</sup> Parsons proposes a view of the soul as informed by transcendence, giving it a forward-driving character.

In faith, the essentially futural character of the human soul is expressed, as the soul is stretched out into the future. Here is transcendence, not another world to this one, but the transcending capacity of the soul to be directed by what is to come.<sup>343</sup>

The critique of Nietzsche is a constantly recurring theme in Parsons’ work. A central aspect of this critique is the lack of hope in and beyond this world that, according to Parsons, is an element of Nietzsche-inspired postmodern philosophy.<sup>344</sup> This is not only a significant existential problem for humans, but also for how humans come to view ethics, as she understands it to be in serious decline because it is losing its ability to offer a futural perspective for humanity. We must thus secure ethics if we are to hope for our salvation.<sup>345</sup> This also relates to her view of ethics as pointing us toward something more than what is in front of us.

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Parsons, “To Be or Not to Be,” 341.

<sup>341</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 218–19.

<sup>342</sup> Don Cupitt and Susan Frank Parsons, “After the End of the World,” *Theology* 117, no. 4 (2014): 272–74.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>344</sup> Parsons, “Usus Gratiae,” 14.

<sup>345</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, “Being Brought to Light,” *New Blackfriars* 84, no. 987 (2003): 250–55.



Parsons proposes language that should be used in accordance with the intentionality of God, as loving us before we come into this world.<sup>346</sup>

For faith is given to know that the being of being human is to be in the midst of God's own discourse, as we are formed by the Word, and it is given to know this as the future that awaits us when we are gathered up utterly into its love.<sup>347</sup>

Further, she sees the role of women in the Christian tradition as paramount because of the importance of presence for a "redeeming ethics" that can "act" on the world, not merely as distant but also as immanent. She proposes a vision in which one should not feel dismayed by the state of the world today, which she sees as being in a perilous postmodern state, but bridge the gaps around us in healing the world. Instead of retreating from the world, Parsons states:

Rather are we as faithful women to attend to the places that are unbridgeable by the world's wisdom, and to refuse to let these go from us until love has made itself known there. This is the depth of our prayer which is the most challenging way of thinking that there is, and this is the place for the soul's information by love, which must always live on the sacraments of love, and so this is the redeeming ethics into which we are called by love's gentle truth.<sup>348</sup>

Love has transformative power, not only for the person through the soul, but extended to the whole world. Although not explicitly stated by Parsons, this appeal to women should be seen as an invitation to grow their presence in various places, including the direst and most unbridgeable gaps of the world today.

In summarizing this, there is clear evidence that, for Parsons, theological inference does not only play a crucial role, but is at the center of her feminist ethics. What Parsons proposes is a contemporary version of natural law theory, which she believes addresses the challenges of postmodernity. The telos, as the striving for the betterment for humanity, is directly linked to the view of the imago Dei, and is in line with her eschatological idea of living as if the reign of God has already come. Parsons' focus on the Creation and on the imago Dei exists alongside her eschatological view, and here invokes the feminist perspective to

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<sup>346</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 220.

<sup>347</sup> Parsons, "To Be or Not to Be," 341.

<sup>348</sup> Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 221.

address how one should act, live, and pray. She argues that we should live as if the reign of God has already come rather than focus solely on its future realization. For Parsons, this theological position is central to her notion of “redeeming ethics” that is rooted in presence, love, and the transformative potential of the Christian faith. Parsons states that “our thinking here too is preliminary, reaching out for what has already come among us, making ready for what is here, and in that preparation is the readiness of the soul for a conceiving of the love of God.”<sup>349</sup> Parsons does not add a theological perspective to philosophical ethics—it is instead the other way around, for her departure point in ethics is not a philosophical stance, but rather the theology she uses as part of a more extensive system, which at a later point also includes philosophical perspectives. The contribution is seen in various forms, but one noteworthy example is her view of communitarianism as the most favorable way to structure society. Here, the communal aspects of the Church could be used as a role model for the later transformation of more significant societal undertakings. In a similar way, the relational aspects of kinship and family are also seen in light of divine love, where the love of the Other surfaces as a manifestation of the progression toward a theological contribution to social reality—both small and large.

I believe that there is merit in engaging with Parsons’ position on the centrality of feminist theology as a vehicle of change, and with how it could offer an antidote to the perilous nihilistic postmodern condition, especially in the importance she gives to the role of women. That said, the strong focus on essentialism in order to ground her emancipatory potential for women could be a focus of criticism, as it runs the risk of reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than challenging them. It is clear that the works of Parsons have had a significant impact in the fields of ethics, theology, and feminism; and her perspectives deserve careful consideration and critical engagement.

I believe that the strong emphasis on essentialism is a limiting factor for the emancipatory potential of her theological feminism. In my view, there is more emancipatory potential in an understanding of gender and embodied situatedness that is less essentialist and instead focuses on the constructive, performative, and relational aspects of identity formation. This would allow for a more nuanced and inclusive engagement with the intersecting axes of identity and power structures, rather than posi-

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<sup>349</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 187.

tioning the identity of “woman” as the primary or only axis of oppression and liberation. While the feminist notion of women is crucial, I argue that a more intersectional and anti-essentialist understanding could strengthen the transformative theological ethics that Parsons advocates. As she has stated herself, essentialism has reinforced traditional gender roles in many ways; and I believe that a more fluid and constructivist notion of gender could open up new vistas for social change and emancipation. This also relates to how Parsons seeks to emphasize the feminine to counter the masculine bias of Western thought. Still, this move could inadvertently reify the very gender binary that needs to be challenged to dismantle patriarchal power.

One part of profound importance is how the centering of theology could inform one’s perspective in most other areas. However, I want to suggest enhancing the linear temporal view that she seems to have, and proposing that the implied redemption through faith is to be understood in a “present (be)coming” that displaces the current position. To some extent, I believe that this perspective is not that far from her view, especially concerning the divine telos that propels change in a particular direction. What I would opt for, though, is a more radical understanding of (be)coming or teleology that is not bound to the view she endorses and that seems to have only *one* direction.<sup>350</sup> This does indeed clash with her idea of what appears to be a necessary direction, a telos bound by modernity, in that there seems to be an inherent optimism for the better. The latter part should not be confused with hope, which instead lies closer to a theological promise.<sup>351</sup> The transformative character of the Christian faith would then not stop at a certain point, but rather be a constant continuation of Creation. To a certain extent, such a view lies closer to a process theistic belief, which interconnects with constant development through faith—not seeing Creation as static—and, by proceeding with the theism endorsed by Parsons, the imaginative character when hope is used to structure the divine promise of what to come. One could see some overlap here with Parsons’ understanding that one ought to be the change one wishes to see in the world, and trying to live as if reign of God was already upon us.

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<sup>350</sup> Parsons, “Ad Imaginem Dei,” 148.

<sup>351</sup> As also discussed in Gudorf, “Feminism and Postmodernism in Susan Frank Parsons,” 527–28.



## 4. All Enfolding in All: Catherine Keller

In this chapter, I analyze the ethical and theological position of Catherine Keller. To analyze the emancipatory potential of Keller's work, I pose the following questions: 1. *What normative ethical model is defended by her?* 2. *What kind of feminist ethics is advocated?* 3. *How is gender understood?* 4. *What characterizes the view of the human that is presented?* 5. *How are subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability understood?* 6. *What theological contributions to ethics are presented?*

### 4.1. Ethics and Non-domination

Keller cannot be said to present an ethical theory. Instead, she draws on various normative ethical positions that do not lend themselves to any easy categorization. This understanding stems from several parts of her writings, most notably her position on holism, non-triumphalism—especially in the religious sphere of Christianity and vulnerability. I do not believe this to be a problem for Keller; instead, her eclectic models of thought could be used to infer different positions when needed. However, this does not mean that she does not hold a coherent position on all topics. I dare to state that the multiplicitous fragments that can be traced to her positions sit well with her overarching goal of having not one but many voices present. The latter stems from her theological thinking, and Keller wishes to free the normative ethical position from coercive power or dominance over others. Instead, she opts for the cooperation of humans and for humanity to attune itself to all of Creation in order to engage in a futural perspective that encompasses creative flourishing and that includes biodiversity and social justice. Keller makes the case from a theological perspective, following the ideal of love derived from Jesus in the Gospels, a position in which love takes primary place. Directly opposing the position of dominance to which she states “classical” Christianity and the patriarchal history has given

rise, love for all Creation becomes the ideal.<sup>352</sup> Keller understands the current Christian discourse, through hierarchical thinking, to lend itself to the domination of others. This domination has translated into violence resulting from the hierarchical thinking that subsumes all through theology; and Keller wishes to free theology from the possibility of legitimizing domination.

So, what type of normative ethical theory does Keller endorse? If one had to categorize Keller, her normative position would be close to virtue ethics. She holds that transforming subjects and the world's outlook is essential for betterment and change. Keller focuses on holism and transformation to decenter the individualist ethical framework, and instead situates the self in a web of interdependence. Keller's brand of feminist ethics emphasizes connection, relationality, and embodied experience rather than abstract universal principles. Interdependence and radical interconnectedness are at the heart of her position, since she understands everything to be intertwined. Keller's feminist ethics resists individualist and dualist notions in favor of non-hierarchical, non-exclusionary, and mutually affirming relationships, which is hard to categorize according to the general normative frameworks.

Central to Keller's thought is process pantheism. She combines process theology with pantheism and an apophatic understanding of God. Process theology is a branch of theology based on process philosophy. It is mainly based on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), an English mathematician and philosopher, and Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), an American ornithologist and philosopher.<sup>353</sup> For Keller, “process theism is defined in terms of two key claims: 1) God is essentially dynamic and interrelated with the world, rather than changeless and independent of the world; and 2) divine power is essentially persuasive rather than coercive.”<sup>354</sup> Further, process pantheism posits that all things are enfolded in a mutual, processual God, and that the finite and infinite, creature and Creator, are inseparably intertwined. God is thus both transcendent and immanent. God is believed to have two poles (thus being dipolar), in which the primordial nature concerns

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<sup>352</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 91–109.

<sup>353</sup> Donald Viney, “Process Theism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/process-theism/>.

<sup>354</sup> Catherine E. Keller and Austin J. Roberts, “Pantheism and Process Theism,” *Modern Believing* 63, no. 2 (2022): 120.

the eternal and abstract aspects and possibilities, and the consequent nature concerns the aspects of God that are affected by the world and by events taking place. The process-panentheistic God cannot directly affect the world, and instead seeks to persuade the world without coercion (by luring entities), drawing all things into an ever-unfolding relational web of care and creativity. This relates to freedom and creativity, in which God and the world are mutually co-creative and interdependent.<sup>355</sup>

So, how does Keller understand the state of the world today? Just like Parsons, Keller worries that the current societal situation gives rise to and enforces neglect for one another, resulting in nihilism. Nihilism blocks any action that seeks the embodiment of the Divine lure that could be translated into change for the future. By reinforcing the hopelessness of nihilism, one or all succumb to a position in which destructive power advances in the world. For Keller, the present nihilism can include the real presence of the battle for good and evil in this world, not as physical spirits but representations of states of being that either further or hinder the creative flourishing that benefits all parts of Creation. Keller shows how nihilism is a danger that leads to inactivity, and a form of defeatism that would discourage people from actively engaging in political endeavors to work for a more equal world. There is a strong sense today of the post-political condition in which change is impossible, and that there is no alternative to globalized capitalism and the image of God as a dominating ruler. In bleak times, the radically different perspectives that are provided by, for example, feminist theologians almost carry a prophetic voice that speaks of a different future together. For Keller, ethics and theology are used to resist that nihilism. By not succumbing to nihilism, and instead looking for interconnections in the world, one can come to love both the self and others. Love becomes a viable theological resource that can be expanded from the self to the political sphere.<sup>356</sup> Love is essential but not enough for Keller, even if it is central to her normative ethical stance. She adds nuances of justice to the theory of love so that the purpose of justice permeates the theory and makes it more viable to achieve a flourishing world.<sup>357</sup> This

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<sup>355</sup> Lina Langby, "Process-Panentheism and the 'Only Way' Argument," *Open Theology* 8, no. 1 (2022): 261–75.

<sup>356</sup> Keller, *On the Mystery*, 168.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

also makes it political: through love, justice can subvert the current domination.

My understanding of Keller's position is that she wishes to transform persons from within, and that they, in turn, should engage in a democratic political struggle that encompasses the perspectives of love and justice that she endorses. This could be achieved in many ways, and a straightforward account would be to vote for the best possible option. Keller thinks that one should transform institutions to serve the subjugated and to root out domination. Perhaps one could speak of this as a bottom-up approach in which individuals engage in various ways to change structures.

Love and justice, as *just love*, results in a theory of compassion that, according to Keller, bridges the concepts of love and justice and moves beyond any skewed use of them. Keller envisions this for all who could change the communal setting in such a direction. Compassion could arise from love, agape, or eros, and with a sense of justice. Given the fear of nihilism, Keller wishes that all would endure and persist in a mode of compassion as relational subjects.<sup>358</sup> To give examples of this, Keller envisages solid and flexible institutions that help to uphold a just and fair society. Passion and compassion could create the tools necessary to persist in the justice of love for all.<sup>359</sup> All institutions should be monitored to prevent them from becoming part of the injustice. Venues for change can be through democratic struggles, such as voting or other means of influence stemming from the bottom-up perspective.

Keller is critical of triumphalism in general. She believes that one should not be overzealous, which easily translates into misplaced righteousness. In her book *Apocalypse Now and Then*,<sup>360</sup> Keller discusses in two ways the function of apocalyptic thought in the Western context. First, she envisions that a linear understanding of time has crept through history to create a discourse that removes the possibility for change when history is understood to be only linear.<sup>361</sup> Second, she discusses the idea of a "counter-apocalypse" that retains the passion for a prophetic speech of justice and one that does not endorse simple binary

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<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>360</sup> Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996).

<sup>361</sup> This will be discussed further under 'chrononormativity' and *queering time*.



understandings of the apocalypse as a temporal event.<sup>362</sup> Keller tries not to relinquish responsibility when power is used for a good cause, and tries to be self-reflexive. She argues that uncertainty can be harnessed, linking it to future creative possibilities rather than a constraining force. Failure is part of life, and a triumphalist stance fosters a dominant perspective over others, as imposed from the theological concept of omnipotence in classical Christian theology. By abandoning this perspective, she envisions a theology that embraces ambivalence. Keller sees lines of thorough thoughtfulness as humbling regarding specific knowledge, and hopes that this will translate into new ways to learn. “But then the failures of our knowing motivate even more learning. We might fail better because we know we do not already know and therefore can learn.”<sup>363</sup> This concerns the open, participatory ideal being endorsed, in which mutual engagements create new possibilities that do not dominate others.

In my view, the perspective of non-triumphalism would be essential when assessing ethical and theological resources for emancipation. The same should be said about Keller’s self-reflexive stance. One must be careful—at least in this world—not to settle but constantly to re-evaluate the prospects of power and dominance in order to further the struggle for emancipation for the subjugated. The process stance used by Keller could also serve as a role model for understanding how one should act to lessen the domination over others, in that one can never settle. Here, non-triumphalism must be a constant process of invoking a self-reflexive stance that aims at engagement with the power structures at hand. In my view, this is an essential and integral aspect of ethics, since the definition of ethics is that it is the critique of morality.<sup>364</sup> Emancipation comes to the fore, since it cannot be part of a normative

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<sup>362</sup> Rick Benjamins, who has written extensively on the works of Keller, describes it in the following way “Within the context of Keller’s rich, complex and multifaceted discussions of apocalypticism, a very critical and self-critical reflection about the self-righteous convictions of leftist, feminist, liberationist or affiliated groups and parties comes up. These groups, which Keller sympathizes with, usually strive for a better world and reject apocalyptic doom-scenarios, but easily and unnoticed fall victim to the same apocalyptic patterns of thought they reject. These groups hope for a better world in the future, which is opposed to the old world of the present, and as a consequence occasionally demonize opponents for obstructing the realization of the new world, which may readily legitimize the use of violence or suppression.” Benjamins, “Aphatic Pantheism,” 112.

<sup>363</sup> Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 143.

<sup>364</sup> Namli and Grenholm, *Etik*, 9.

position that is not criticized when performing academic ethics. This does not constitute an ethical theory, but it contributes significantly when working in the field of ethics.

Keller sees the world in its current state as heading for social and ecological disaster. She states that the current political state is intertwined with the production of classical theology and that, throughout history, politics and theology have contributed to each other. Keller argues that theology, as failed theos, surrounded by failing institutions, could show us how to “fail better.” Western theology, which promotes omnipotence, resides everywhere, and a counter-theology could provide the resources to challenge this. Keller is critical of triumphalism in traditional Christianity, nationalism, and capitalism.<sup>365</sup> To “fail better,” for Keller, is precisely what is needed to strive for a better future and, at the same time, to acknowledge that frailty and vulnerability will always be present, but that one should strive for an understanding that endorses integration rather than separation. For Keller, this is found in her theological understanding of the cosmos, or “chaosmos,” as she often describes the vibrancy of an uncertain world. She believes that “[s]ome cosmologies will fail better than others.”<sup>366</sup>

How does the upgrading of failure influence Keller’s position? I believe that this is a vital position to acknowledge, since it works with non-triumphalism to establish a forgiving attitude that overlooks the faults at hand while striving for betterment. In this sense, the understanding that one fails is of the essence, since failing is part of life, and is the opposite of a dominant triumphalism. This position does not glorify failure, but endorses it as an integral part of life and provides resources for change. This could also be applied to emancipation, primarily when one acts in ways that do not end as foreseen. Here, I would also like to add, from Christianity, to Keller’s view of the importance of forgiveness.<sup>367</sup> In having a perspective, or in Keller’s case, a cosmology, that acknowledges failure and in which forgiveness is endorsed, one could refrain from becoming fueled by resentment; and, even if one cannot fully refrain from it, the resentment may be reduced.

Keller is critical of what she labels “chrononormativity,” in which the progression of time is understood to be linear (often a feature of the

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<sup>365</sup> Catherine Keller, *No Matter What: Crisis and the Spirit of Planetary Possibility* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2025), 67, 110, 132.

<sup>366</sup> Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 123.

<sup>367</sup> For some examples from the Bible, please see Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:27, Luke 6:37, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13.

Enlightenment thinking of the West that corresponds with the inevitability of technological development). Instead, she envisions a “queer multiplicity of becoming” and a “queer space-time” that is open-ended rather than set, like most of Keller’s other conceptions.<sup>368</sup> Creativity is at the core, where one aspect of God is the essence of creativity and possibility that entangles everything. For Keller, “chrononormativity” is intertwined with the perspective of domination, in that linearity of time has been absorbed into political and theological thinking to further the idea that there can be only one end. Her theoretical understanding opens one to creativity and non-domination, since the “queering” of time does not lend itself to only one future. As a model of thought, an openness to different futures should be embraced.

In that sense, the futural model emphasizes the possibilities of different futures. The queering of space-time might become a model of thought that could serve non-domination and further emancipation. In my view, the mental image endorsed by Keller should be furthered with actions of other kinds, especially concerning emancipation. To change one’s existential perspective is essential, but material actions—and, in Keller’s words, for example, that *truth matters*—should be pivotal when focusing on different areas such as politics. Models of thought are of the essence here, but one must go beyond those and let them take physical form to further the emancipation of the subjugated. In my reading of Keller, she is in no way against this; but her focus is sometimes directed chiefly at the idea that models of thought have priority. There is no conflict per se here; but I wish to move the discourse toward the materialization of emancipation.

Another central point of departure for Keller is that there is not just one origin of the world, which translates into her understanding of ethics and politics as non-dominant. This stems from the notion that the world does not have a single origin, but instead is formed out of the depth of chaos rather than created from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). This is the central argument endorsed in her work *Face of the Deep*. Keller states that the previous and current understanding in Christianity in Genesis—that God created the world out of nothing—is a misunderstanding. Theologians have misinterpreted this text, which has resulted in a conception of God that stresses dominance rather than participation.

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<sup>368</sup> Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017), 193.

Keller labels the former position “dominology,” and links this understanding with the masculine, dominant, and superior, creating everything from nothing, singular in himself, not influenced by any other.<sup>369</sup> Likewise, the depth of chaos—*tehom* in the original text, and “face of the deep” as commonly used in translations of Genesis 1:2<sup>370</sup>—is understood to be the feminine spirit that, because of its sheer existence, must be erased or, if that is not possible, dominated by the masculine.

The author of Genesis, like virtually the entire ancient world, assumed that the universe was created from a primal chaos: something uncreated, something Other, something that a creator could mold, form, or call to order. But the Christian theology that early came to dominate the church could not tolerate this constraint upon God’s power: for why should “He” have had to reckon with an Other? The prevenient chaos cramped the growing Christian imaginary of mastery—what we may call its *dominology*, its logos of lordship. I will argue that by the third century theological orthodoxy had defined itself by an unprecedented *nihil*. Classical theism created itself in the space of the erased chaos.<sup>371</sup>

The position marked by Keller intertwines the perspectives of the Church with that of masculinity in its search for dominance of the *other*—understood as both the world and femininity. These positions are to be understood as mutually reinforcing entities that have contributed to each other from the beginning, and still do so today. This perspective of Creation from the deep is part of Keller’s more extensive understanding of process pantheism, in which God does not dominate through Creation but instead lures all parts of the world toward new creations in an everlasting process. This is a distributed (and later, in political terms, democratizing) concept that Keller believes resonates well with scientific theories, exemplified by her question, “Could what scientists call ‘self-organizing complexity’ now be read as an articulation of divine creativity?”<sup>372</sup> For Keller, this perspective suggests a move from dominance in social interactions toward equality and democracy, in which all parts reverberate to evolve constantly. This is emphasized when Keller dialogues with Carl Schmitt and his *Political*

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<sup>369</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 54.

<sup>370</sup> Genesis 1:2 reads: “[T]he earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

<sup>371</sup> Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvii.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

*Theology*.<sup>373</sup> This is also translated into how God is embodied through the Creation. For Keller, God is not a metaphysical exception, but is seen as the embodied principle of creativity in Creation. All are intertwined and entangled; through creativity, they become embodied entities that surpass any mechanical notions. God, in process and thus in time, is part of all embodiments and the materialization of the world.<sup>374</sup> I suggest that this should be understood in line with the radical democratic ideal endorsed by Keller, which is a prime example of her view that non-domination is essential. It should be understood not only as an example but also as something that transcends the fabric of Creation, in which self-determination as actuality should be a guiding principle for organizing a political society. By reading this in conjunction with her relationality, here called “entanglement,” cooperation is endorsed as a positive ideal.

Thus, Keller’s normative position is a form of holism in which the mutual engagements of all subjects and entities strive together in their constant creative process to make the world a better place. Keller links the process-panentheistic perspective with holism, since all are entangled in the open-ended process of becoming in which God is the relationship underlying all. Since all are intertwined, this is used to justify the betterment of relationships with all.<sup>375</sup> This relationality is paramount for Keller, and is part of the direction that the lure entails, in that one should engage in the betterment of the Creation. This is part of her vision that one should not engage in dominating others, since that limits or hinders their creative flourishing, which she believes to be in line with the divine lure, in which open-ended creativity is the ideal. Open-ended creativity is essential; and this perspective suits the goal of not dominating others.

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<sup>373</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>374</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 188.

<sup>375</sup> Benjamins, “Apophatic Panentheism,” 118.

## 4.2. Feminism and Inclusion

So, how does Keller view the feminist struggle for emancipation?<sup>376</sup> Keller believes feminist theory, *Theoria*, to be a form of *seeing*.<sup>377</sup> For her, this involves a metaphysical presence through which the invocation of the Creation resonates through a network of relationships. It is still particular, but is interconnected to the totality of the world like a spun web. Keller treads a path between taxonomies and wishes to cross what are continually seen as traditional boundaries. One can attune to and discover this in oneself by using *female sensibility*. This constructive power for Keller can transform the world around us, since a “[f]eminist sensibility affirms the quest for connection—not as a mere wish but a driving desire to realize what is real.”<sup>378</sup> She explains that “[r]ealization means both becoming conscious of the real and making it actual, and so exercises both cognitive and transformative power.”<sup>379</sup>

Feminist ethics thus has the power to change the world for the better, and to a large degree this stems from the point of view one adopts. In this sense, the psychological component comes to the fore, because the transformation of the world starts from within. Thus, Keller’s position could be considered constructivist, according to which the power to change the world resides foremost within the subject.

It is worth noting that femininity is also present in the male psyche. I believe that this opens some space for men to engage in feminist matters when ascribing to such a sensibility. This is important, since feminist theory, ethics, and theology can be used in broader applications.

How does Keller understand the exclusion of women in historical Christianity? She makes the case through a psychological/psychoanalytical perspective that aligns with a stereotypical presentation of archaic subjects. Keller refers to the Babylonian creation myth “Enuma Elish,”<sup>380</sup> which included the concept of matricide because the female

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<sup>376</sup> Keller only uses the word *emancipation* in a few instances in her various works. She prefers the term *liberation*, which is widely used throughout her writings. In my understanding, and as used in this dissertation, the terms are interchangeable.

<sup>377</sup> Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), 157–58.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> For a summary and the full text of ‘Enuma Elish’, please see Joshua J. Mark, “Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text,” in *World History Encyclopedia*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---fu/>.

power of Creation represented danger and destruction.<sup>381</sup> Keller also describes how Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas connected masculinity and rationality as activity in the image of God, while feminine concepts were connected to passivity and reactivity as “the category of the monster.”<sup>382</sup> This is linked with understanding the feminine as chaotic, as *Face of the Deep* shows. Christian orthodoxy has always rejected not only chaos but also femininity and women. Keller states that this kind of separation and sexism shapes Western culture: all subjects are seen as separate; the male view is presented as absolute.

Feminism has challenged this during the past century to reveal how all are intertwined. For it to be truly fruitful, the old view must be left in the past; until that happens, change will not occur.<sup>383</sup> Keller’s theorizing revolves around the concept of the male ego as separative, implying an activity rather than a fundamental state of being that cannot be changed.<sup>384</sup> This is linked with the understanding of dualisms found in the Cartesian concept of mind/body.

One prominent aspect of Keller’s feminism includes destabilizing “separation” as a concept and showing how the “male divisions” are inaccurate. Further, Keller wishes to restore those parts of the concepts that have traditionally been understood as unfavorable and associated with the female. One such example is how the female spirit of Creation has been understood to be chaotic.<sup>385</sup> Keller shows how the chaotic spirit is needed for Creation—in the general sense of the word and in the specific use of the creation (of the world)—hence the possibility for change rather than being inert, as the foundation for the world is the “chaosmos.” The Christian Creation myth from the Bible has been misunderstood from the start: the world was not created *ex nihilo*, but rather formed from the “Face of the Deep.”<sup>386</sup> This interpretation destabilizes the male position as inert and dry, whereas the creative female spirit is wet and flowing.

My understanding is that Keller’s theological re-interpretations could be used to further the emancipation of women. Perspectives such

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<sup>381</sup> One could also readily refer to the Hindu Goddess *Shiva* as “the destroyer of worlds”. For further reading please see Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 2nd ed., Mythos (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>382</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 98.

<sup>383</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 2.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–92.

<sup>386</sup> Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xviii, 13.

as these may not change the world, but they can be crucial components of a larger narrative that fosters a shift in perspective, leading to emancipatory outcomes.

Referencing Søren Kierkegaard, Keller discusses how patriarchy imposes the construction of the woman's self as naturally self-sacrificial. She writes:

But the fact that devotion is woman's nature comes again to evidence in despair. By devotion she has lost herself, and only thus is she happy, only thus is she herself; a woman who is happy without devotion, that is, without giving herself away (to whatever it may be she gives herself) is un-womanly.<sup>387</sup>

By internalizing this view, women find themselves in a double bind, losing themselves the moment they come to be. This is a delicate matter, since caring for others is essential to Keller's normative standpoint. The quest is to keep oneself free and authentic while caring for others. One path is through the desire for the Other, as in a creative eros that is corporeal and active. This notion is inspired by Levinas and his concept of desire as arousal rather than as satisfaction, as presented in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>388</sup> Keller is consistent in her process theology, which does not endorse the dominance of others, and which is present in her understanding of eros and love. "This desire is never realized, satiated, done—for the Other whom it desires cannot be had, consumed, appropriated."<sup>389</sup>

Keller shares the understanding of silencing women or making them invisible as a patriarchal strategy throughout history. She uses it when reflecting on the biblical portrayal of Mary Magdalene and the Church's interpretation of it that followed.<sup>390</sup> Keller reads the Gospels by invoking perspectives from specific gnostic texts—most prominently the *Pistis Sophia*<sup>391</sup> from the third century in this case, and through the Gospels

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<sup>387</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 183.

<sup>388</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33–35, 38, 62–64, 101–17, 269–72, 292–307.

<sup>389</sup> Catherine Keller, "'She Talks Too Much': Magdalene Meditations," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 249.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 237–42, 247, 250.

<sup>391</sup> Carl Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia*, trans. Violet MacDermot, English translation. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).



of Mary and Philip.<sup>392</sup> From the *Pistis Sophia*, Keller outlines part of the story when Jesus speaks with the apostles and others surrounding him. Jesus poses questions, and Mary Magdalene, portrayed as a ‘Miriam,’ constantly answers before anyone else can. After a while, Peter interrupts the teaching session:

“Peter leapt forward, [and] he said to Jesus: ‘My Lord, we are not able to suffer this woman who takes the opportunity from us, and does not allow anyone of us to speak, but she speaks many times’.” Or, in a less literal translation: “She talks too much.”<sup>393</sup>

The point Keller makes is about the perspective of several religious scholars who “have exposed the sex-and-power scam that controlled the Magdalene image for most of Christian history and has lifted an icon of women’s ecclesial leadership.”<sup>394</sup> By subduing women from the earliest Christian times, male domination has prevailed at the expense of women. One such aspect is how the Church has viewed some of the gnostic texts and alternative gospels. Keller writes: “*Heresy*: So far, however, feminist theology, as indeed most biblical scholarship by women, engages the content of these gnostic texts only as it sheds light on the social context of the struggle for power.”<sup>395</sup> This aligns with her other positions regarding an open-ended system in which one should not refrain from engaging with the material presented at the fringes of “mainstream” or orthodox Christianity. As with the larger feminist struggle, this is a question of power and of discourse that has been present far and wide, subsuming numerous aspects of life and how history has been written. The latter also emphasizes the intertwining of gender and sex throughout history.<sup>396</sup> Keller writes: “*Gender*: Of course, these are ancient texts, written in the Judeo-Greco-Roman matrix of unquestioned if variegated, male supremacism.”<sup>397</sup> The same is present later in history as well. She also states that Magdalene has been portrayed throughout modernity in line with the earlier understandings of the Church—for example, as semi-naked—without ecclesial protest.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Keller, “‘She Talks Too Much’: Magdalene Meditations,” 234–35.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 244–45.

This is understood as part of the discursive process that rendered and affirmed Magdalene as a sinner and a whore.

Keller's reclaiming of women and of their sexuality through theological thinking is thus essential when engaging in moral debates with and within Christian traditions. Perspectives invoked through history that subsumed women are problematic and must be re-read through new perspectives.<sup>399</sup> However, it is also important that this should come from within. It could be a great inspiration when assessing and transforming questions of faith and the Christian tradition. In Keller's case, it might start with each person rethinking their commitments.

How, then, is emancipation understood by Keller? She envisions a relational perspective that frees women and men alike from their patriarchal subjugation.<sup>400</sup> This is done by rejecting the predefined patriarchal roles. Since women and men alike are captive (but under different circumstances), freedom reverses not only the subjugation of women but also that of men. The latter is crucial, since it destabilizes the notion that feminism and the feminist struggle are issues only for women. By relating to the feminine sides of the self, in the intra-relational self—especially by men—they could become aware of many aspects previously excluded from the ideals of maleness.

I think that this is important, since it positions Keller in the feminist discourse while forgoing any notion of hatred toward the patriarchal male position; instead, she provides a constructive endeavor that could be positively adopted by women and men alike. This also makes her position coherent with the idea of non-dominance. Keller's feminist ethics provide an inherently positive outlook for the world, and her anthropology offers a perspective of positive, constructive change for all. Domination holds no value, and neither does exclusion. Keller's perspective could further a feminist theory that does not exclude men. Through awareness, it could engage with it to advance the struggle for emancipation.

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<sup>399</sup> A similar perspective presented by the use of poststructuralist theory is how one could read the story of the Samaritan woman when she meets Jesus at the well. Without retelling all of it, the gist of the analysis is that, through a mutual need/desire, both the woman and Jesus need each other to perform their deed; the woman needs her savior, and the savior needs someone to rescue. For further reading, please see Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 43–64. and John 4:1-26.

<sup>400</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 161.

By advocating an inclusivist view of feminism, how does Keller see what men could do to bring about change? Keller believes that any male who reads a book such as *From a Broken Web* would have their egos softened to some degree, and that the pattern of misogyny might, to some extent, be challenged; even if there is inherent intent to do otherwise, one is still part of larger societal structures that are imposed on the self. Further, Keller believes that a problem is to avoid men going on “guilt trips.”<sup>401</sup> Men who wish to move beyond current structural patriarchal norms would likely receive little support from other men, since this group probably still believes that they benefit from the status quo. Keller states that men often feel angrier at women than at the patriarchal structures that made women turn toward feminism in the first place; and this anger does not encourage further sensibility toward post-patriarchal notions.<sup>402</sup> One strategy that Keller supports is for men to relate actively to the world as part of themselves and primarily to what have traditionally been understood as its feminine aspects, such as women and children. By doing so, and invoking the feelings of the universe, Keller’s notion is that men could start to overcome their current patriarchal ego. As noted, even the best intentions of men do not equate to success in such matters—but then again, they never do.

Since for Keller the self carries a broad range of aspects that are not separated but instead are intertwined, numerous parts connect to different sections of the world “outside” the self—and as doubled back reciprocally, since the same works in the opposite direction: each enfolding each and all. Further, there is a risk that some men who believe that they are in touch with their feminine side will forego the actual step of moving toward it, but instead take only a partial step into understanding themselves as enlightened *enough* on the matter, while in practice draining women around them to a much greater degree than if they were not interested in feminism at all.<sup>403</sup> I want to note that this perspective of men only engaging *enough* in feminism is essential here, especially concerning the constant self-reflexive stance described earlier and related to critical theory. It should also be noted that emancipation, such as through feminism, cannot be understood to have “succeeded” until absolute equality is present—something that I deem doubtful for the foreseeable future. When one feels sure that this state has come about,

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 203–4.

it probably just means that the situation is distant enough from suffering, but that in no way should it lessen engagement in making the world a better place.

My view here is that there is a need for a range of personal and communal practices and strategies when using theories of resistance to injustices—and it would be hypocritical to suggest that a *single approach* would always be needed. This should also be seen in light of Keller’s argument that, even if they are interested in feminism to a degree, men try to refrain from staying in touch with their “feminine” sides, and instead should excel in their undertakings (that is, to prevail; and for Keller, this is related in a way to domination) rather than practice contemplation. Solitude does not equate to division, and contemplation can rejuvenate the spirit in more ways than one.

### 4.3. Gender and Anthropology

Keller sees gender as fluid but not easily changed. This stems from her view of and engagement with archetypes in psychoanalytical theory, mainly Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. She explores the archaic influence, through history, that old Creation myths and their characters have. The same is present in the mythological world of ancient Greece, where the epics of Homer are used for discussion.<sup>404</sup> Keller believes that God is non-personal and devoid of gender, but that there seems to be an importance in gender from a spiritual perspective, since the feminine and masculine spirits are referred to as having different characters. In her later writings, Keller envisions a more radical approach to understanding gender as multiplicitous.

Keller envisions what she labels an apophasis of gender. Keller states: “I have sometimes called on an ‘apophasis of gender’: As in the ancient mysticism of unknowing, the negation of what we thought we knew opens us to an otherness that we have yet to understand.”<sup>405</sup> This perspective of undoing gender is directly related to how she sees a multiplicitous formation of all entities that are not subjected to linear, positivist thinking, but emanate from the convivial intersections of what constitute phenomena in the world. The same is present in the field of her feminist perspective, and Keller envisions a move that:

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 8, 26.

<sup>405</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 40.

[...] in terms of the feminist folds: it opens, with no linear necessity, from a genderfold into a colorfold to a queerfold to the manifold itself. The manifold serves as place holder, an infinity of finitudes, for the open sequence of intersecting, entangling, and asymmetrical social contexts (gendersexraceethnicityclassspecies...).<sup>406</sup>

Power structures create the conceptions of men and women as separate. Through the power of discourse over time, the genders and their characteristics have been embodied according to specific categories. Over time, this adds up; and Keller mentions, for example, Carol Gilligan's perspective on how women view themselves as having a different understanding of morality than men have.<sup>407</sup> I interpret this not as a biological fact but as something in line with De Beauvoir's understanding of womanhood as socially imposed and created.<sup>408</sup> This provides an opening for change and a fluid creativity that transcends current gender positions. Keller states: "Gender formation and sexual practice, discursive formation, and bodily passion, fold convulsively in and out of each other."<sup>409</sup> Keller frequently uses perspectives derived from Butler, especially in her later works.<sup>410</sup> In line with this, Keller understands the division of sex/gender not to be an innocent divide, but rather an imposition that further fixes the idea of the woman as subordinate to the man. Keller affirms that gender cannot be abstracted from sexuality and that there is no definition of each that is separate from the other. She references Butler, who questions whether one *is* a gender and *has* a sexuality, or whether the language is not sufficient.<sup>411</sup> Keller connects this with the apophatic view, since it almost seems as if the idea of gender and sex surpasses what one can speak of.<sup>412</sup>

Keller believes that "'sex' and 'gender' always conflate confusingly"<sup>413</sup> through discourse, making certain positions from below abject. Thus, the positioning of certain ideals, namely "man in the image of God," enforces a hierarchical thinking that legitimizes the domination

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>407</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 122–24.

<sup>408</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 330.

<sup>409</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 203.

<sup>410</sup> As an aside, to show appreciation, Keller calls Butler "the Kant of queer theory." Catherine Keller, "The Apophasis of Gender: A Fourfold Unsayings of Feminist Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 4 (2008): 918.

<sup>411</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 16.

<sup>412</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 23.

<sup>413</sup> Keller, "Apophasis of Gender," 912.

of others. This is also legitimized through theologies and the construction of gender identities that relate to theology (since there is no division between spheres of discourse). Keller adds that genders and faiths have been shaped in the West during a long history of Christianized patriarchy; and today gender is rapidly diversifying. It is understood that gender does not directly correspond to sex.<sup>414</sup> By not decoupling gender and sex, Keller moves toward a discursive understanding of these phenomena as intertwined. This is in line with the relational ontology that entangles all-in-all and each through a constant process of (en)folding.

Keller understands men and women as distinct but simultaneous owing to her understanding of the self not in the singular but in the plural, such that the self is a society and many at once. From this perspective, a range of feminine and masculine traits are present in each person; this relates to how the self permeates discourse. Here, there is a queerness, as inferred from the perspective of multiple selves in the self, that transcends any simple notion of division. Keller opts for an intertwined relational perspective that enforces distinction above separation. It is tricky to grasp her theory fully, since the mattering of the self-created spirits that embody the world is formed by themselves, not from any coercive outward power. The divine lure works on each entity, whispering directions for it but not forcing it, since God is devoid of coercive power.

One way in which to interpret Keller's view on relationality is to focus on her understanding of the idea of divine wisdom, *Sophia*, that reverberates through all of Creation and transcends it. Keller states: "Wisdom does not enclose a world, a religion, a gender, a sex, a race, a class, a nation, a species. Rather it dis/closes the truth-opening, mystery, multiplicity and connectivity of each of those manifold bodies."<sup>415</sup> Here, the topic of separation and freedom becomes entangled through this wisdom. The divine lure that crosses all boundaries works in a direction that does not reinforce division but instead inspires the hope of a non-domination that does not translate into fixing the subjugated identities, such as women, in any restricted space. This also translates into actionability, whereas the idea of division of perspectives into different categories works to obstruct the view of emancipation.

So, where does this understanding of gender leave Keller's feminism? Keller envisions a future in which the current construction of

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<sup>414</sup>Keller, *Intercarnations*, 194–95.

<sup>415</sup>Ibid., 45.

gender is no longer applicable. She writes: “Multiple forms of belonging in difference: In this space gender would be performed as a radically pluralist faith, irreducible to a liberal pluralism, which in religions or without them keeps its differences tolerantly separate.”<sup>416</sup> Keller wishes to free the construction of gender, especially that of the *woman*, from what she sees as the current state of domination that tries to pin it to a single entity. This resonates with her view of feminist theology as a constant critique that can never be settled. This said, the current domination cannot be easily expunged, and the present feminine traits should be seen as actual. Keller states that feminist theology will continue introducing and interpreting female symbols while distinguishing between idol and icon. She further calls for feminism to resist fixating on gender as the template for females until the traditional concept of gender has been “undone” in feminist theory.<sup>417</sup> This perspective is a clear move in the direction of queering the feminine, in that it should not be thought of as a single entity.

Keller further believes that feminism in the future will rid itself of the divisions that emanate from man/woman to sex/gender and that, by inferring a perspective derived from Butler, queer perspectives will instead come to the fore and thus move beyond current stereotypes.<sup>418</sup> In line with Keller’s vision to assert change that emanates from within persons and that changes their understanding of the world, and therefore can change the world itself, she argues: “Once we can think gender without firm foundations and unquestionable boundaries, but intensify its power to materialize our humanity, we may perhaps endow this erotic destabilization with a certain agapic persistence.”<sup>419</sup> This is a prime example of “doing,” in which gendering is a performative act upheld by those who participate in the discourse. This perspective moves toward changing attitudes to make the world anew. Keller states that gender transformation does not solve all the problems in the world, but that it is a key to moving forward.<sup>420</sup>

To sum up, Keller uses a constructivist account of gender that cannot be separated from discourse. One should not try to resolve gender issues definitively, since any positioning easily lends itself to domination.

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>417</sup> Keller, “Apophysis of Gender,” 918.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 925.

<sup>420</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 197.

This should be seen in light of what I view as one of Keller's overarching goals: one should be free to choose and pursue the inherent creativity that permeates all of Creation and reverberates with the divine lure. This also negates all concepts of identitarian fixation that would not emanate from the multiplicitous possibilities that are inherent in the world. Gender could thus also be used in line with other perspectives to offer a glimpse of how, through destabilizing current, one could better the world and move toward emancipation for the subjugated.

How does Keller see the human? For her, the human is constituted in relation to the world, and the world is constituted in relation to the human.<sup>421</sup> Keller uses Gilles Deleuze's<sup>422</sup> concept of "the fold."<sup>423</sup> For Deleuze, difference and repetition precede the concept of identity.<sup>424</sup> The fold (or *pli*) is a concept of the world as a constant motion. The exteriority folds and unfolds into or onto itself, thus creating a new fold that is an ever-recurring multifaceted process, where the inside can be described as a doubling of the exterior. The world consists of infinite folds, where possibilities become actualities while remaining open-ended in character since the folding process is everlasting.

Similarly, Keller adopts a concept of the subject as "becoming." While Deleuze spoke of a "nomadic" subject, Keller emphasizes the interconnectedness that brings forward a relational subject who should, normatively, by force of this interconnectedness, care for others. Still, a cleavage is often present that keeps subjects from realizing the shared

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<sup>421</sup> For Keller, who uses a holistic rather than an anthropocentric theory, the same is present for all subjects. This section focuses specifically on anthropology. Thus, other entities as subjects are not elaborated on further here.

<sup>422</sup> Daniel Smith and John Protevi, "Gilles Deleuze," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/deleuze/>.

<sup>423</sup> Charles J. Stivale gives the following answer to the question, "[...] what does Deleuze mean by 'the fold'?" The simplest answer is to say that it does not and cannot mean just one thing. It can mean *pli selon pli*, the fold after fold that implicates the movement of life from fold to fold, within, into, and through the envelopment of unfolding and onto the next fold. It can mean the *entr'expression*, the between expression, that this undulating, creative, and vital movement manifests, the ongoing and constant expression of the actual from the virtual, as much as the virtual's nascent state toward the actual. From this perspective, then, to pin down any individuation as representing "the fold" quite evidently would betray the sense of the heterogeneity of movements and continuity of becomings that characterize Deleuze's concept." Charles J. Stivale, *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: The Folds of Friendship* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>424</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), v–vi, 26, 38, 47–48, 231–32, 247.



reality and its importance. Notably, here is the “general” history of humankind, which is ensnared in patriarchal demeanors while at the same time being open to change; and, in dire times, there is still the possibility to change for the better. In this sense, her understanding of the human subject is in flux.

So, how does this relate to the world? She wishes to refrain from dualisms, as in her critique of the Cartesian mind/body dualism; and the same attitude is present when moving to other dualisms of the world. For Keller, there is no division between the subject and the world. The same could be said in the wake of ethics, since—although reconstructed—it is present in a world that is dialectically constituted and non-separable from its subjects. In this transferred sense, Keller’s ethical position is about what is just for the subjects, who can never be in themselves distant from the Creation. Instead, the mattering<sup>425</sup> invokes itself in the subjects at hand as they emerge through the material world and spin outwards. Thus, the material component implies a notion of responsibility for the inhabitants and the world.

How, then, do the human and gender coincide? Keller uses the novel *The Secret Life of Bees*<sup>426</sup> by Sue Monk Kidd to show the wisdom of the female divine; but perhaps more important in one aspect is how she especially highlights something that represents parts of what could be understood to constitute her anthropology.<sup>427</sup> In the novel, the main character, Lily, declares that “people, in general, would rather die than forgive.”<sup>428</sup> I understand this to be a theological perspective of sin as detachment from God and one another. Not forgiving creates a stalemate in which victim and perpetrator cannot move forward. This is not to be confused with the neglect of victims’ situations; instead, life is complex, and perpetrators have been shaped in a particular discourse that is saturated by certain norms. Keller stands close to Butler, in that humans causing harm are responsible for their actions, while it should

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<sup>425</sup> Keller uses the poetic duality of *mattering* to mean, at the same time, 1. mattering of consequence, that it is important, and 2. mattering in the sense that a phenomenon materializes and takes a physical form.

<sup>426</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2002).

<sup>427</sup> The novel is a form of “coming of age” novel that centers on a fourteen-year-old girl, Lily Owen. Set in South Carolina in 1964, it explores topics of love and belonging, as well as the divine female spirit. For a short introduction please see “The Secret Life of Bees,” *Sue Monk Kidd* (blog), accessed February 24, 2021, <https://suemonk-kidd.com/books/the-secret-life-of-bees/>.

<sup>428</sup> Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, 277.

not be reduced to a simple reading and labelled “evil.”<sup>429</sup> Disillusioned, or having been wrongfooted, is perhaps a suitable way to describe this position, since the invocations of discourse displace subjects and then present them with a cleavage that does not result in their flourishing, following Keller’s vision of self-constitution free from unjust powers. Only by forgiving can one move forward and not be bound by a previous injustice. As long as one “remains” in the injustice, there cannot be any progress, since a shadow hinders the creative enfolding.

It is important that Keller’s view of humanity and embodiment is theologically informed and is clearly related to Christology. In her Christology, Keller invokes a perspective of radical redistribution and a decentralized understanding of embodiment that is not singular. According to Keller, this perspective is rooted in the experiences of marginalized groups that already embrace multiplicitous viewpoints.

The singular incarnation undergoes radical redistribution. Already experimentation in multiple Christs—Black, Latino, queer, or the female Sophia—has over a couple generations effected what we might call a *superpositional christology*, in which communities in their material-ritual apparatuses diffract Christ differently. Yet in each case there can be no separation between the observant community and the bodily marking of their Christ. This is the one who in Matthew’s account cannot be disentangled—to the consternation of the “Lord Lord” sayers—from the hungry, the imprisoned, the “least of these my siblings” (Matt. 25:40).<sup>430, 431</sup>

Matthew 25:40 directs attention to those most in need. Keller endorses a radical distribution of Christ by invoking an apophatic perspective on the subject at hand.<sup>432</sup> This would disentangle the manifestation of Christ from certain assumptions. Still, I understand that there is no need to use the apophatic perspective to have a radical Christology that can manifest under different circumstances. In line with Keller, I fully believe that perspectives of difference should be shared and used to learn how to understand Christ’s materialization. However, I do not see how any unsaying of this would further the cause of that need—that is, a

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<sup>429</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 15–16.

<sup>430</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 80.

<sup>431</sup> Matthew 25:40 reads: “And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

<sup>432</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 80.

Christology that takes difference seriously to the fullest. The materialization of Christ should instead be sought to shed light on a Christology that does not linger but is brought to the fore in all its glory for those in need.<sup>433</sup> This does not need to coincide with any dominology, and a vulnerable Christ may be most needed to understand how God can share suffering. Thus, Keller's perspective should highlight Christ's actual multiplicity and materialization when required. Still, one does not need to negate any speech act of the manifestation to do so.

#### 4.4. Subjectivity, Relationality, and Vulnerability

So, how does Keller understand subjectivity? Keller's process theology posits the foundations of the world to be not entities but relationships. This understanding is based on the notion that matter equates to being static, and relationships provide openness to change in that "all things flow,"<sup>434</sup> and thus, the process proceeds. The "relationship" is also at the core of Whitehead's process philosophy, in that discrete objects exist by virtue of their difference *in relation* to other entities. Without the relation, they would not exist.<sup>435</sup> Keller further describes process philosophy as a philosophy of *feeling* that cannot be reduced to emotions. Instead, feelings are the actual connections that bind occasions together.<sup>436</sup> Further, "actual entities are events, not substances"<sup>437</sup> that all entities "prehend" instinctually, from the smallest atoms to compound entities and persons.<sup>438</sup> *Positive prehension* works, in that the bond between entities, their relation as feeling, binds all parts of the universe together.

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<sup>433</sup> Here the reference to "Christ Pantocrator" comes to mind; and to what extent one believes this concept (and depiction) is of importance, perspectives from the Eastern Orthodox Church show that one can encompass understandings of both apophatic theology and a positive Christology.

<sup>434</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, Corrected ed, Gifford Lectures 1927–28 (New York, NY: Free Press, 1978), 208.

<sup>435</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect: Barbour-Page Lectures, University of Virginia, 1927* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1985), 39.

<sup>436</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 183.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>438</sup> On the topic of prehension and feeling, Viney writes: "Whitehead speaks of every actual entity as prehending, or grasping or taking account of, its environment and as striving to realize the *subjective aim* of coordinating its prehensions in some determinate fashion. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead uses the word 'feeling' as a synonym

The particular individual is then a pulse of experience in which the world is *brought* in by feeling. Brought into what? For the feeler does not exist before the feelings. To feel the world means to emerge from feeling the world. These feelings make me what I am. That is, individuals actualize themselves—become actual—by feeling or refusing to feel (“negative prehension”) everything else out there in the objective world. And to feel the world means literally to bring it in, to give it a home, to let its objective manyness turn into a new subjective oneness. A new theory of one and many, of subject and object, is here taking shape.<sup>439</sup>

Process metaphysics thus makes all subjects part of one another, since the world being brought into the subject at hand constitutively also exists in the opposite direction. All these subjectivities exist because of one another, dialectically constituting all parts simultaneously. Since none exists apart from the others, they share a mutual presence that entangles them. All parts are enfolded in one another, and the subjectivity at hand, such as a person, exists as the spatiotemporal locality where a flow of prehensive occurrences constitutes what we understand as ourselves. Thus, the subject is a unique perspective that is individual but inseparable from the world. The same works for all entities; but the subjective constitution as a mind might not have emerged in all entities (as compound entities). Simultaneously, prehension is present for each entity. This makes the connection and constitutes the mutually emergent other. It is vital to understand Keller’s position on mutual vulnerability, and that the constituents, as subjects, should care for everyone.

Thus, Keller sees relationality as the foundation of all existence, a prerequisite for subject formation. It is inherently vulnerable, since others can harm it. Dependency involves vulnerability, and we should accept this and work to reduce the harm done to one another. This should not be done by invoking a false sense of separation in which one earlier thought that self-reliance could lessen vulnerability. We are always vulnerable, but the actual harm can be reduced communally when domination is reduced or eliminated. Relationality and vulnerability are distributed differently in precariousness; how could one radicalize this? Keller writes of intersectional perspectives, in which many attributes are present in subjects’ lives. The problem is that the generality of entanglement is rather vague. The distribution of vulnerability is unequal; and

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for prehension to indicate the vector character of feelings—a feeling is always a feeling of something.” Viney, “Process Theism.”

<sup>439</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 183.

without a developed and in-depth ethical understanding of precariousness, it could be problematic. To emancipate the subjugated, relief should be directed toward those in dire need.

Since Keller uses a pantheistic process theology, interconnectedness is in the fabric of the world. Using Deleuze's concept of the fold, Keller can critique the subject as divided by interiority and exteriority. In this conception, the interiority is an expression of the exteriority, albeit in a new position.<sup>440</sup> When using the fold in the subject, the self folds into itself (*the self*), which in essence is a form of subjectivation, since what can be characterized as the exterior and interior sections of the self converge; but as they are folded, new planes emerge, and the process is continued. When understanding the world as interconnected with others (and here, Keller builds on the ideas of other humans, animals, and all parts of the world), the fold extends to encompass the world before the subject. The subject is formed from being in relationship rather than an autonomous subject before coming from relationship. The subject and the world are mutually constituent emergent phenomena: intertwined and inseparable. The subject constitutes a unique perspective that is individual but still intertwined and inseparable from the world. This unique perspective is present in virtually all entities. At the same time, subjectivity depends on what type of entity it belongs to, since what is generally considered conscious is not a prerequisite here. The unique perspective for humans would translate into the 'I'—that is, the self-referential locus of the mind as directed on itself. The same would be present for sentient beings; but assessing how it would look and translate into human terms is more difficult. This would be the same for other entities: for example, how a mountain—or other inanimate objects—could be understood to have a unique point of view.<sup>441</sup>

The spatiotemporal subject is ever in flux, always moving from the past, through the present, into the future. Keller references Augustine's

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<sup>440</sup> Simon O'Sullivan, "Definition: 'Fold,'" September 19, 2007, <https://www.simonosullivan.net/articles/deleuze-dictionary.pdf>.

<sup>441</sup> I understand Keller, in following Whitehead, that the unique point of view in a sense would be present, since it constitutes and prehends other parts around it. This might open the way for panpsychism or pan-experientialism; but it is hard to assess the degree to which that would change the human subject of interest in this dissertation; thus, owing to demarcations, this line of thought is not explored further here. For more on panpsychism, please see Philip Goff, William Seager, and Sean Allen-Hermanson, "Panpsychism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/panpsychism/>.

*Confessions*, in that all things will pass,<sup>442</sup> and with the Whiteheadian process, understanding thus destabilizes the subject to continually propel itself into the future. By being constituted of feelings, the subject is objectified through its connection to the world for just a fleeting moment before it floats away, diminishing in the past. In this sense, the subject is never quite the same, as the flow of time and connections varies and evolves.<sup>443</sup> For Keller, it then follows that the subject's feeling, as solidified into an "objective datum," influences every future occasion. Since the objectified past's influence is still present, the fleeting moment of constituted subjectivity directly imposes itself from the past on the future through the present; thus, there is a direct continuity, if even it is somewhat altered, for each subject. However, since the flow, in line with the creative forces of the universe, is constantly evolving, the subject is never quite nor entirely the same, and as such, cannot *really* know itself either; the process cannot be halted. The subject remains in the same "flow," and since it can still know some things, or perhaps quite a lot, from time to time, it is not an empty subject but a knowing one that should know it cannot fully know itself. Thus, the subject can only really grasp the past, and when accounted for, the current moment is also in the past, and the "current" present has not yet made itself part of the subject's *becoming*.<sup>444</sup> This perspective is reasonably close to the one Butler uses, in which the subject, to an extent, is opaque to itself. By being partly unknown, one should be humble and not triumphant, in that the same should be valid for others. The point

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<sup>442</sup> The section referenced by Keller is in *Confessions* Chapter XXIX. Augustine here focuses on the everlasting grace of God, and distances this from temporal occasions in the world. Augustine meditates, now that he follows God, on how he shall be "forgetting what is behind, and not distended but extended, not to things which shall be and shall pass away, but to those things which are before, not distractedly but intently, I follow on for the prize of my heavenly calling, where I may hear the voice of Thy praise, and contemplate Thy delights, neither to come, nor to pass away." Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 163–64.

<sup>443</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 187.

<sup>444</sup> Keller writes, "My present self may think 'I feel angry.' But the anger to which it refers is that of the immediate past—which will influence but need not totally determine the subsequent moments of experience. I *am* not this anger when I can name it. This is why the knower cannot know itself: it can have as the object of its knowing only a previous occasion, an antecedent self. Strict reflexivity is impossible. The self cannot literally know itself. The sword truly cannot cut itself. The knower and the known are not one." *Ibid.*

here is that all subjects are vulnerable to not fully knowing and, therefore, cannot claim to be dominant concerning one another. This is part of Keller's understanding: she seeks to provide a theory of non-dominance based on her theoretical perspective of how the world and the subject are constituted.

I want to pose the question: If that is so, how does not knowing provide ample grounds for justification that will not lend itself to domination? This may not be a logical necessity. Still, when understood in conjunction with the perspectives such as mutually constituent subjects, relational anthropology, and the endorsement of non-coerced choices for each subject, in my understanding the compound perspective being presented does lend itself to domination to a much lesser degree when compared with dogmatic certainty. The key is reflexivity, and self-reflexivity to an even more considerable extent, which, without losing its foothold, is open to the creative flourishing of open-ended character that can invoke the presence of hope. I am sure that one could use uncertainty as a tool for domination; but that is not the case here, since it cannot be singled out from a more extensive understanding of that (self-)reflexivity. Here, process metaphysics provides a theoretical perspective that lays the foundation for all types of entity and how they relate to one another, but not through their domination of one another.

So, how does this position relate to emancipation? Keller theorizes that the individual is open to the world and not to domination.

Let us then for the sake of consistency consider self the momentary individual, of whatever species or kind, in its full scope. Self is the unique, immediate event where an experience takes place and where the world is gathered as a unique composition. A self feels its way into existence; it takes possession of a world; and then it lets itself go. It owns its world but cannot—try as it might—hoard the gain. For it cannot even maintain *itself* just as it was: it is a momentary event of possession, of inclusion, of taking in and putting out. Thus the self contains within its parameters everything that is not itself; yet the self is clearly distinguishable *as* itself. It *selves* its world. There is nothing that is not somewhere part of it; yet in a moment it parts with its own selfness. Its immediacy perishes into the subsequent world. It is not as true to say that its boundaries are permeable as that it permeates the unbounded.<sup>445</sup>

Subjects are interconnected, and their porous boundaries share a metaphysical presence that translates into the political reading of Keller, to

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<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

say that the world and the subjects “own” one another as part of one another, but that this is not a possessive understanding, since that would invoke a perspective of domination of the other; whether it be the world or the subject that wishes to hoard the gain. Keller presents a theological critique of positions of certainty that have often “succeeded” throughout history in dominating others by enforcing their beliefs. This could further improve the understanding of relationships by exploring different engagement methods that could lead to emancipation. Critiquing triumphalism invokes a perspective of a shared vulnerability that cannot be encapsulated in a triumphalist perspective. Since theology is important (especially in the USA, where Keller writes), the discourse—through theology—could be altered in a direction that does not enforce triumphant stereotypes but rather highlights traits such as humbleness. Self-reflexivity is essential to refrain from over-indulgence. No matter the subject, one could be engulfed in it in the search for perfection.

Thus, Keller understands that subjects can respond to the world in various ways. This is important when considering the concept of the subject, since it removes the notion of subjectivism from the perspective of the self. The self creates the past as objective, in the form of a solidified “objective datum.” The self is part of this process: the subject’s unique perspective is part of the objectification of the past, since the current outlook about what was is changed, all while the possibility of futural change remains. Like the subject, the world is shared between entities to reduce the risk of the subject lapsing into solipsism. The past is not arbitrary, and the subject—as the self—cannot become anything at any given moment. This is part of the continuous subject formation with others, making the past stable while keeping the possibilities for the future open.

I understand that refraining from solipsism is crucial, since doing so would continue the relational aspect of subjectivity. In my view, this is important when understanding the potential for emancipation. The component of futural changeability creates the possibility of a different becoming, a becoming in which one is not bound by the past but is still influenced by it. This resonates with a discursive understanding in which the subjects are upheld in relationship and mediated through discourse, but not fixed by the discourse. I suggest that the process philosophy perspective used by Keller is important, since it provides a theory that never accepts a stalemate regarding the subjugated. By showing that the future is open, in opposition to a restricted perspective such as



“there is no alternative,” the constant process invokes an understanding that does not lend itself to believing that there is only *one* way forward. Concerning a discursive understanding, as the one Butler uses,<sup>446</sup> in which there is minimal possibility for change, this perspective could challenge such an understanding. However subtle it may be, adding a perspective of constant change could spur hope that would show the emancipatory potential.

A cautious note should be entered here, since the possibility of change invokes the possibility of negative outcomes. This is a challenge that I believe no theory can fully avoid, and is a necessary risk of believing that all things are in process. I believe that the possibility of change, as opposed to the restricted thinking of “there is no alternative,” is well worth the risk—especially in times of nihilism and hopelessness. Hope, in the form of a “leap of faith,” is not enough for emancipation. Still, when added to the constant process that is inherent in change, it might be the key that one needs to act and move toward emancipation for the subjugated. Openness and creativity—through non-domination—are what to look for.

Keller integrated postmodern and negative theological concepts into process theology, which are valuable today when “we face the unknown of an insecure future, recognize the limits of our situated knowledge, as well as the shortcomings of our identification of God in metaphysical terms.”<sup>447</sup> This is an essential part of Keller’s perspective, which includes “unknowing,” in line with a Buddhist echo, limiting the amount of possible knowledge in any given situation.<sup>448</sup> This relates to a theology of uncertainty as non-dominance, resulting in open-ended concepts from the human person to theology to politics and to other spheres. Keller references the philosopher of religion, John D. Caputo, in his expression of a theology of “maybe,” in that uncertainty should always lie at the heart of theology.<sup>449</sup> This is also a safeguard against dogmatism, and Keller understands this to translate into the political sphere when she engages Schmitt’s understanding of the sovereign as the exemplar.<sup>450</sup> On the epistemological plane, uncertainty opens the possibility

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<sup>446</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17.

<sup>447</sup> Benjamins, “Apophatic Panentheism,” 105.

<sup>448</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 21.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>450</sup> Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 5–10, 21–68.

for new knowledge, since previous knowledge is not deemed unchangeable.<sup>451</sup> A mindful unknowing creates the space for change, and like the analogy of the “cloud,” contours remain fuzzy.<sup>452</sup>

Keller’s mattering of bodies seems to be an emergent phenomenon, not reinscribed through itself, as Butler describes the process.<sup>453</sup> Keller does provide a foundation, but not to the same extent as Butler.<sup>454</sup> For Keller, the unique outlook of the subject is embodied. Keller states:

Not that I ever know myself directly, as a Cartesian mind could. In the concrescence I remember and forget what has been, even as I anticipate or ignore possibility for what may be. But “I” am always only now becoming and therefore never available for pure self-knowing. “I” am already a crowd—of past selves and future possibilities. “I” happen at the same time as the perspective enfolding them all. So the “I” seems to be a peculiarly human device: it renders my perspective, entangled in all those others, singularly repeatable—and therefore responsible. We are able to respond to the other before us, and so to decide, to cut between possibilities—mindfully. Or not. The other may be first of all human, mirroring me to myself, but only first of all, and only late in history did the human get abstracted and extracted as ego from all the nonhuman selves folding in and out of it. Still we humans know ourselves cloudily as complex compositions of our relations human and otherwise, called to create something new of them—of ourselves. Together, in any event.<sup>455</sup>

This provides the essence of Keller’s subject that the self is always coming, in the future tense, which through process directs it toward the future. Further, sociality is stressed in that the self is created through the relationships of humans and non-humans alike. Alongside this is the emphasis on decisions as a prerequisite for subjectivity, in that the choices

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<sup>451</sup> Of course, one can ask what type of knowledge Keller refers to. This is a broad topic, and perhaps it is sufficient to note that what counted at one point as knowledge might later not be thought of in the same way, even though at the earlier time it was justified to believe it to be knowledge. For further discussion on the topic, please see Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa and Matthias Steup, “The Analysis of Knowledge,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/knowledge-analysis/>.

<sup>452</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 23.

<sup>453</sup> My view is that Butler grounds her perspective of mattering of bodies in epistemology, while Keller starts in metaphysics. The former can thus be regarded as a “bottom up,” while the latter is a “top down” understanding of what constitutes ontology.

<sup>454</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

<sup>455</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 178–79.

made and simultaneously rejected create the fold of the self and the others in conjunction. By choice, actions (and non-actions) work to move forward. Since the process is never ended, the subject is not fixed, but its timeliness may change in a queer way that disrupts linear time and changes how the formation is brought about. The subject transcends its setting through its freedom, propelling the self forward.

A cautious note should perhaps be entered about the “Cartesian mind” and how Keller labels it negatively. To what extent Descartes believes one could “fully” know oneself is left out, and he did try to show that at least one knows that the mind of the self exists—not whether it could be fully known. I understand that Keller sees this as a part of her broader theory, in which the mind is not separate from the world but rather a part of it. Thus, the porous borders of which she writes become essential when assessing how her theory of the subject could be used to further emancipation. There seems to be a tension between the self and the world, since they are intertwined but still distinct.

I think that the perspective proposed here by Keller is critical when understanding how the subject is formed and what this could entail concerning others and the Creation. By not delimiting the self, but rather showing how it is brought forward in relation to others, care for others should be emphasized. Perhaps this is not enough to prompt action, such as in the political sphere or in everyday life, but it is part of the larger discourse on how one should act and what traits and principles are essential in relation to others and the world. I believe that a shared sense of responsibility, such that intertwined perspectives are present—as in the self—would move the feminist discourse toward emphasizing power to the self, and see that emancipation is a collective sense of effort. Since power is communally upheld and shared, negativity directed toward some is thus directed toward all. Understanding how persons (and all the Creation) are interrelated should result in a personal and communal interest in emancipation for all. This is not an argument from selfishness, but rather the other way around, so that the self can flourish with and through others.

What, then, could the subject do concerning ethics? Keller understands everybody to be responsible for acting by being given a choice. A heavy burden is placed on all subjects as responsible for all others through their relationships, which are global. Keller posits this as a possibility for betterment and change. At the same time, I understand it

more in neutral terms, such that creativity could be used for either creation or destruction—and they often coincide, depending on the perspective. This gives no privileged point of departure, just as Keller’s equally distributed panentheistic God does not have a single vision for the whole Creation. For Keller, the same is the case when she states, “The self is not only social as arising from the multitude of relations it internalizes; the person *is* a society.”<sup>456</sup> This relates to the concept of not knowing: one can have meaningful exchanges with the self from within.

Keller rejects any anthropology that leads to an understanding of atomistic subjects. The separation leads to a state that does not involve solidarity, and she asks whether “we” got divided into “identitarian *many*.”<sup>457</sup> It is easier to care only for the self rather than take care of others, however different they are (again, avoiding anthropocentrism here). Suppose that each subject is shared in each, albeit distinct, through a unique point of view; the entanglement through others should be used to infer a state of solidarity that could be translated into actions. She wishes to disdain such division; and here she sees rigid identities as a problem for solidarity, since it infers the separation of people rather than aiming for the interconnected goals of betterment.<sup>458</sup> Instead of opting for identity politics, Keller states: “I hope rather to think together with any who work to gather a de-essentialized, dense—indeed contracted—entanglement of our differences.”<sup>459</sup> Identitarian politics restricts people and creates division. Still, one must be careful not to reimpose a state of imperialism and dominance that excludes the possibility of forming the self with specific practices and histories. A constructive way forward is to work with inclusion rather than separatism, which I believe is well in line with what Keller envisions when engaging with feminism: that it is not restricted to women. Instead, men should also be included and adhere to such perspectives and theories.

Keller endorses intersectional perspectives that do not reduce identities to individual separateness and that are founded on theological engagement with an emancipatory character for the subjugated.

Theological relationalism rides with the progressive politics of late modern religion. So it came linked with the assertive identities that, in reacting against oppressive essentializations, was necessarily tempted

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<sup>456</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 196.

<sup>457</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 26.

<sup>458</sup> Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 11.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*

to new essentialisms (Woman! Gay! Black!). At the same time, a “simultaneity” or “intersectionality,” articulated by African American women already in the seventies, resisted the contextual closure of such reactive identities. The multiple vulnerabilities of some subjects of liberation—as the “triple jeopardy” of race, class, and gender early framed by womanist theologians for theology became “multiple jeopardy”—push right through identity politics into a more honestly entangled ethic.<sup>460</sup>

Keller endorses interconnectedness on every plane that does not erode the vulnerability aspect of subjects, but that also does not reduce them to this state alone. She does not invoke strategies for the emancipation of the subjugated on any granular level. Instead, she works on a larger scale, focusing on a grand vision for the future. The character of the statements is somewhat vague in that their direction is not granular, and thus they risk becoming dispersed or diluted, since the functioning character translating into actionability is never quite present, at least, not in detail. Keller strives for a shared relational ontology, but fails to account for the most vulnerable even when trying to. This is a crucial part of my critique as an ethicist. However, Keller writes about *matter*, as in how the creative, open-ended process matters itself through the Creation. It still focuses on the possibility of future things rather than demanding actionability here and now. Keller writes:

Or we can attend to the delicate tissue of our entanglements. Such responsiveness might make us more ethically affective and effective, capable of stronger coalitional conversations, collective actualizations, terrestrial communions. If so, we have to do not with the imposition of beliefs but with the superposition of possibilities—and so of more convivial, maybe even cosmopolitical, materializations.<sup>461</sup>

One possibility that would further the vision that Keller endorses is emphasizing the material aspects of injustice. I believe that this aligns well with the intentions that Keller envisions, and one cannot cover all bases. In my view, Keller provides a compelling perspective for understanding the need of the subjugated and their suffering. What should be enhanced further is the materialization of the Spirit as guiding when invoking matters of political engagement. This is not a dichotomy, but rather

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<sup>460</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 32.

<sup>461</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 82.

something that aligns with the multiplicitous perspectives endorsed by Keller.

Through their shared experience of the world, the potentiality of the subjects does not impose any external force—even when the lure of God is present. This shifts much of the responsibility to the subjects, and could be seen in the light of her general discussions, which perhaps lessen in impact to a degree. This is especially prominent from her theological perspective on the concept of a theology of maybe.

Now we hear of the theology of maybe, of perhaps, of divine weakness—calling us to do what we “can do.” But if a discourse of mere powerlessness seems (when for instance we feel helpless before corporate depredations) to waste too much potential, let us summon our cloud power. We might even in certain contexts translate the divine power, in fidelity to the Latin *omnipotentia*, as divine *omnipotentiality*. It would unfold indeterminately in all creatures, in a perspectival one by one—“as if directed just to me.” It is truer to say that this *posse ipsum* is actualized than that it acts: it does not make, but makes *possible* the actual creature, the actualization of the creature. Therefore each creaturely contraction expresses not the act of the creator but the agency of the creature. Theology haunts each of us with the gift of our own ability, our responsibility. But really, now, never mine alone but widely and wildly “ours.”<sup>462</sup>

Keller thus states that her process theology does impose a heavy burden on the subjects at hand, since there is only the self and others in relation and no divine power that might come to the rescue, since it does not entail personhood.<sup>463</sup> However, without falling into fatalism, there still seems to be something unsettling about the citation above; the most subjugated do retain their agency paired with responsibility. Also, with all the problems and burdens that corporations might impose on people, one must not be too radical in directing attention toward people who are devoid of corporate relations: the homeless, the outcast, and the refugee—as subaltern—to name just a few. Direct attention to the problems of capitalism is necessary: ethics should be more radical in transforming society.

Concerning locality, a noteworthy part of Keller’s theory is the aspect of “nonlocality,” in that her eco-feminism does not restrict itself to

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<sup>462</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 112.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

a communal setting but reaches infinitely wider.<sup>464</sup> She references quantum theory from the natural sciences to show how entanglement works in physics, and makes the case that relationality works by analogy. Quantum theory is developed as a reaction to the earlier Newtonian physics, in which objects are understood as separate.<sup>465</sup> Keller's relational ontology does not lend itself to communitarianism, but always wishes to strive further. In this sense, situated knowledge could be understood in universal claims, since the reach is infinite and not bound by the context. She endorses porous borders for the self and for society, because separation can never be acceptable. This aligns with her understanding of ownership as part of dominance, such that one can never *own* the other. She strives for openness and interconnections that continually cross boundaries in an ever-intertwining process. Thus, communitarianism cannot be favorable from her perspective. It might be a short-term solution while one contemplates together with others, but it is not what the divine lure wishes the Creation to move toward indefinitely. I suggest that we view Keller as a holist with a solid cosmopolitan ethos, in which subjects freely engage in their chosen undertakings without being hindered by others.

What role does vulnerability play in Keller's understanding? Interconnections and co-dependency not only make the self in need of others, but are only made possible by and through them. The necessity of others entangles and makes cooperation possible rather than cleavage. One could try to make moats around the self, but the world is still made of connections, whether one likes it or not. Further, Keller imposes a Christological understanding in which God, through Jesus as made flesh, suffers *with* and *from* the world.<sup>466</sup> Keller cites Paul from 2 Corinthians 13:4,<sup>467</sup> and makes the case that this is a difficult passage that treads on the verge of indulging in weakness.<sup>468</sup> She emphasizes the need to read this passage from a nuanced perspective, in which vulnerability, as shared by God, could empower the subjugated. It should not be used to dwell in passivity. Neither should it be seen only as trium-

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<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–48.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>466</sup> Keller, *On the Mystery*, 84–85.

<sup>467</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:4 reads: "For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God."

<sup>468</sup> Keller, *On the Mystery*, 84.

phant, since Keller holds a view of God that does not denote omnipotence.<sup>469</sup> At the edge of chaos, vulnerability could work as empowerment in light of this middle ground, neither as passivity nor as unwarranted triumphalism. Keller references Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, "God at the mercy of the world,"<sup>470</sup> written in a Nazi prison cell.<sup>471</sup> Even in times of the most hideous horrors, when one might not feel the love but instead be bewildered by torment, light in the Spirit defies death, and it is made known that Christ suffered on the cross. Keller connects this idea to the idea of non-violence, emphasizing figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., who embodied this spirit. Their work represents a hopeful, albeit sometimes modest, movement toward a balance that avoids both passivity and triumphalism. At this moment, an understanding of vulnerability could be necessary for empowerment.<sup>472</sup>

## 4.5. Theology and Transformation

What role does theology play today? Keller believes that we live in a post-secular era in which theology contributes significantly to ethics and to philosophy. She believes that one can use theology to disrupt other prevalent understandings of the world by invoking a discourse framed through theology. Keller repeatedly references theologians, and she has a particular interest in Nicholas of Cusa, from whom she draws inspiration in several instances. Later, when writing on politics for the world, her grounding in apophatic panentheistic process theology is vividly expressed as the common dominator that should lead to collaborative and reciprocal care for others, not only in humans but for all parts of the world.

Keller understands the concept of theology as becoming through its apophatic non-presence. It is an ever-moving horizon of possibility that never presents itself in favorable terms, but instead focuses on an open-ended process to foster betterment for the whole world. This betterment includes a holistic perspective that is free from dominance and in which

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 69–90.

<sup>470</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York, NY: SCM Press, 1971), 164.

<sup>471</sup> Keller, *On the Mystery*, 85.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.



respect for all living creatures is present. By harming nature—for example, through deforestation and the extinction of biological life—one directly hinders and interferes with this open-ended creative process, and enforces a position of unjust dominance over others.

Central to Keller's theology and ontology is that all is in all, as entangled multiplicities that fold in and out of one another; the relationships penetrate all parts of the universe—and the apophatic process panentheism provides a foundation for creatures and inanimate objects alike. Keller uses the example of Lady Anne Conway,<sup>473</sup> an English philosopher of the Enlightenment, to illustrate the need for multiplicity in philosophy and theology, which might have been deemed out of bounds in its time, while providing a range of contributions that are not restricted to a single orthodoxy. As the title of *Polydoxy*<sup>474</sup> states, Keller (and her co-editor Laurel C. Schneider) opts not for a single understanding of theology but for a multidimensional model that does not result in hegemony. Keller references what is perhaps one of Whitehead's most famous critiques of "the classical Christian image of God" when he states that "[t]he Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar."<sup>475</sup> Here, she takes over one aspect of the critique of a sovereign understanding of the superior that implies a perspective of vulnerability emanating from a democratizing view that should not promote anyone above others. Keller conjures up the view of God through discourse linked to maleness. In their self-understanding as God-like, men took over this perspective as an ideal for themselves, removing the feminine from concepts of power.

So, how does Keller's theological stance differ from traditional theism? Keller believes that classical theism has worked as a legitimizing factor of superiority, often with the omni-attributes<sup>476</sup> (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and sometimes omnibenevolence) ascribed to God. Keller views previous notions of Christianity as triumphalist and as translating into a worldly dominion of power modeled on

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<sup>473</sup> Sarah Hutton, "Lady Anne Conway," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/conway/>.

<sup>474</sup> Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, eds., *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (Drew Transdisciplinary Theology Colloquium, New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>475</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 342.

<sup>476</sup> William J. Wainwright, "Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnipresence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology*, ed. Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46–65.

divine attributes. This has resulted in a dogmatic stance that does not represent every perspective in Christianity. She wishes to refrain from a theology of certainty, and instead wants to be open to plural understandings of theology. A move should be made from singularity toward multiplicity, which should be seen as a resource for theology.<sup>477</sup> Keller claims that, by adopting this multiplicitous perspective that opens theology up, a theology that can better the world is possible. This is a critique of classical theism and theology, which she accuses of providing a solid ground for the domination of others. Regarding orthodoxy, Keller wants to move beyond the “previous and current understandings” and to offer a range of perspectives. “Polydoxy” references orthodoxy, and then widens the term to include multiple lines of thought, as in the case of “convivial manifold,”<sup>478</sup> which has new possibilities.

And what on earth is the point of theology, now, today, if not the cultivation of this convivial manifold? Amidst the mounting perils of our social, ecological, and spiritual multiplicities, can theology in its Christian morphology now come — despite our more demoralizing histories — to nourish our planetary symbiosis?<sup>479</sup>

One could ask whether this is an instrumentalization of theology. Perhaps it is; but for Keller, theology can only be directed toward all of Creation, since the apophatic God remains present in all parts of the world rather than being something separate. By being “relation itself” and the force that lures all others, for Keller, God is elusive. At the same time, absence does not equate to nonexistence; the fabric of possibility itself, in its presence that materializes into actuality, “matters itself” through the ongoing process of enfolding relationships.

By invoking the perspective of immanence from transcendence, Keller’s theology presents a democratizing project while removing the promise of the transcendent telos found in classical theism as devised by God. God is understood to be distributed through all of Creation and its materiality.<sup>480</sup> This coincides with the process panentheism that holds

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<sup>477</sup> Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, “Introduction,” in *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, ed. Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider (Drew Transdisciplinary Theology Colloquium, New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 1.

<sup>478</sup> Catherine Keller, “Be a Multiplicity,” in *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, ed. Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider (Drew Transdisciplinary Theology Colloquium, New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 83.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>480</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 109.

that creation and possibility, also emerging as other names for God, entail a privileged position over destruction and separation. A problem arises here in conjunction with the immanence present in the world, since process and creation are not linear, and often invoke creation and destruction as a simultaneous phenomenon. Why should one of them be understood as privileged when both are needed (since they are part of the same process, as found in “the fold”)? In my view, the classical theist notion of a telos provides a better answer to why creativity would be privileged. In Keller’s position, it would work more as a force of nature, something that just “is”, present but devoid of morality. Another solution would be to understand the lure as a form of telos, which Keller does not, but that would radically change her theological position.

Another point revolves around the chronology of theology, in that Keller identifies “now, today”<sup>481</sup> as the locus. This opens up the idea of a functionalist perspective of theology in a specific time, and that its use could change over time. This aligns with Keller’s concept of a queering time (as opposed to “chrononormativity”), which suggests that the concept might change. The concept of theology has changed throughout Christian history, often in conjunction with philosophy as a counterpart.<sup>482</sup> Still, this perspective entails an instrumentalist view of theology that needs to be useful for something else and important in its own regard.

To soften the critique, Keller could be understood to direct theology toward the coming of God in her apophatic panentheistic view that democratizes and distributes the Divinity throughout Creation. In this view, the constant coming, or becoming, of the Divine is distributed throughout the world in the struggle for betterment. A problem that Keller does not address is how the betterment of the world, when devoid of a divine telos, could improve itself without having an ideal model to strive toward. The lure of the Spirit is there; but in relation to the Catholic concept of divinization or the Protestant notion of coming closer to God in relationship, there can be no essential transcendence of becoming “more” like God. Social and ecological relationships are still present, but the totality of the lure is distributed in the open-ended character, which makes morality inherently subjective. My view is that a telos

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<sup>481</sup> Keller, “Be a Multiplicity,” 83.

<sup>482</sup> Michael J. Murray and Michael Rea, “Philosophy and Christian Theology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/>.

can be excluded from the linear understanding of time of a predestined apocalyptic notion.

Yet another point of critique posed by Keller of classical theism is that only “some” people “belong” to Christ, and that this creates a division of a hierarchical character that translates into unsound power relations, not opening up the prospect of equality and love for all.

When “belonging to Christ” means that “we” and not “they” get the goods of salvation—I do not see the love. It may be that the deconstruction of classical omnipotence, a linchpin of process theology, makes possible a notion of divine efficacy, influence and not mere all-in-all immanence, that does not betray the love.<sup>483</sup>

I do not dispute Keller’s claim that many forms of classical theism can be and have been used in oppressive ways. Still, I do not agree with her notion that this is an inherent part of that theological perspective. As written in Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul addresses a specific Christian congregation in the earliest Church; but the text is open to the love of others, and does not divide people, just as Jesus lays out the “Golden Rule” in Luke 6:27–31.<sup>484</sup> It is evident, as in other instances of caring for the “stranger,”<sup>485</sup> that there is a well-established love for others in the Bible (even though many perspectives are presented, and one could thus use it to legitimize many or most possible notions). Often, there is a risk that a “pick and choose”<sup>486</sup> approach is used to bolster one’s view rather than seeing the larger picture.

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<sup>483</sup> Catherine Keller, “‘Theology’s Multitude: Polydoxy Reviewed and Renewed’: Theology’s Multitude,” *Modern Theology* 30, no. 3 (2014): 136.

<sup>484</sup> Luke 6:27–31 reads: “[27] ‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, [28] bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. [29] If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. [30] Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. [31] Do to others as you would have them do to you.’”

<sup>485</sup> A good example is found in Matthew 25:31–46 (“The judgement of the nations”)

<sup>486</sup> For example, when Keller states (which might well be the case): “In other words, our honorific dominion comes down to this: we get to be vegans like all the other animals!” in Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 77. It is apparent that Jesus Christ, as the new covenant, distributed non-vegetarian food, as shown in Matthew 14:13–21 (Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand). For further references to the “new covenant,” please see, for example, Deuteronomy 30:1–5, Jeremiah 31:31, 33, Ezekiel 36:26–27, Luke 22:20, Hebrews 7:22, and Hebrews 8:6.

Keller references Deleuze and Guattari in their famous introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*:<sup>487</sup> “Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.”<sup>488</sup> Before this citation, Keller writes: “‘Don’t be a one or multiple, be multiplicities!’ It is the *pli* that makes the difference.”<sup>489</sup> As exemplified in the “*pli*,” the fold here should also be seen as a reference to the “*en*” in “*panentheism*,” in that the concept goes beyond the common understanding of it.<sup>490</sup> This expands into other areas, of which one is the workings of the Spirit:

In between and beyond the religions, our entangled polydoxy affirms its multiplicitous spirit. Here in particular we offer a self-critically Christian conviviality, as one messianically explicated host for the larger convivencia: for the nourishing, today, of the planetary multiplicity of vulnerable bodies. Each plurisignularity – “interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousand” – enfolds in itself, variously, uncertainly, responsively, its world of others. Spirit seems to urge us, with an urgency amplified in every ecological or existential emergency, every religiopolitico-economic contradiction, to welcome assistance and to offer it abundantly.<sup>491</sup>

Keller provides a perspective that is proper to her process panentheism, in which the Spirit lures or urges the subjects in the world to engage in the betterment of Creation. However, one would like to think that that reading could be seriously doubted when one looks at the current state of the world. Keller is also distraught at the state of the world, but wishes to remain hopeful that the Spirit is present in calling for a positive creativity. When that call is discerned in a perilous time, which might be understood as the working of the Spirit, the masses seem to be led astray by other priorities and engagements, and the calling goes unheard. For Keller, sin is a result of the human wish to separate one another and to dominate others. Change and re-creation contain positive

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<sup>487</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 173.

<sup>488</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>489</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 173.

<sup>490</sup> One’s thoughts easily stray to the Muslim *Takbīr* in “*Allahu akbar*,” commonly translated as “God is greater,” in which “*akbar*” takes the relative form of the adjective “being great” (*kabīr*) that always indicates the forward direction of the presence. For further reading please see Hans Wehr, *A dictionary of modern written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 3rd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1976), 810. and Karin C. Ryding, *A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 195; *ibid.*, 244–53.

<sup>491</sup> Keller, “Be a Multiplicity,” 97.

and negative results; for that matter, the mind both does and undoes things simultaneously. For Keller, faith is an open-ended process that does not equate to blind certainty, but is rather a combination of a relational social process that provides a reciprocal framework entangling all subjects that are present. The discourse is already present from which challenges can be made; but just as Butler understands it, constraining limits are imposed on the subjects, which creates a form of grounding in the immediate context.<sup>492</sup> Keller expands this to all spheres of Creation—both social and ontological, as in her understanding of Genesis—when she states: “Nothing knowable comes constructed *ex nihilo*, void of context.”<sup>493</sup> This perspective enforces nonseparability and potentiality, in that entities share a context and thus are non-separable, and that their potentiality becomes actual through materiality and differentiation.<sup>494</sup> For Keller, “It is this *nonseparability of difference* that renders injustice intolerable. For good or for ill, in cosmology or in ethics, differentiation is not an effect of separation but of an entangled unfolding.”<sup>495</sup> By unfolding and simultaneously folding into and onto one another, the separate entities are a result of the differentiation process that exposes itself through repetition, and subjects are a result of this process; repetition produces difference, and subjects are thus produced. No cleavage between entities or subjects could exist without relational comparison as entanglement. If there is no differentiating process, the entities would not be perceived as distinct entities (even though they are not separate, through their entanglement)—in essence, they would be the same. In short, the process of differentiation creates subjects.

Keller also understands nonseparability as a foundation for her ethics, in that the subjects are entangled and fold into one another; they share a necessary bond that precedes their existence as particular subjects. Also, since the constant enfolding process is entangled in all, all subjects that relate to one another are part of the same process that shapes and re-shapes, through the folding of one another, into new relations and subjectivities. To a large degree, this view is similar to Butler’s in that, through the shared existence, one has a responsibility for the other.<sup>496</sup> However, Butler’s view primarily derives from Levinas and

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<sup>492</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17.

<sup>493</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 20.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

his concept of the “face of the other.” Keller questions this type of phenomenology, since she understands Levinas to overemphasize the separation of the other. Keller writes:

Levinas radicalizes its otherness in a language of “exteriority” and “separation.” While avowing the infinity effected in the face of the irreducibly singular, we instead explicate it as a relation of nonseparable difference. I am composed and so in part degraded in and by my relations. And just therefore does the singular confrontation *concern* me—it directly involves, enfolds, implicates me.<sup>497</sup>

Keller refers to *Totality and Infinity*, and criticizes Levinas for removing ontology altogether from his ethics, since he focuses on sheer immanence that is devoid of ontological baggage.<sup>498</sup> Keller believes that Levinas enforces the view of a “self-sufficient ego” that Butler avoids.<sup>499</sup>

I believe that Keller misunderstands Levinas in this particular regard. In my understanding, Levinas created a theory devoid of ontological implications because it focused on sheer immanence that still translated into relational ethics, in which the direction of the responsibility is outward–inward and then reflected toward the other. For Keller, the entanglement mainly starts in the self and directs the responsibility outwards because of a shared connection. Still, for better or worse, Levinas’s understanding implies a much larger responsibility for the self by the instantiation of the other.<sup>500</sup> In my view, Levinas’s perspective could place much pressure on the subjects, but could simultaneously emancipate the subject through responsibility.

So, what about the relationship between theology, ethics and politics? Keller believes that theology contributes profoundly to ethics and to politics, claiming that theology is a discipline in dialogue with a vast range of spheres. This is in opposition to the current situation in which spheres are separated—a division that results in politics being devoid of theology, and enforces a secularism that does not contribute to the

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<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 227–28.

<sup>500</sup> Another approach worth mentioning, although not similar in theory but with a similar aim, is Derrida’s understanding of unconditional “hospitality,” as explored in Gerassimos Kakoliris, “Jacques Derrida on the Ethics of Hospitality,” in *The Ethics of Subjectivity: Perspectives since the Dawn of Modernity*, ed. Elvis Imafidon (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 144–56.

exchange of thought that could advance society (and the world). Keller believes that theology might be an open and hospitable discipline with which others could cooperate.<sup>501</sup> Further, the prophetic character of theology could instill hope in a population that sees separation and division as a given. Keller provides a compelling argument for the incursion of theology into other spheres, and that mutual exchanges and cooperation could further one another—as long as one did not erase the unique qualities of each entity, since, to some degree, disciplines should remain somewhat faithful to their character in relation to the others. This is enhanced by her use of Christological perspectives in her work. One such aspect is highlighted by the thematic use of Jesus' revelations in the Gospels, such as in the mystical way in which Jesus describes himself in John 15:5<sup>502</sup> as the vine, while his disciples are the branches. Each is part of each and is necessary not only for flourishing, but also for life itself: without the branches, the vine itself is dead.<sup>503</sup> For Keller, this is part of the continuous creative process in which all creatures and agents participate in a global movement.

One crucial aspect that Keller brings out is that the eco-feministic approach instills a mutual responsibility to care for the Creation. In times of ecological disaster and all the ravaging destruction that is present, this perspective should be enhanced and translated into resistance actions against the exploitation of the earth. In the classical theological understanding, humans are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). The principle of human dignity is traditionally justified in line with the *imago Dei*. Keller's theory directs the energy of Creation toward the whole world, while the *imago Dei* instills a form of anthropocentrism—something Keller wishes to leave behind. For Keller, this also bears gendered connotations of the man as ruler; instead she opts for an inclusive perspective in which all of Creation takes part.<sup>504</sup> However, this situation is complex because the widespread distribution of responsibility can lead to a dilution, so that no one really takes responsibility. Care for others can also be instrumentalized, since one could care for the other only to better oneself (since the self is maintained by the other). A principle of human dignity, or the responsibility of the other for Levinas, displaces the focus from the self and toward any attribution

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<sup>501</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 27.

<sup>502</sup> John 15:5 reads: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

<sup>503</sup> Keller, *On the Mystery*, 36.

<sup>504</sup> Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 193.



that may heed and direct it externally toward the other. This is a heavy burden. Still, the accountability for the subject is predominantly to care for the other in themselves, not to care for the other to better the self. Anthropocentrism is still not “resolved,” and by placing the classical theological concept of human stewardship over the Creation, it remains. This concept has its benefits, since the subjectivity of the human self might just be that limited; and I see little reason to refrain from an understanding of care for the Creation from this perspective. Perhaps more pressing is the question or function of apophatic theology, and here I have a divergent view from Keller. I favor the concept of apophatic or negative theology in that it always transcends the current notion of understanding (as in the modality and connotation of *Allahu akbar*).

In Keller’s apophatic theology, the negation disperses God. It distributes the actuality into the Creation while remaining true to the infinite possibilities of pantheism, where the possibility of God transcends Creation through the Spirit that lures. The Spirit in Keller’s theology, and the direction of the lure emanating from it, since she does not wish to call it a telos—owing to the open-ended character of process theism—opens for the question of how that same direction would be understood. A divine telos must not be linear (although it might be); and I would claim that to have the lure is, in essence, to have a telos. If not, what (open-ended) direction should the world strive toward in its enfolding? The Spirit, then, must be personal if the direction of the lure is not to be by chance. This does not equate to the removal of pantheism, nor does it by necessity disavow process as such; instead this creates a more complex understanding of God that genuinely transcends Creation while grounding that understanding in it, since such pantheism can remain open-ended in the enfolding. Whether one understands the process in relation to divinization or to entering Paradise, the multitudinous aspects of theology can remain.

I would argue that a God devoid of power, negated but present, that does not move (what happened to the “most moved mover,” if that is not a mover?) but lures, still holds the power of that lure. Persuasion, no matter the form, just as speech acts, does entail power that cannot be ignored. The power of speech can change and shape not only tomorrow but also the world, and the lure of the Spirit is a power in the world, flowing through Creation, perhaps calling toward an open-ended telos—but a telos, nonetheless. One could argue that there is a difference between *coercive power* and *influence*, where the former represents the

power of domination, and the latter represents the lure that Keller endorses. Still, one could make the case that influence is power—although not coercive to the same degree that violence is—and therefore is not violent. Still, I would like to disagree with this statement, and propose a view that makes speech acts; in that sense, the lure could be characterized as a form of “speech,” which I find a reason to do, since it *speaks* to beings and entities in the world in Keller’s understanding.

Speech matters and (to borrow Keller’s understanding of how truth matters<sup>505</sup>) implies the same understanding of other types of speech acts, as they also *matter*, in that they “materialize” through the power of discourse and shape the world. In this regard, and even though Keller, to a degree, uses Foucault’s understanding of power/knowledge,<sup>506</sup> a more in-depth perspective would enhance the understanding at hand. For Foucault, power and knowledge are each a prerequisite for the other, since power uses “knowledge” and is based in it, while at the same time power shapes the use and content of knowledge that then reflects on the discourse from where it was cited. Thus, they are co-dependent and co-exist with each other and, through the power of discourse, shape the understanding of knowledge—through epistemology—that those subjects inhabit. In this sense, the materializing component and result of speech acts go beyond the lure as innocent; and even if it does not entail coercion by physical force, it still implies the power to change the world at one’s will. For Keller, though, the latter is hard to understand, since the Divine lacks personhood but still seems to enact a particular type of “will” as the lure, producing a kind of present telos.

Keller’s vision of emancipation for the subjugated as a matter of spiritual transformation is sound. However, she falls short by not going in the direction of recognition and redistribution. One should move further here and provide resources that could translate into social action. Keller contributes by offering theological inspiration; but I still suggest that we need an understanding that enforces normative ethical perspectives that go beyond the sphere of theology. Theology is important, and should remain an important resource for ethical thinking; but it should also be self-reflexive in understanding the limits of current discourse and, from time to time, move beyond its constrained setting.

Keller’s perspectives are essential when constructing theology, which does not lend itself to the domination of others. I believe this to

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<sup>505</sup> Keller, *On the Mystery*, 12.

<sup>506</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*.

be a crucial point that ties directly into a mode of resistance that could translate into an actionability that starts from within the self and spreads outward through society. By transforming the self, one could engage in struggles for the emancipation of the subjugated through collective means. Through a structural account, and by changing the direction of the discourse, the subject formation could also be furthered to include a broader account than exists today. This is of the essence when studying “restricted” modes of subject formation that limit subjectivities. Keller’s endorsement of how gendering should not lend itself to domination—that is, restricted through limiting discourse—is a perspective that is well worth bringing to the fore when thinking about identities and subjectivities anew, free of domination. In doing so, inherent and situational vulnerability should be embraced for what it is, and a normative account should be adopted that furthers connections and inseparability. Keller makes significant contributions, and one does not need to embrace all the process metaphysics to see the valuable aspects of her theory.

Another valuable aspect of Keller’s theology is her endorsement of non-triumphalism and self-reflexivity. I believe this to be an asset to remember when exploring the relationships between emancipation, subjectivity, and vulnerability. Keller’s relational understanding is crucial, since it commits subjects to working together. In my reading of Keller, where “separation” could be translated as “sin,” it opens the space for an inclusive rejoinder in the struggle for the emancipation of the subjugated. Therefore, following Keller’s perspective, the significance of working together, women and men, humans and other creations, is a crucial feminist struggle. The opposite could indeed be seen as a sin; and sin as unjust separation is a core theme in the next chapter, where I study Denise M. Ackermann’s works.



## 5. Relational Praxis: Denise M. Ackermann

In this chapter I analyze the ethical and theological position of Denise M. Ackermann. In order to analyze the emancipatory potential of Ackermann's work, I pose the following questions: 1. *What normative ethical model is defended by her?* 2. *What kind of feminist ethics is advocated?* 3. *How is gender understood?* 4. *What characterizes the view of the human that is presented?* 5. *How are subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability understood?* 6. *What theological contributions to ethics are presented?*

### 5.1. Ethics and Anthropology

Ackermann's ethics is reconstructed from her writings in this chapter. She does not provide a normative theory in a traditional way, but her theology makes significant contributions to ethics, or so I claim. Central to Ackermann's theological and feminist position is the importance of praxis. For Ackermann, praxis is the intersection between theory and practice in a mutually and dialectically reinforcing manner.<sup>507</sup> Praxis thus incorporates the intellectual dimensions of theory while also emphasizing people's lived and embodied experiences. For Ackermann, praxis is emancipatory in its nature, and therefore, the subjugated voices are critical, since they provide accounts of injustice that are not known to the privileged.

Ackermann's understanding of liberation is directly related to experiences of apartheid South Africa and the years after the fall of the apartheid regime.<sup>508</sup> Underprivileged groups contribute their perspectives to politics and theology in order to shed new light on questions of injustice

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<sup>507</sup> Ackermann, "Liberation and Practical Theology," 30.

<sup>508</sup> Denise Ackermann, "Feminist Liberation Theology: A Contextual Option," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 62 (1988): 14–28.

and to reveal modes of domination that would otherwise not be visible. In the context of South Africa, this is visible in sexism against women and racism against non-White people. The lived experience's importance also points toward materialism, where the physical understanding of injustices and the embodied perspectives are vital. This includes, for example, poor living conditions, not having clean water and food, and a lack of shelter and security. These conditions are not something one can "think differently" about; they are genuinely real, and impact those living under them.

Thus, Ackermann's practical theology implies a critical understanding of justice. This understanding is relational, emphasizing justice as right social relationships. Right social relationships should be seen as a prerequisite for justice; but they are not symmetrical per se, since justice can only be brought about if the relationships are constituted on the principles of mutuality and equality. Such an understanding has several sources: Christian traditions, the experiences of sexism and racism, and philosophical inquiries. From the Christian faith, Ackermann primarily focuses on the concept of the *imago Dei*: humanity is created in God's image, and thus has a dignity that cannot be denied. If anyone would challenge this dignity, the challenge would, by proxy, be directed toward God. The *imago Dei* justifies different forms of resistance to injustice. Alongside to the *imago Dei*, Ackermann looks to Christology to further her analysis of the materiality of the Passion of Jesus. Concerning philosophical inquiries, Ackermann focuses primarily on the contribution of critical theory and on how it enhances the understanding of praxis as part of an emancipatory ideal.<sup>509</sup> This includes critical resources to assess and work against injustices, particularly emphasizing equality and the redistribution of resources.

Injustice is social, and implies wrong relationships. What does Ackermann say about right relationships—that is, justice in a positive sense? By "right relationships," Ackermann understands relationality as paramount for humanity and social formation.<sup>510</sup> Humans are intrinsically relational, which is vital when pursuing questions of justice. Dualistic thinking, such as hierarchical structures, does not provide the un-

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<sup>509</sup> Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom," 35.

<sup>510</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "Interrupting 'Global-Speak': A Feminist Theological Response from Southern Africa to Globalization," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, ed. Sheila Briggs and Mary McClintock Fulkerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, January 4, 2012), 17.

derstanding that requires equality. Since all humans are made in the image of God, all humans are to be treated with equal dignity. As a form of domination, hierarchy contradicts equality.

Further, as necessitated by their dignity, all humans should be able to live flourishing lives according to their choice. All forms of oppression or domination are unjust, since they directly counteract what belongs to individuals and to their dignity. Oppression has many forms, including the rejection of being recognized as an ethical and political subject, the lack of power to change one's position and circumstances, and the lack of the material resources to live well above the bare minimum. When recognized as political subjects, all persons can actively engage in political and social practices that impact their living conditions. As moral subjects, people should be allowed to establish their moral identity without being forced by others. Subjectivity entails agency, and each subject must be able to make viable choices and perform actions according to their wishes.

Ackermann understands equality as the right to pursue one's goals without hindrance from others. This implies the demand for mutuality, which cannot be restricted to negative rights alone. Positive rights are also needed to secure participation in political matters. The same is true of the power to change one's conditions; and this also entails a broader perspective that involves different discourses. These discourses include, but are not limited to, the different relationships of which each person is part, such as family, friends, employment, and political engagement.

Not all forms of oppression are codified by law. Sexism and racism, to mention only two, might be part of the social fabric—that is, the dominant discourse—that must be challenged to provide people with the possibility of real choices. Thus, not just oppression that is codified in the law must be challenged and changed.

In the same way, other discursive practices create unjust relationships, and these must also be challenged. Similarly, providing for material needs are essential, since poverty makes human life miserable and suppresses freedom. This points toward materialism, which structures people's lives and should not be used as a hindrance to flourishing lives.

As already stated, Ackermann's longing for justice is part of her theological project. I understand that this longing expresses her faith, in which the longing for God cannot be separated from a longing for jus-

tice. Ackermann's practical theology is based on the *imago Dei* and enriched by her use of Christological resources. The experience of the subjugated is shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By invoking the Christological perspective, Ackermann emphasizes the dialectics between the particularity of the humiliation experienced by Jesus on the one hand and how the resurrection is expected to redeem all humanity on the other hand. In the narration of the Passion of Jesus, Christological resources show how God fully experienced concrete injustices and thus shared the conditions of the subjugated. Experience of the subjugated is concrete and particular, but redemption in God is universal. Following this, the contextual experience and similarities in the Passion can be invoked today, and the universal claim to justice is preserved, since redemption is not localized, neither spatially nor temporally. Just as God redeems all, there should be justice for all.

Thus, Ackermann interprets Christian theology as a model for liberation and justice. The ideal of non-domination and equality is critical. God does not discriminate regarding forgiveness, nor should humans discriminate between themselves. Emancipation for the subjugated is not constricted to any location. Instead, it has a universal character that needs to be contextually mended.<sup>511</sup> Each actual injustice is a concrete experience of domination and oppression in the form, for example, of inequality and unjust hierarchies. This contextualization of the emancipatory ideal also emphasizes the relational aspect of Ackermann's normative account, both in the form of justice as communal right relationships and in concrete actions one must take individually and collectively to challenge the oppression being experienced.<sup>512</sup> Since relationality is always present, one must act relationally by contextualizing the universal claims of emancipation for the subjugated in actual physical spaces, discursively and spatiotemporally. By engaging with relationality, the theologian must meet concrete persons; she cannot do so in the abstract.

This relationality is decisive for Ackermann's understanding of praxis, and her work as a practical theologian exemplifies the embodied actions for justice. Praxis must be a lived experience that is only possi-

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<sup>511</sup> Denise Ackermann, "Critical Theory, Communicative Actions and Liberating Praxis," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 82 (1993): 22.

<sup>512</sup> Denise Ackermann, "Defining Our Humanity: Thoughts on a Feminist Anthropology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 79 (1992): 20–21.



ble in a communal setting. When praxis is enacted through just relations, this is reflected in the person and in structures. Ackermann uses an example of how the Church has constantly neglected women's experiences and robbed them of the status of theological subjects. Instead, we should rethink the harmful practices in ecclesiology that have led to the hierarchical thinking and practice of regarding women as inferior to men.<sup>513</sup> All experiences are communally mediated, which also points toward the social construction of reality through relations.

As stated earlier, the experience of injustice in Ackermann's theology focuses on South Africa during the apartheid regime. What does this mean when we are about to interpret and scrutinize her ethics today? I believe that it is reasonable to endorse Ackermann's thesis that experiences of injustice cannot but be particular, and that at the same time they contribute universal insights into social justice. The questions that were most pressing during the apartheid era are not the same as today's, but they still give viable insights into liberation and justice.

Ackermann's position on feminism and justice is close to that of Nancy Fraser, although they relate to different contexts.<sup>514</sup> Most importantly, Fraser highlights that a feminist theory of justice must recognize *different forms* of injustice. Through her critique of the reductionism in various forms of second-wave feminism, Fraser argues that feminists must incorporate a transnational perspective to suggest a potent theory of justice. Such a "transnational feminism is reconfiguring gender justice as a three-dimensional problem, in which redistribution, recognition, and representation must be integrated in a balanced way."<sup>515</sup> Very similar to Fraser, although primarily through discussions of concrete political problems in South Africa, Ackermann demonstrates the complexity of social injustice.

Her emphasis on material conditions and on the embodied experience of the subjugated is most relevant to contemporary ethics, and I believe that we should follow Ackermann in this regard. In that case, any meaningful recognition of human subjectivity must be combined with providing for material needs if actual changes are to occur. Recognition—and in many cases, a recognition disconnected from distribu-

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<sup>513</sup> Ackermann, "Critical Theory, Communicative Actions and Liberating Praxis," 22.

<sup>514</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, *New Directions in Critical Theory* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 104.

<sup>515</sup> Fraser, 114.

tive justice and a structural analysis of power—has been more prominent in the discourse since Ackermann’s most productive years. This means that her materialism has great critical potential today. There is an increase in the unequal distribution of wealth today,<sup>516</sup> and the ethics of recognition alone cannot challenge this. Here, materialism and the demand for equal distribution are perhaps more critical than ever.

Ackermann’s materialism encourages us to focus on material conditions, distribution, and power relations. In this perspective, capitalism is an unjust social organization, and Ackermann develops a critique of ideological projects that legitimize capitalism.

Somehow, unexpectedly, she claims that Cartesian dualism plays a significant role in the genealogy and ideology of capitalism. According to Ackermann, one central characteristic of modernity concerns the ideal of progress, which is seen as positive and inevitable. This has developed along with capitalism, in which economic exchange through capitalist markets is seen as the best expression of progress and, in many circles, as the only possibility. Cartesian dualism is also part of modernity, since divisions make objectifying easier than focusing on subjective aspects and interrelations. Dualism provides a strong foundation for hierarchies, and hierarchies lead all too easily to inequality, which is unjust if one endorses equality as right communal relationships rather than domination. In my reading of Ackermann, the simultaneous development of Cartesian dualism, capitalism, and modernity should be seen as mutually reinforcing, each boosting the others. When considering subject formation, the subjectivities produced under such conditions are not founded on relationality but rather on divisions. This is crucial, since subject formation is mediated through discourse, and thus, for a subject formed in a context that endorses division and separation, the subjectivities will contain the same elements. This contrasts starkly with the formation of subjectivities based on advocating relationality, mutuality, and equality.

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<sup>516</sup> “Wealth inequalities have increased at the very top of the distribution. The rise in private wealth has also been unequal within countries and at the world level. Global multimillionaires have captured a disproportionate share of global wealth growth over the past several decades: the top 1% took 38% of all additional wealth accumulated since the mid-1990s, whereas the bottom 50% captured just 2% of it; Gender inequalities remain considerable at the global level, and progress within countries is too slow;” “World Inequality Report 2022 | UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab,” October 4, 2023, <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/publications/world-inequality-report-2022>.

The discursive narrative that is present in modernity states that there is no alternative to the societal structures of late capitalism.<sup>517</sup> According to Ackermann, much is at stake when people do not believe there to be any alternative, and thus might become nihilists. “Nihilism” here refers to a state of passivity that can result in people becoming mere consumers of social reality rather than active agents. A mode of power is present here that focuses on preserving the status quo for the privileged and for rulers. By enhancing such a notion, passivity can be fostered in a population. This is only sometimes done in a devious way. Still, its actuality becomes pressing when the overarching narratives of modernity prevail, namely that all grand narratives are obsolete and that now all must internalize the disorderly character of postmodernity. Ackermann believes that, after Nietzsche, there is a discontinuity in the lack of active engagement for the betterment of society. We should follow Ackermann here, since when people become passive, they no longer pursue justice or be part of the resistance that challenges present forms of domination.

What, then, is Ackermann’s alternative to the current modernist ideology of capitalism? In my interpretation, hope is related to the longing for justice. Like other theologians of liberation, Ackermann understands the concept as genuinely critical toward preserving the status quo and as pointing to the possibilities of new creations. Even in the direst of times, when all seems lost, there can still be hope to ignite the spark that would prompt change later on. For Ackermann, the theological inception of hope stems from the Christian faith and the promise that God redeems all Creation. Christology invokes active engagement instead of passivity in this critical interpretation, thus making the change possible.

Any change is always a risk; but when hope is used as a theological resource for ethics, it is most dangerous for those in power. Change is also a risk for the subjugated because no act of liberation can guarantee better results than what it seeks to change. Therefore, hope is a dialectic of the longing for justice, the belief in its possibility, and the capability to act without expecting the demise of one’s particular liberation project.

I claim that Ackermann contributes significantly to ethics in the intersection between praxis and theological resources. Ackermann offers resources that are focused on just social relationships by using a dialectical relationship between theory and practice through praxis, with a

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<sup>517</sup> Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, 210.

strong focus on the subjugated. This shows how one could envision a future that is rid of injustice and that is not restricted to only a few. This is a risky business, but we should seek to further it. In the end, perhaps all we can do is to hope that this relationality could restore equality for all.

## 5.2. Subjectivity, Relationality, and Vulnerability

Subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability are all important concepts to Ackermann. They are interrelated in her writings, and in this section I examine them further to show how they provide valuable resources for feminist ethics. In my understanding, the importance of the experience of injustice makes subjectivity crucial for Ackermann; by experiencing injustice, the subject is harmed, and human flourishing is impossible under unjust conditions. Equally, resistance against injustice is an experience of agency and subjectivity.

When Ackermann presents her understanding of subjects, she often does it through a particular reading of Western philosophy. According to this reading, the separation of mind and body is a central element in Western philosophy; and over the years, this thinking was absorbed into the dominant traditions of Christianity. When Descartes later coined the famous phrase *cogito, ergo sum*, this mode of thinking was furthered even more. This has legitimized the divide, as if the mind and body exist as separate entities.<sup>518</sup> Ackermann focuses on the subject as perceived throughout modernity, in which the male, understood as predominantly mind, was *the* subject, and how this excluded women's subjectivity, in and beyond the Church.<sup>519</sup> The *male* model of the subject did not let the 'other,' *woman*, become a subject. Ackermann focuses on the feminist critique of mind/body dualism and what has come after it. One critical remark concerns the embodied experience of the subject, not as a detached subject without a body.<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 78.

<sup>519</sup> Denise M. Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm, eds., *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 2.

<sup>520</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "'A Voice Was Heard in Ramah': A Feminist Theology of Praxis for Healing in South Africa," in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Denise M. Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 87.

Ackermann repeatedly states that humans do not *have* a body; they *are* a body.<sup>521</sup> Her critique of mind–body dualism is still vital for feminist ethics when it questions how the mind has been associated with the male and the body with the female. Further, it is troubling that, in separating the mind and body, knowledge is also seen as non-mediated through the body, and thus is disconnected from the subject. In doing so, the subject’s experience also translates into hierarchies that all too easily lend themselves to the legitimization of domination based on hierarchical divisions.<sup>522</sup> Hierarchies and divisions are easily used by those who wish to exploit others through domination for their benefit. Dualistic and hierarchical thinking is a foundation for making such claims, since by definition it is not interested in equality.

Equality and mutuality could be seen as powerful challenges to hierarchies. This view is incorporated into Ackermann’s materialism, in which the importance of the body should be thought of, at least partly, as a materialistic issue. Therefore, embodiment and materialism are dialectically related and should be seen as mutually reinforcing concepts. I believe that Ackermann gives no obvious primacy to corporeality or to materialism more generally. Instead, they should be seen as mutually reinforcing, since humans are bodies and need other material conditions to flourish. From a structural materialist perspective, provisions should be distributed fairly for all. Corporeality also intersects subjectivity and the material world, since the body provides the localized space for the subject to emerge. Ackermann’s emphasis on praxis could further a notion of justice in the intersection between the material and the subjective.

This extrapolation from Ackermann also shows the significance of the context for the subject formation, since the experience, mediated through language, is always positioned in a specific spatiotemporal setting. The experience of the body is fundamental for subjectivity; and, again, this locates this experience in the world.<sup>523</sup>

Ackermann views the subject as the product of relationships. The subject, sometimes interchangeably described by her as “the self,” is always related to other human beings. For Ackermann:

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> Ackermann, “Feminist Liberation Theology,” 19.

<sup>523</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 39.

There can be no self without human relationships. There is no self apart from others; neither can there be any adequate idea of what my *imago Dei* means unless I see myself as being created for relationship – with God, with myself, with others and with the world in which I live.

However, the moment we affirm the primacy of relationship, we need to ask what it means to be an individual person. Our individuality arises from and is shaped and tempered by our being in relationship with others. We are a mixture of attachment and autonomy; we are both connected yet independent to varying degrees. And there is a tension between our need to relate and the reality of our oneness. This tension is creative when we understand that our personhood comes out of, grows and is nurtured because it is summonsed into loving relationships with others. We are beings always in the process of becoming more ourselves through our relationships with others.<sup>524</sup>

Thus, Ackermann prioritizes the discursive production of subjectivity through relationships. There is always an interdependency between the discourse of relationships and the actual relationships. This is because discourse is always part of the existing relationship. On a metaphysical level, Ackermann does not explore this prospect in sufficient depth. Still, she endorses the relational production of the subject (the self).

A comment should be made about forming relationships that entail both positive and negative aspects. Relationships are a complex phenomenon, and usually entail various positive, neutral, or negative aspects for the subjects who are present. Sometimes, all aspects are present, while other times they are unevenly distributed. For people who are part of unjust or destructive relationships, it is easy to see that the negative outcome directly reflects in their subjectivities. Just as positive relationships provide ample ground for a healthy subjectivity, the opposite applies in the case of negative relationships. Here, it is important to note that those who experience unjust treatment in their relationships should be given ample recognition, and that this should be used as a normative force to bring about change. In the same sense, those who create negative and destructive relationships are not only responsible to others: their nefarious deeds also shape their own subjectivity. The aim of seeking justice would thus not only be to relieve the oppressed and subjugated, but it would also be to provide previous perpetrators with

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<sup>524</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, “Sources of Power and Hope: A Theological Perspective from South Africa,” *Förbundet Kristen Humanism* (blog), November 12, 2010, <http://www.kristenhumanism.org/arkiv/att-lasa-mer/sources-of-power-and-hope-theological/>.

the ability to engage in meaningful relationships that make human flourishing possible.

In my interpretation, Ackermann opts for a constructivist view of the subject; but this challenges her thesis about the material aspects of the body and the importance of physical experience. If the mind and body are not separate at all, and the subject is socially constructed, then, at least to some extent, the same must be true for the body. Ackermann clearly states that language and discourse describe reality and construct it.<sup>525</sup> I suggest that we accept the premise of the constructivist view and, like Ackermann, reject the Cartesian understanding of mind/body dualism.

From this, though, we should also accept that the body is, at least in part, if not wholly, constructed through discourse. One interpretation of this relationship explores the dialectics between discourse and corporeal materialism. There is, for example, no unmediated experience of corporality: our physical bodies are discursively co-constructed in human experience. In “[m]aking love, giving birth, dancing, eating, wrestling with depression or arthritic joints — these are not only bodily realities. They shape our experience of ourselves, what we know, and what we yearn for.”<sup>526</sup> Ackermann argues that the body is the source of all reality and knowledge; the body should thus not be seen as inferior to the mind. Ackermann emphasizes the cruciality of acknowledging the body as an integral part of one’s identity and how it shapes our experiences, thoughts, and emotions.

One important normative implication of Ackermann’s view of relational subjects is that one cannot believe that their normative accounts and personal preferences are the norms for all. We must listen to one another, which in turn points toward reciprocity and mutuality. Since we are formed socially, we must care for the discursively and spatio-temporally space where that formation occurs. In caring, one should not dominate others, but instead focus on providing resources for flourishing lives. Thus, relationality has a normative force that binds subjects together. Through relationships and narrations, we are part of one another’s co-creation. This insight creates a responsibility for others and for the context of which we are a part. The discourse and context always entail normativity, and justice should be central to this normativity. The

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<sup>525</sup> Denise Ackermann, “Meaning and Power: Some Key Terms in Feminist Liberation Theology,” *Scriptura* 44 (2019): 20.

<sup>526</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 66.

normative force that binds us should be translated into actions to enhance justice and equality for all.

In my reading of Ackermann, the relationship between subjectivity and social environment, mediated by language, is dialectical. Central to Ackermann's understanding of how subjectivity is formed is the intersection between gender, race, and class. She uses her experiences as a white woman in South Africa. Ackermann describes growing up in a patriarchal family, in which struggling to find her place as the only daughter affected her. She explains how her experience of patriarchy affected her understanding of power. Ackermann's childhood in a privileged white suburb in Cape Town, and her moving as a diplomat's child to Sweden and Argentina, exposed her to different cultures and ways of life, making her aware of her privilege. Later, while studying at the University of Stellenbosch, she encountered racism and authoritarianism, which fueled her opposition to Afrikaner nationalism and the apartheid regime in South Africa.<sup>527</sup> Here, I claim that Ackermann understands the experiences, as part of the subject formation, to be intersectional. Even though she does not use this terminology, the intentions are much the same when she writes that her experience of being white in South Africa, of being a woman, is the point of departure for her writings.

Many more parts of her subjectivity are formative to varying degrees.<sup>528</sup> Ackermann spells this out: “[But] I am also, among other things, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a friend, a teacher, a lover of the mountains, a back sufferer, and a cashew nut addict. Some of my experiences are more telling, more formative for my thinking than others.”<sup>529</sup> Thus, to varying degrees, the intersectional perspective enhances the normative distinctions that are made when assessing how subjectivity is formed. In doing so, we could make more in-depth analyses that avoid any simplistic notions of superficial analysis.

Although subject formation is a process that is embedded in the pre-defined discourse, there is space for change and negotiation. This view is based on the plasticity of the space in which subjectivity is negotiated. There is space for change because no one has completed their subject formation. Further, language is not private, and is located both within

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<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–7.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*



and outside the subject; the experience of the self consists of overlapping patterns that can be shared between persons.<sup>530</sup> The subject's experiences can be shared and negotiated in this sense. This does not remove the subjective account of experience, but instead opens it up in a discursive way that externalizes the sources of experience from the self.

Ackermann elaborates explicitly on the moral implications of the relationality of the subject. On the normative level, we are not justified in believing that our own experiences are the norm for others.<sup>531</sup> This has significant implications for the scrutiny of identity politics. Human experiences can be shared and negotiated, Ackermann claims. Neither should we overemphasize the uniqueness of the individual. The individualist paradigm furthers the closing down of communication when individual experiences are described as unique and as impossible to narrate to others. The result is further the fragmentation of society, which contributes to political and social apathy.<sup>532</sup> I find this reasoning both plausible and productive. The risk of fragmentation (through identity politics on a social level and overemphasizing the uniqueness of individual experiences on a personal level) and separation between people should be articulated and counteracted. Identity politics, understood as a form of hyper-individualization, does not promote discussions that could be an important instrument for change.

What, then, is Ackermann's alternative? How does she imagine the relational self? The subject for Ackermann is not *one* self but *many* selves.<sup>533</sup> In this sense, there is not one strong identity, but rather the invocations of plurality that stem from the discursive production of the self that entails, so to speak, the language of the self. Thus, identity is not a stable mono-identity but a mixed multitude that entails languages and narratives in which one finds the self. Here, Ackermann continues her critique of Descartes. Now, she states that, similar to the particularity of experiences of injustice, subjectivity is particular but open to otherness. Ackermann states that "[t]he move from the rational Cartesian man (and I mean 'man') at the centre of the universe, is yet to be completed."<sup>534</sup> Thus, the Cartesian vision of the rational man dislocates the self as more important than others. According to Ackermann, Cartesian

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 38–39.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>534</sup> Denise Ackermann, "Becoming Fully Human: An Ethic of Relationship in Difference and Otherness," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 102 (1998): 18.

dualism is not open to the idea of multiple selves that promotes relationality and equality.

It is often hard to realize what one is entangled in; and the individual might need help to free herself from the grip of the dominant discourse. Racism and patriarchy are just two examples of such dominant discourses keeping human beings passive in relation to social orders that could be changed.<sup>535</sup> In the South African context, this primarily includes women and non-White people. So, how should one act to challenge racism and patriarchy? Ackermann suggests that “[c]onscientization, which happens more often in groups than individually and has a strong relational content, leads to a critical consciousness whereby people enter into the historical process actively.”<sup>536</sup> The ‘conscientization’ for which Ackermann is looking here can only be brought about if we actively listen to the other and believe that the perspective of the other is worthy of genuine attention.

In turn, such listening demands a particular normative attitude to the self. Ackermann says: “To speak of otherness is also to be open to otherness within me, to the possibility of a foreigner within my own unconscious self.”<sup>537</sup> If we understand that our self is not fully explored, we should also understand that the self of others is not fully explored by them. This perspective supports the ideal of listening to others, since they could further our understanding of our selves. By listening to others, a critical consciousness could form that would promote the mutual aspects of our subjectivities that can perhaps only be explored through others.

Ackermann claims that humans have a moral responsibility to act when someone is injured.<sup>538</sup> What, in practice, harms people most is unjust social structures; therefore, we owe it to one another not to harm through domination. As mentioned earlier, Ackermann’s view of the subject is consistent with her understanding of justice and of the importance of listening to the experience of subjugation. By listening, we can be changed and so form a consciousness to further justice for all. This consciousness can then be transformed into actionability, such as in social and political engagement and activism. It should also include redistribution, since just distribution is a prerequisite for flourishing

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<sup>535</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, “Reproductive Rights and the Politics of Transition in South Africa,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11, no. 2 (1995): 126.

<sup>536</sup> Ackermann, “Meaning and Power,” 22.

<sup>537</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 13.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

lives. Thus, liberation aims to create a just world in which subjectivities are not subdued but are fostered under difficult conditions (both material and discursive).

To promote equality, a privileged listener could be moved by the narratives of the subjugated and oppressed. Through praxis, by combining theory and practice, the listener's subjectivity could change positively. Subsequently, the privileged listener also has their narrative; in expressing that along with the others, change is possible. Such a change requires a will to reveal injustices through the stories of the oppressed. In my view, this is far too optimistic—even more so in the wake of Gayatri Spivak's radical critique of colonialism in her seminal *Can the Subaltern Speak?* A significant part of colonial order is precisely that it is impossible for the most vulnerable to articulate their perspectives.<sup>539</sup>

One way to handle the risk of problematic optimism is to emphasize that transformational listening already presupposes a longing for justice and for solidarity with the most vulnerable. In my reading, the narrative that aims to change the future should be expanded to all of humanity—thus negating the current boundaries of gender domination that do not endorse full humanity for all. Ackermann states: "Our stories constitute our identity. We all have a narrative identity."<sup>540</sup> If we accept her vision of liberation, we must present ourselves in a way that includes vulnerability. However, this does not mean accepting injustice: we should use our knowledge of vulnerability to pursue more just relationships.

Having experienced gender discrimination while growing up, Ackermann also saw the blatant racism when the National Party in South Africa excluded colored<sup>541</sup> people from the voters' roll in 1955.<sup>542</sup> This is part of what has informed her position on justice and injustice. Using the example of "white" South Africans under the racist apartheid regime, she states:

Any person who invests her or himself in the freedom of the other as an end in itself, embraces vulnerability, a beautiful yet painful concept and

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<sup>539</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

<sup>540</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "Living with Difference and Otherness: A Response to the Stories from Canada, Spain and Italy," *Regreso y Encuentro – Reflexiones Teológicas*, 2006, 9.

<sup>541</sup> In apartheid South Africa, the official term was the insulting "non-White," which included everyone who was not "White," including people of mixed race and immigrants of Chinese, Indian, and Malaysian descent.

<sup>542</sup> Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom," 39.

one which causes many feminists and oppressed people to recoil. Vulnerability as a construct used for preserving dominant and oppressive gender, race or class systems and relationships, should be denounced as abhorrent. For those who live at the bottom of our societal pyramid, risk is seldom a choice in the battle for survival. But the truth is, there is no change without vulnerability and risk. For white South Africans this means choosing to relinquish power as dominance at the risk of not gaining anything in exchange.<sup>543</sup>

While radical vulnerability is a given for the most vulnerable who live under unjust structures, the privileged who struggle for and together with them should position themselves in a vulnerable place to bring about change. This can be deeply disturbing on a personal level, since the comfort of privilege holds stark power over humans. The challenge of power, and how to navigate it, could be enhanced by the account of ethics that is translated into action.

As suggested by the racial account in the South African context, domination easily translates into other concepts, most notably the issue of gender equality. Domination takes many forms, and when racial injustice, for example, is seen, similar power dynamics could be revealed, such as sexism. I want to link this with understanding relationality as the prerequisite of subjectivity and with how relationality has yet to be opened to all. In engaging in meaningful relationships, one also exposes vulnerability and decentralizes modes of power if one comes from a position of power. Further, it shows the importance of hope; and in relinquishing power, the privileged must remain hopeful that a more just world is possible. Theological resources are available when discussing risks and power.

Regarding Ackermann's account of vulnerability as "a beautiful" concept, I read her as providing a positive view that contrasts with the more common understanding of vulnerability as purely negative. At first glance, using these words might be controversial. However, examining her position further is part of a changed perspective that re-evaluates what has previously been, and still very often is, linked to the feminine and women. For my part, though, I would not use the word "beautiful"; instead, vulnerability is necessary for change, translating into an ontological state. I would suggest being careful when using a term such as "beautiful" to describe vulnerability, since such an aestheticization might translate into a position that focuses more on the

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<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 46.

aesthetic values, thus losing focus on the critical normativity that could be derived from vulnerability when not aestheticizing the concept.

However, theological resources such as Christology and eschatology must be interpreted so that the unjust burden of vulnerability and risk stays visible. This also acknowledges the risks experienced by the subjugated, in that there is rarely any option to escape risk. This lesson should be taught through narration and be internalized by those in power. When internalizing the narratives of the other, change can occur; but one must always be open to this. It entails a self-reflexivity that can be risky. Risks can be mitigated, and equality is of the essence here, since mitigating risk for some should not be at the expense of others. To trade someone else's freedom for your own security cannot be just and right.

Ackermann states that we must navigate between openness and isolation, since both poles, in their extreme forms, are destructive of the subject.<sup>544</sup> We need to make moral choices possible when addressing issues of subjectivity. Without such choices there would be a *laissez-faire* attitude toward everything, including every other person, without judging how our choices impact the self and others.

When opening oneself to others, one becomes vulnerable to harm and injury by them. This is a risky endeavor. Ackermann provides a theological resource to articulate and comprehend this particular kind of vulnerability, namely a spirituality of risk. If we embrace the spirituality of risk, we must make ourselves vulnerable in all aspects of life.<sup>545</sup> Ackermann's view of vulnerability as part of the human condition, as a dimension of injustice, and as a form of spirituality does not immediately appear compatible with feminism as a project of liberation from patriarchy. Ackermann realizes this, and says that she understands why women are uncomfortable with the concept of vulnerability, as it has often been used to enhance subjugation by the patriarchy. Likewise, men are also uncomfortable with vulnerability, since the idea has been used to signal weakness. Therefore, her project is about changing the theology of vulnerability by freeing it from both the passivity of subjugation and the link to glorifying strength and power—or so Ackermann claims. Vulnerability is a resource that could be used normatively, since it opens the space for change, for better or worse.

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<sup>544</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 14–15.

<sup>545</sup> Ackermann, "A 'Spirituality of Risk,'" 125.

For Ackermann, vulnerability also relates to the corporeality of human existence, since injury and harm are often directed toward bodies. This has been exploited by privileged groups in power that have willingly created and upheld structures that use precarity to their advantage. One such example concerns how economics under globalization has kept large groups, and most often women, in a perpetual state of precariousness. This includes using people with low incomes as cheap labor, more or less selling their bodies, children, and futures.<sup>546</sup> This is a prime example of how structures are used to amass wealth for a few by exploiting the subjugated, primarily by using their bodies for nefarious ends. This cannot be just, and should be used to inspire change. To challenge the patriarchy, the view of vulnerability must be critically normative. We should acknowledge that our corporeality is part of the same discourse. In doing so, we should understand how the embodied experience of material injustices affects bodies. These injustices take many forms; and for Ackermann, this uneven distribution of injustices is inherently linked with her understanding of vulnerability.

Thus, I summarize Ackermann's understanding of vulnerability as fundamentally connected to relational subjectivity. This understanding is a product of Ackermann's practical involvement in solidarity and liberation, an involvement that implies risks for the self and is, therefore, Christological. I understand that all relationality involves a state of vulnerability; if it did not, nothing would be on the line. By taking a genuine risk, one can envision something different, a new horizon that calls one to venture beyond the oppressive nature of current hierarchical power relations. We should acknowledge our vulnerability, both in our corporeality and in our discursive manner. We are all vulnerable and susceptible to harm in many ways. This is what makes change possible since, a static or stable entity is just that: invulnerable. If viewed this way, as I have suggested, vulnerability becomes an ontological condition rather than a perspective that is applied later to entities. Instead, it is a prerequisite for creation and change, and should thus be amply reflected on. This does not entail a move from vulnerability to invulnerability; instead, the knowledge should translate into ethics and be present when making assessments. Vulnerability becomes not only part of anthropology but also of all parts of existence. Since vulnerability is not evenly distributed, this also requires action and change. Here, one

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<sup>546</sup> Ackermann, "Interrupting 'Global-Speak,'" 8.

should make the distinction between vulnerability and precarity. Vulnerability is what makes someone or something susceptible to harm. Precarity is the exposure to actual harm, both physical and discursive. In understanding this, one could further the normative choices at hand in engaging morally to reduce the precarity of others. In doing so, the actions are reflected in the subject itself. This is always performed relationally, again emphasizing the importance of caring for the other.

In seeing vulnerability as an ontological condition that should impact our moral choices, reducing precarity is of the essence. This aligns with Ackermann's understanding of how the subject is relationally formed, and of how we have a moral responsibility to act when someone is harmed.<sup>547</sup> I want to develop this perspective and suggest that it should be radicalized. We should actively pursue justice through just relationships and reduce precarity for all. This requires both redistribution and recognition—working in tandem—to provide ample ground for subjectivities that are not restricted by the domination of others.

To look further into the matter, we should turn to Ackermann's feminist theology, which could be used to further change in the world, motivated by feminist and theological backing alike.

### 5.3. Feminist Theology and Gender

So, how does Ackermann view feminist theology? For her, "feminism is an egalitarian movement."<sup>548</sup> Feminists know that the political and the personal cannot be separated.<sup>549</sup> The latter refers to the notion of healing as a central aspect of her theology that encompasses all of society.<sup>550</sup> Ackermann writes: "A feminist theology of praxis begins by acknowledging the unending, relentless quality of human suffering together with the resilient longing of the human person for wholeness."<sup>551</sup> Her view starts with the brokenness of today, and is directed by a commitment to human well-being.<sup>552</sup> In defining feminism, Ackermann is consistent with the general notions of feminism that regard its liberatory practices as casting off oppression. She writes, "I define feminism as

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<sup>547</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 71.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>549</sup> Ackermann, "A Voice Was Heard in Ramah," 81.

<sup>550</sup> Ackermann and Bons-Storm, *Liberating Faith Practices*, 7.

<sup>551</sup> Ackermann, "A Voice Was Heard in Ramah," 84.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*

the commitment to the praxis of liberation for women from all that oppresses us. Feminism does not benefit any specific group, race or class of women, neither does it promote privilege for women over men.”<sup>553</sup> The latter is essential, especially in light of any notion that feminist ethics would imply misandry. Ackermann endorses equality for all, women and men alike. For her, feminism is about radically transforming consciousness in order to bring about change in all spheres of society.<sup>554</sup>

In Ackermann’s view (and here she adheres to a prevalent feminist analysis of previous and current male domination over women), a starting point must be forged in light of this experience. She writes: “For millennia, an ethic of male control over female sexuality, perpetuated by the male teachers of the Church and bolstered by patriarchal social constructs, has been the norm.”<sup>555</sup> The domination has taken many forms, and still has a severe impact on women and on their agency. Patriarchy permeates Christian traditions, which in turn legitimize women’s lack of agency. In my reading of Ackermann, the Church has been exercising domination in a truly unjust manner. A central aspect here is the equality of all of humanity; and here, there cannot be any separation between women and men, which is theologically implied and justified.<sup>556</sup> The agency of women is thus severely limited by the discursive power held by male domination—inside and outside the Church. This relates to conscientization because, by limiting their agency through a discourse of domination, the subjugated are not necessarily aware of it.<sup>557</sup> Through different means, the subjugated need to be made aware of their peril so that they can rise together to challenge the dominant order, which is the source of their subjugation.<sup>558</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Ackermann, “Meaning and Power,” 24.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>555</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, “A Gendered Pandemic? — HIV/AIDS in South Africa,” in *Feminist Ethics: Perspectives, Problems, and Possibilities*, ed. Carl-Henric Grenholm and Normunds Kamergrauzis, Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 29 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2003), 135.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>557</sup> Ackermann does not use the term “false consciousness,” but a reference to that term is appropriate. Friedrich Engels writes in a letter to Franz Mehring: “Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process.” Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Franz Mehring,” in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works in Two Volumes, Volume II.*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1949), 451.

<sup>558</sup> Ackermann, “Interrupting ‘Global-Speak,’” 17.



The perpetuation of a narrative of male dominance in certain religious communities has caused significant discomfort and harm to many women. Despite this, societal and cultural norms and personal beliefs can prevent them from challenging religious authorities. Tragically, many women have internalized this oppressive perspective, perpetuating the cycle of mistreatment through their own thoughts and actions. One way to open up new avenues here concerns the understanding that religious authorities can change, and have done so throughout history.<sup>559</sup> I believe that Ackermann has significant contributions to make here, especially in the theological domain, in which churches and congregations could be perceived as resisting any change. The internalization of the dominant images, here to be understood broadly, is entirely understandable, yet it must be challenged. The idea of false consciousness is prevalent here, and needs to be discussed in a way that does not promote paternalism. A fundamental notion here is that of non-domination and of how such a perspective better lends itself to exposing internalized oppression while maintaining a self-reflexive stance that is not fixed.

I believe that Ackermann's vital contribution derives from the experience and contextualization in her works. A discourse of positivity is possible such that one does not end up in a spiral of revenge. Like Keller, Ackermann is cautious not to endorse a version of Christianity that lends itself to domination through triumphalism.<sup>560</sup> This is crucial concerning power structures, where the Church, as is all too clear in examples from South Africa during the apartheid era, often sided with the oppressors. In doing so, they perverted the Gospel and participated in undemocratic, brutal, and coercive actions against innocent persons. Ackermann is not attracted to authoritarian theologies of domination that glorify imperialism. Instead, God seems "to hide in Creation"; God does not enforce God's will in an authoritarian way, thus being the opposite of a dominating ruler. God is seen as the power of life while suffering and experiencing death.<sup>561</sup> This shows that there is an alternative to domination from a theological perspective. Ethics could learn from this perspective to further non-domination. Adding to this perspective is the life and inspiration of Jesus, and how he inspired people through

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<sup>559</sup> Denise Ackermann, "Women, Human Rights And Religion: A Dissonant Triad," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 5, no. 2 (1992): 74.

<sup>560</sup> Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, 34–35.

<sup>561</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 77.

non-violence and non-domination. Jesus did not oppose the Roman Empire with military might, but died on the cross, lacking control. In this inverted perspective, through resurrection the cross becomes essential.<sup>562</sup> Further, this shows that, even under dire circumstances, another way is possible in which theology is used to instill hope. In my view, this indicates that non-domination should be learnt on the basis of a Christological and theological foundation.

When conceptualizing feminist theology, Ackermann believes in being open-minded and self-reflexive. She does not see feminist theology as having just one perspective, just as there is not just one perspective in “male” theology.<sup>563</sup> This is because of the many different voices in the feminist discourse, and they should not be viewed as a rejection of it. In fact, Ackermann sees the pursuit of justice that feminist theology entails as essential. This is especially true because feminist theology focuses on women’s real-life experiences and struggles.<sup>564</sup> It is important to note that Ackermann places particular emphasis on this point because the male-dominated paradigm in theology has historically reinforced the subjugation of women. In my view, this perspective enhances feminist theology and moves it forward. Current and previous thought systems are often difficult to change, especially if they contain dogmatic elements such as those encoded in the Church. We could formulate a critique of those benefiting from the current patriarchal paradigm, in which those in power do not wish to change the status quo.

So, how does Ackermann draw on the lived experience of women to further her feminist theology? For her, the theological concept is based on the embodied and theoretical understanding that combines the perspectives of knowing and feeling. Ackermann sees feminist theology as emanating from two perspectives. First, the relationship between God and humanity needs to be explored—especially the relationship between God and woman. Second, since the language and tradition exploring the relationship between God and humanity has been male-dominated, feminist theology must challenge this sexism.<sup>565</sup> In this case,

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, “From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance: Stigma, HIV/AIDS and a Feminist Theology of Praxis,” in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Sarojini Nadar, Women from the Margins Series (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2006), 225.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology,” 33.

the foundational perspective of Ackermann's understanding of oppression is derived from the experience of the unjust positioning between women and men. This, of course, is not fixed in isolation, and again arises from the lived experience of various threads. Ackermann seeks to challenge the sexist oppression of women, which partly stems from the Church's patriarchal rule and domination, invalidating women's experiences. Only if the Church is transformed to give full recognition to women and men could the Christian message of emancipation be sought.<sup>566</sup> Ackermann states that, when trying to theorize on feminist theology and to include the vast differences in women's experience of being subjugated, one always risks becoming elitist and patronizing.<sup>567</sup>

This is a firm position that places the emancipatory ideal of the Christian faith center stage, thus turning it against what it has become—all too often, unfortunately, androcentric, sexist, and perverted in character. In line with this, Ackermann proposes that women who read the Bible experience something different than do men.<sup>568</sup> The possible movements arising from these different positions should transcend the limitations imposed on those who are subjugated.

So, how does Ackermann believe that we should bring about the change toward a more just world? According to her, practical theology is a vital form of critical theory that highlights the communicative aspects of Christianity. This approach uses praxis, or practical action, to prompt theological reflection that could bring about liberation.<sup>569</sup> Ackermann firmly supports the concept of emancipation that goes beyond all forms of oppression, and believes that feminist theological ethics could play a significant role in healing and transforming our world.

In Ackermann's view, praxis is a collaborative effort that supports various feminist viewpoints in seeking justice and empathy. The resulting feminist theology must always be analyzed in context and be subject to ethical scrutiny.<sup>570</sup> Ackermann believes that feminist and theological ethics are not separate but are interrelated. She also emphasizes the importance of being open to diverse perspectives in order to advance a vision of a world that is in need of justice and healing. To this end, Ackermann notes that feminist theology draws from a wide range of sources, which is significant given the Church's suppression of female

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<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>570</sup> Ackermann, "Interrupting 'Global-Speak,'" 14.

perspectives.<sup>571</sup> The abundance of perspectives provides a strength that closed thought systems cannot match; and being open to new ideas enhances critical thinking and challenges hegemony and domination. Ackermann argues that feminist theology is essentially a critical theology, and that incorporating feminism and theology into ethics could enhance the moral critique. Therefore, being open to diverse perspectives has an epistemic value that needs to be recognized.

Ackermann is critical of theorizing that, like postmodern culture, rejects the utopian longing for a just future. Such rejection, in fact, serves dominant structures. She advocates using critical theory as a form of practice close to the context that could reveal specific modes of power and domination that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.<sup>572</sup> From her feminist theologian's perspective, Ackermann states that critical theory offers tools that help her to analyze particular and context-specific forms of oppression. The emphasis on subjugated and marginalized people persists while offering a revolutionary vision for a better future. In this twofold perspective, critical theory balances the need for analytical tools in the given context with the anticipation of a better future for all.<sup>573</sup> For Ackermann, a teleological direction arises from the transformative character of critical theory.

Ackermann states that the critical theory must be thoroughly grounded in gender analysis.<sup>574</sup> The hermeneutical character of her theory of praxis must be positioned within the Christian theological sphere so as not to lose the foundation from which the normative direction is drawn—that is, to place it within the Church. For Ackermann, “domination is simply human sin.”<sup>575</sup> This theological perspective provides resources for a normative stance for an ethic that opposes all forms of domination and injustice. One can point to all forms of domination using the power of theology, and state that this is not in line with the divine telos. From this, she proposes instead a change that does not involve domination. By imagining a brighter future, hope is derived from the very core of theology—the redemptive promise that change is possible. In the contextual setting she has also seen change, which, in my

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<sup>571</sup> Ackermann, “A Gendered Pandemic?,” 129.

<sup>572</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, “‘The Substance of Things Hoped For’: Women’s Imaginative Praxis Outside the Church,” *Emory International Law Review* 14, no. 2 (2000): 600.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, 601.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>575</sup> Ackermann, “Liberation and Practical Theology,” 40.

view, further fuels the engagement. Ackermann states that her experience with imagination and of its power in difficult times makes her intensely wary about postmodern perspectives that reject the vision of utopian theologies.

Ackermann is not naïve when it comes to the Christian tradition, and acknowledges that both the tradition as a whole—including the Church—and the Bible contain oppressive dimensions.<sup>576</sup> This critical perspective does not avoid the difficulties in the Christian faith. Such a vast tradition, through both time and space, would include negative aspects that are burdensome to encounter and to deal with. I believe that this provides a perspective on the tradition that counteracts its negative aspects and points toward interpretations and actions that could better serve humanity and provide emancipation for the subjugated.

Some theologians do not believe that Christianity can be redeemed from its problematic legacy. A notable example is Daphne Hampson.<sup>577</sup> In opposition to her, Ackermann shows that it really is possible to be conceptually grounded in the tradition and to critique injustices both within in and beyond it. Self-reflexivity is critical in this regard; and I believe that it is a perspective that should always be used because it fits well the notion of critical theory.

In my view, critical theory must always stay critical in relation to its particular social context. From my reading of Ackermann, she stresses this, considering the Gospels and how feminist theology must always side with the subjugated, the poor, and outcasts. In this sense, the Christian tradition provides well-tuned resources to justify such a stance.

So, does Ackermann view feminist theology as open to everyone? In a letter to her mother, she raises the question of whether men could be feminists, given that they lack the experience of gender discrimination.

Appealing to experience means acknowledging the fact that experiences are often ambiguous, certainly limited, and often contradictory. Any claims to truth are therefore partial. I do not know how else to start

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<sup>576</sup> Denise Ackermann, "Liberating The Word: Some Thoughts On Feminist Hermeneutics," *Scriptura* 44 (1993): 9.

<sup>577</sup> For Hampson's perspectives on what she labels "post-Christianity," please see Daphne Hampson and Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Is There a Place for Feminists in a Christian Church?," *New Blackfriars* 68, no. 801 (1987): 7–24; Margaret Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity*, 1st North American ed (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); Margaret Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

doing theology other than by reflecting on my experiences in conversation with others. Just a thought—Do you think men can be feminists, even if they have not “experienced” gender discrimination? They certainly can have sympathy for the feminist cause and even stand in solidarity with women who struggle against sexism. A friend once remarked impishly: “Some of my best friends are feminist-inclined men!”<sup>578</sup>

So, how should we understand Ackermann’s position here? What is her view of the dialectics between universality and particularity? If we were to suggest that her statements concern identities, then I believe that we would have a problem, since personal experience would be seen as a prerequisite for the feminist position. Ackermann also focuses on solidarity, to which I will return shortly; but I believe that this is key when understanding the positions that one should hold.

I suggest that this position on feminism is not in line with the rest of Ackermann’s account, and does not relate to her other convictions about discrimination and experience. Throughout Ackermann’s works, she is proud to have rejected and fought against the South African apartheid regime despite being white and thus being privileged by the apartheid system. Analogous to this, I find it unconvincing that men could not be feminists when white people could be anti-apartheid and anti-racist. Even though experience can precede convictions, I firmly believe that morality can be internalized, even when it is viewed from “outside,” in line with solidarity. The latter also contrasts with Ackermann’s view that experiences can be shared between people, at least to a large degree.<sup>579</sup> In my view, if shared experiences were impossible, it would create genuine problems for engagement with one another.

To develop this position, I suggest that we look to Chandra Talpade Mohanty and to how she emphasizes the importance of solidarity, outlined in her book *Feminism Without Borders*.<sup>580</sup> Mohanty argues that solidarity is crucial for feminist movements, as they are often divided by factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. These divisions can hinder the common struggle against oppression. She believes that solidarity can help to overcome these divisions by creating a unifying space for feminists from diverse backgrounds to come together, share

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<sup>578</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 40.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>580</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

their experiences, and develop joint strategies for liberation. Mohanty articulates this critique of what she sees as those mainstream feminist theories and practices that neglect the importance of solidarity. She argues that such theories and practices often focus on the experiences of white, middle-class women predominantly in the Western world, and overlook the experiences of women in the Global South. This focus could result in a form of feminism that is ignorant of the realities of oppression and that fails to address the needs of all women, no matter where they live. Mohanty thus proposes an approach to feminism rooted in a solidarity that is not bound to any one location. Even if one could not share the experience of the other, one could acknowledge this and show solidarity with the liberation struggle. By doing so, one could engage in a mutual process of seeking liberation for the subjugated, even when divided by race, ethnicity, class, and nationality.<sup>581</sup> In engaging with this type of solidarity, feminists could establish relationships across different lines and work together to challenge all forms of oppression. Adding to this, Mohanty emphasizes the significance of the awareness of one's privilege and power, which could shape one's understanding of oppression and one's interactions with those working for liberation. This is crucial to understanding how one could be part of the emancipatory process, even when one does not share all the burdens experienced by others. By using this perspective of solidarity, one could move toward a greater understanding of others, incorporating their views while not appropriating their experiences. In this case, solidarity could overcome divisions and play a crucial role in understanding how to position and focus the feminist ethics of Ackermann.

Still, does feminism benefit all? The emancipatory potential that feminism entails must be directed toward healing for all—women and men alike—since that is a prerequisite for a just future that is possible only after patriarchy has been abolished. It is crucial to note that even those who benefit from the existing system are still oppressed by the system itself, thus also limiting their possibilities of pursuing a more flourishing life than that to which the current system restricts them. This concept is closely linked to Ackermann's theory of conscientization, as those who are restricted by the system often struggle to understand it from within.

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<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 224–25, 228, 230.

This idea also pertains to equality, not to animosity toward men. Instead, it highlights the significance of authentic emancipation for all individuals, including those who, under current conditions, profit from patriarchy.<sup>582</sup> Ackermann constantly speaks of healing and of how all of humanity needs healing. This is undoubtedly one instance in which such healing must be manifested in the possibility of another future that could only be derived from the experience of the subjugated in conjunction with the penitence of the oppressor that does not result in further guilt.

So how could one further the relationality of Christian faith from a feminist theological perspective? Ackermann does not fully develop a theory here. Instead, she points toward the emancipatory potential in the starting point of not describing the claims of salvation as stemming from the biological maleness of Jesus. This is done by reference to the messianic vision that the last shall be the first<sup>583</sup> and that, in doing so, reversing the current order of power relations. Still, this is the starting point, and it is not enough, since that would only cement the hierarchical order of patriarchal sexism. The messianic vision concerns the relationship between God and all of humanity. One could find peace only through the relationship that does not enforce power over others. The vindication of women, the lowly, and the subjugated—whoever they may be—shows the potential of the revelatory speech that arises from Christ as a horizon for which to strive.

As already mentioned, for Ackermann, relationality is the center of feminist theology.<sup>584</sup> This perspective is inferred from the feminist theological perspective for all of Creation—women *and* men alike. Ackermann states: “I find myself questioning those who see the need or inclination for relationality as peculiar to women.”<sup>585</sup> This is in line with Ackermann’s liberationist perspective, which does not define feminism as a question for women only—even though the starting point has been the subjugated female’s perspective and not the position of the other. As relationality is the opposite of alienation, women and men alike need it.<sup>586</sup> By being excluded from the collective practice and participation of

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<sup>582</sup> Ackermann, “Women, Human Rights and Religion,” 76.

<sup>583</sup> As Jesus states in Matthew 20:16, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

<sup>584</sup> Ackermann, “Defining Our Humanity,” 20.

<sup>585</sup> Here, Ackermann references Carol Gilligan. For further reading, please see Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 87–102.

<sup>586</sup> Ackermann, “Defining Our Humanity,” 20–21.



the Church, Ackermann believes that women have turned toward personal spirituality instead, which, given the relational nature of theology as practice, has deprived them of the possibility of becoming fully relational beings—that is, humans. By enforcing the patriarchal order, the Church has also deprived itself of the opportunity to create a complete understanding of what might result from women being equal to men in matters such as ordination. Only through relationality could the Church change, making women and men equal in the community of faith. This also translates into the domain of embodied sexuality. Here, Ackermann insists that “[s]tigmatizing human sexuality is sinful. *God created us sexual beings*. Our sexual natures are God’s gift to us to be enjoyed responsibly” [italics in original].<sup>587</sup> By “responsibly” I understand Ackermann not to propose abstinence, but that it requires a sensitivity that does not dominate, but instead endorses the positivity of sexuality as a consensual activity.

One aspect of Ackermann’s theology is of special significance for ethics: the combinational factors of present and futural co-existing in the promise of the “reign of God.” As stated earlier, for Ackermann justice has a material component. One such instance relates to healing, pointing toward restorative justice for the subjugated and underprivileged. For Ackermann, healing means liberation for the subjugated and having all that is needed to live a flourishing life with dignity.<sup>588</sup> In the promise of the coming of God is a dual temporal reference: it is already here but not yet present. Ackermann elaborates on this perspective when she ponders the question of how to know whether the reign of God is present. She opts for the idea that the reign of God is both current and in the future. It would be best if you lived as if it were already here, but still wished for it to come.<sup>589</sup>

From this perspective, there is a significant promise, through faith, that there will be a better future—and that, in a sense, it already is. I believe that hopelessness and apathy are prime obstacles to the work for a better future. By seeing God’s reign as a source of inspiration, the struggle for dignity and equality could be bolstered—perhaps even more so during times of rising inequality, subjugation, and democratic deficit. Through faith and hope, the promise of a better future points toward and beyond the possible. Since theology is not bound by what

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<sup>587</sup> Ackermann, “Engaging Stigma,” 393.

<sup>588</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 55.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–56.

is predefined, it could further a vision of justice that is not restricted by mundane realities. In my view, this should also be read alongside Ackermann's "embodied practice." Through faith, it is a transformative practice that can change perceptions, and thus behavior and actions, that leave behind the limitations of thought that are often present today. Ackermann states that believers find that their faith demands ethical behavior.<sup>590</sup> I view this in light of personal change. That change is not required, but it comes from those who internalize faith's implications. Thus, transformation comes from the source of the self and spreads outward through actions.

Therefore, for Ackermann, faith itself is seen as a transformative process. She states that all believers must be constantly transformed and moved by the Spirit. The Spirit works to move the self toward egalitarian notions of charity, justice, and compassion—while simultaneously abandoning possessiveness and the domination of others. But, as always, it is hard for the self to let go of possessive behavior; and in this respect, humanity must be continually challenged.<sup>591</sup>

## 5.4. Power and Context

Let me briefly recapitulate the most important contributions that Ackermann makes to ethics when focusing on subjectivity, relationality, and vulnerability. As described earlier in this chapter, Ackermann's work is written mainly in response to the experiences of apartheid and the struggle against injustices in South Africa. Still, just as Ackermann claims herself, even after the apartheid regime fell and democracy was introduced in South Africa, unjust structures were still in place.<sup>592</sup> I argue that the same is evident today, even in societies that are stable democracies. Modes of oppression in the form of racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, and colonialism are still present today. The context of the struggle against injustices may differ, but since subjugation persists, so must the struggle for justice.

Her understanding of praxis is crucial: in it, practice and theory converge to produce new insights into justice. For Ackermann, theology

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<sup>590</sup> Ackermann, "Women, Human Rights and Religion," 68.

<sup>591</sup> Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, 259.

<sup>592</sup> Ackermann, "Engaging Freedom," 34–37.

and ethics are intertwined, working together to produce a better *normative* understanding of the world that is to be used as liberating practice. The concept of liberating praxis involves taking sustained action to bring about justice, liberation, and healing. This is achieved by continuously striving and remaining hopeful while engaging in actions that empower marginalized and oppressed communities. It requires collaborative and accountable reflection on the theories and praxis of struggle and hope that are based on the stories and experiences of marginalized and oppressed people. In South Africa, for example, the feminist practical theology practiced by Ackermann could be seen to have contributed to the healing and reconstruction of the country by providing critical, committed, constructive, and collaborative reflection on the theories and praxis of struggle and hope for the mending of Creation. This approach challenges the traditional male-dominated voices in practical theology, and offers a liberating praxis that motivates emancipatory actions. Liberating praxis could be applied in other contexts too, such as fighting against racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, and colonialism—all of them also present in South Africa. It involves a transformed way of thinking—seeing things from “below” or from the “outer circles”—that leads to the rejection of perspectives that have legitimized forms of oppression “from above.”<sup>593</sup>

Members of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians engaged in several activities of praxis. They advocated the rights and empowerment of African women through research, activism, and community engagement.<sup>594</sup> This praxis aimed to create lasting social change and to promote gender equality within African societies. This included telling and sharing stories across different cultural and religious environments, including regional collaboration with women and with marginalized and oppressed people. Their praxis also involved challenging patriarchal systems and norms in theological education, promoting inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches. Further, collaboration and dialogue with various stakeholders, such as faith communities, policy-makers, and civil society organizations, were key components of their

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid., 42–46.

praxis. In the case of the Black Sash,<sup>595</sup> they engaged constantly in protests and advocacy efforts to challenge apartheid policies and to fight for the rights of marginalized individuals.

Another aspect concerns the tension between universality and the need to contextualize feminist ethics and theology. I believe that Ackermann shows important features of the applicability of feminist ethics and theology as containing the power to work for the emancipation of the subjugated. When assessing situations of domination, there is an inherent need to reveal the concrete modes of power linked to gender discrimination. This contextual sensitivity should also be linked with the notion of self-reflexivity for the subject and the quest for justice, which is never final. In Ackermann's case, the critical and self-critical perspective derived from critical theory provides one tool that contextualizes liberation's universal appeal and applicability. This should also be seen in relation to feminist theology as liberation theology, which focuses on those living under precarious conditions.

Hence, I argue that, even though Ackermann's writing was done under different circumstances than today, its applicability remains valid for several reasons. A primary concern for Ackermann was the interconnection between gender discrimination and racism in apartheid South Africa, which I claim is important from an intersectional analytical perspective. In post-apartheid South Africa there has been progress; but far from all hopes of equality and prosperity have come to fruition. Racism is still prevalent today, and although it is directed in many cases toward groups other than those who suffered it during the apartheid years, it is still present. Racism and inequality deepen the suffering of those living in precarity. As the Swedish ethicist Madeleine Persson has shown in her research on human rights and migration, racism is hard—if not impossible—to defeat by legislation alone. Legislation is of the essence; but further normative and political tools are needed to challenge the continuous economic, social, and discursive production of racism as part of hierarchical structures.<sup>596</sup>

These problems are persistent, and Ackermann's feminist theology could be used to revitalize the discussion on how to challenge modes of

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<sup>595</sup> Ackermann, *Liberating Praxis and the Black Sash: A Feminist Theological Perspective*.

<sup>596</sup> Madelene Persson, *Frågan om människovärde: En kritisk studie av mänskliga rättigheter i rasismens och migrationens tidevarv*, Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics 52 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2020), 277.

oppression today. To some extent, the landscape is different today, especially regarding communication technology and how the world is interlinked; but the general outline of her thought is still substantially valid. Further, the unjust hierarchies and unequal distribution of material resources remain: the rich accumulate wealth to a disproportionate degree, and gender inequalities persist.<sup>597</sup> Emancipation seems far away, and so collective struggles are more important than ever.

Compared with Parsons or Keller, Ackermann's ethics and theology are different, primarily because they belong to the tradition of liberation theology in South Africa.<sup>598</sup> What, then, is the "liberation" in her liberation theology? The term "liberation" signals the need for unfree people to become free from whatever binds them. This includes both overt and covert modes of domination. Patriarchal structures and material inequalities that hinder human flourishing are two prime examples. The continuous production of racism is often linked with unequal material distribution.<sup>599</sup> Similarly, gender discrimination is often intertwined with other modes of domination. One central aspect of Ackermann's view of liberation is the importance of revealing the material mechanisms that produce racism and gender inequality. In revealing these mechanisms, emancipation becomes possible through the agency of those who long for radical change.

A comparison with Keller's theology would be helpful if we wanted to grasp Ackermann's view of the subject. Keller views the transformation of the subject as primary in relation to societal change. In contrast, Ackermann focuses more on the material aspect of change, which can produce transformed subjects. According to Ackermann, faith can transform the subject, but material conditions are fundamental to the dialectics of social structure and subjectivity. Therefore, distributive justice is the fundamental demand from the perspective of promoting agency. I would not describe Ackermann as a prominent materialist, but it is evident that people's material needs play an essential role in her normative understanding of emancipation.

Similarly, and most importantly, Ackermann defends transformation in the Church, which needs to be practiced communally. This furthers Ackermann's relational account. On the other hand, Keller focuses predominantly on discussing the meaning of changing the subject itself. In

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<sup>597</sup> "World Inequality Report 2022 | UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab."

<sup>598</sup> Ackermann, "Feminist Liberation Theology," 14, 17–19, 27–28.

<sup>599</sup> Persson, *Frågan om människovärde*, 285.

Parsons's case, she is more focused on the internal debate within Catholicism. She writes within a dominant discourse, which differs from the discourse Ackermann writes within.

As a feminist ethicist, Ackermann shows the importance of the lived experience of persons as bodily creatures, and how this relates to modes of power and domination.<sup>600</sup> Here, she also has some remarks on whether men could be feminists, while at the same time acknowledging that white people during the apartheid regime in South Africa could be antiracists. As I have argued, it is more in line with Ackermann's general position that would admit men to be feminists. The label may not be the issue at hand. More importantly, we should focus on solidarity with those in need, as this can unite people and perspectives to challenge unjust hierarchies. When considering the distribution of power and the domination that often accompanies gender divisions, it is essential to note that the anti-racist and feminist ideals are interconnected in their pursuit of justice and equality. Moreover, the feminist ideal can contribute significantly to the goal of combating racism, particularly when examining the present and past actions of the Church, which actively promoted hierarchies and domination. Solidarity is a crucial aspect of feminist ethics, according to Ackermann, allowing individuals to unite and challenge unjust hierarchies.

As already noted, Ackermann is inherently critical of late capitalism, which endorses economic wealth as the highest good and, in doing so, does not focus on other important ideals—such as positive relationships. Parsons and Keller share much of the same critique, since most of the value of relationships cannot be translated into monetary terms. Other ideals must be shown to be central in order to challenge the commodifying of human values and agencies.

However, opposing capitalist commodification does not prevent Ackermann from recognizing people's material needs. The redistribution of resources and power becomes vital when moving toward justice for all. I believe that Ackermann is correct in saying that just relationships are the most crucial instrument to challenge commodification.

Right relationships are valuable in their own right and as a dimension of justice. The relationships one has reflect one's inclinations and actions, making it crucial to choose the right ones. It is vital to align the

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<sup>600</sup> Denise Ackermann, "Reconciliation as Embodied Change: A South African Perspective," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, no. 59 (2004): 58–62.

idea of love, as mentioned in the Bible, with the values of equality and emancipation. Although doing the right thing for the wrong reason can bring good results, the community aspect of conscientization is vital to collectively doing the right thing for the right reason.

Let us turn to Ackermann's focus on community, which she believes is a resource for justice. She adopts a position that is both positive and negative about it. Community is a resource for humans; but we cannot be naïve here, and we must work within our communities for betterment. I do find her position ambivalent. This ambivalence has to do with the structure of a community; not all communities produce positive living environments. Groups in communities can be very controlling internally, and the discursive production of power/ knowledge can hold a firm grip, especially when paired with the commodifying aspects of capitalism. The discursive setting that produces beliefs is, so to say, never innocent in its own biases and power modes. From Ackermann's perspective, this was the case under the apartheid regime in South Africa. Still, she believes that communities are a key to change for the better. To enhance relationships of non-domination, there is more work to do regarding how modes of resistance could be developed in groups to challenge the larger social discourse. This starts in the personal setting of each subject, but it must also transfer into the political. One particular current challenge is the lack of a vision of alternatives to the status quo.

We should listen to the stories of those living under precarious conditions, as there is much to learn from their perspectives. It is essential to acknowledge and amplify the voices of those who have been marginalized and oppressed, as they hold valuable insights into the lived experiences of injustice. Through praxis, one could formulate strategies to challenge injustice, in which transparency and the visibility of domination are needed. Ackermann's perspective on the role of community in promoting justice is complex: as noted earlier, she sees both the positive and the negative aspects of it. Analyzing Ackermann's perspective on community, it becomes evident that she considers community as a resource for justice. However, she also recognizes the potential for communities to harbor internal control and power dynamics that may perpetuate oppression and inequality.

So, how do we navigate this complexity when working with power dynamics in the discourse? Much like Keller, Ackermann wishes to opt for an open-ended process that is not restricted to specific dominant

power modes that subjugate people. Only through openness to change could betterment be promoted. The opposite would be the current modes of domination, in which the discourse does not allow for visions of a better future, but maintains the inevitability of the status quo, so to speak. To address fully the issue of oppressive community dynamics and the pursuit of justice, it is crucial to consider how knowledge about oppression is obtained and made visible. There is epistemic strength in the plurality of perspectives offered by feminists, and an open-ended and self-reflexive stance that promotes inclusivity would be crucial. Again, one should not propose perspectives that lend themselves to domination. The problem of devising different stances and positions is an issue; but guidance could be given using the fundamental ideals of the Christian faith that endorse equality and mutuality. Self-reflexivity is present here, and constant reinvention and critique should be encouraged. In this regard, Ackermann is more subtle than Keller, which might relate to the material aspect, which is more concrete than the abstract Spirit of the subject that Keller endorses.

If Christian theology is to guide us through a reasonable pluralism, how should we relate to the doctrinal dimension of faith? Ackermann acknowledges that there must be a continuation of faith, but that the current “purity” and doctrinal understanding that is prevalent must be challenged from a feminist perspective. In line with Ackermann, I argue that this is the time to invoke new modalities and resources to challenge the dominant tradition that has led to patriarchal rule. Domination in the current order needs to be exposed and challenged. To do this properly, we should turn toward more inclusive practices that can be derived in part from Ackermann’s ideas of praxis. This leads to another aspect that Ackermann ignores to a large extent, which is how social reality is to be understood. Ackermann writes about how the discourse could suppress the potential of emancipation in certain instances.

As a liberation theologian with a keen interest in critical theory, Ackermann places great emphasis on the concept of dialectics when it comes to understanding social reality. In her view, a deep understanding of power dynamics and of their impact on various aspects of life, particularly on the experiences of the oppressed, is crucial to tackling the intricate complexities of social reality. Ackermann’s approach, rooted in the Christian tradition of giving voice to the marginalized, seeks to reimagine theology as more inclusive and empowering. She calls on theologians to expand their understanding of theology by considering



the perspectives of historically marginalized groups, especially women and those who have faced oppression in religious and societal structures. This approach acknowledges the diverse experiences in Christianity, and encourages reflection on how theology could become more critically attuned to the realities of human existence. By embracing Ackermann's perspective on Christianity and theology, it becomes evident that she advocates a feminist re-evaluation of traditional doctrinal understandings. By interpreting the stories of the oppressed dialectically through the Christian faith, new avenues for understanding Christianity could emerge that would challenge patriarchal interpretations. Another strength of Ackermann's thinking concerns the rejection of mind/body dualism. She is critical of the separation of mind and body that emanates from Descartes's understanding of mind/body separation. Much like Parsons and Keller, Ackermann finds this to be part of the harmful discursive production of the feminine. Ackermann explains that humans do not *have* a body; they *are* a body.<sup>601</sup> The bodily perspective is crucial, since it mingles with the material aspects of her understanding of injustice. The embodied perspective, as inhabiting emotions and experiences, resists the division of the mind/body dualism that has led to the hierarchical domination of the male spirit over the female body. Corporeality produces desires, and one such aspect concerns human sexuality. Ackermann states that humans are created as sexual beings.<sup>602</sup> This has implications for justice. Human sexuality should be endorsed, not subdued, as it is in certain discourses—both inside and outside the Church. Instead, by acknowledging this, we could understand how sexuality and embodiment are interconnected and are central to understanding human experiences and injustices. From this, it follows that one should challenge discourses that try to suppress human sexuality since such discourses also restrict the subjectivities produced by limiting human freedom.

Furthermore, embodiment is one aspect that is interlinked with the perspective of vulnerability and relationality. On the ontological level, vulnerability and risk are concepts that coincide. As Ackermann notes, this is part of life, just as the creation of humanity was God's most risky endeavor. Risk, vulnerability, and hope thus entail a betterment that moves beyond the current discourse and brings about emancipation for the subjugated. Ackermann acknowledges that many feminists are

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<sup>601</sup> Ackermann, "A Voice Was Heard in Ramah," 87.

<sup>602</sup> Ackermann, "Engaging Stigma," 393.

skeptical of using vulnerability as a concept, since for them it is code for showing weakness. However, it is still an important concept with which to work. Vulnerability can be understood in many ways; but one aspect concerns its being an ontological reality, since entities can be hurt or destroyed. For a viable theology to represent reality adequately, vulnerability must be present.

Subjectivity has already been discussed to a large extent, but a few remarks are essential to further discussion. As a starting point, as revealed by Ackermann's feminist analysis, the patriarchal order has dominated the discursive production of the female subject. On an abstract level, this is right when assessing how social constructivism works through discourse. Still, more is needed when moving into the political sphere, and redistribution is needed to produce equality. Ackermann's understanding could be radicalized here, and demands for redistribution could be voiced more overtly from the theological foundation she favors. This would also emphasize the theological implications for the political, where feminist theological perspectives can, and should, play a pivotal role in promoting change toward a more just society.

Ackermann's analysis of subjectivity in the patriarchal system highlights the need for a more radical approach to addressing gender inequality. By grounding the discussion in Ackermann's feminist analysis, it becomes apparent that the dominance of the patriarchal order has significantly influenced the discursive production of the female subject. As a result, the notion of female resistance, agency, and subjectivity becomes central to the discussion. By endorsing this from a feminist theological perspective, new insights could be offered to challenge the traditional power dynamics and to advocate a more inclusive and equitable society. In particular, Ackermann's feminist analysis underscores the importance of addressing the discursive construction of female subjectivity and the tangible and material impacts of the patriarchal order. Furthermore, Ackermann's perspective on subjectivity in the patriarchal system emphasizes the crucial need for redistributive measures to address gender inequality. A important position to take here includes recognition and redistribution of resources to the subjugated. Since humans are equal before God, this should translate into the political, where equality should be pursued on all levels. This stance aligns with Ackermann's emphasis on the need for redistribution as a means to achieve equality.

As touched on regarding the theological motivation and thus its contribution to ethics, one central concept concerns the *imago Dei*. This is paramount in justifying equality and reciprocity. Although to a lesser degree than Keller, Ackermann focuses on the non-domination stemming from the *imago Dei*.<sup>603</sup> Humanity is made in God's image, providing an absolute foundation of dignity that cannot be challenged. In not granting each human their dignity, one is also robbing God of dignity, since that is the model for human dignity. Ackermann provides resources to further the pursuit of justice for all.

In contrast to Keller, Ackermann focuses here on the anthropocentrism of the justice claim, and endorses the ideal of human stewardship for the Creation without moving, as Keller does, to ecocentrism or holism. This is an efficient mode of operation that is in line with the materialistic approach endorsed by Ackermann. Adding to this materialistic approach, one must engage in a continuous process of self-reflexivity in which just living conditions for humans only would be, so to speak, the demise of justice. To live flourishing lives, justice should be seen as including justice for all ecospheres, and not as restricted to humans.

Ackermann's feminist theology has played a crucial role in highlighting the importance of gender equality in religious practices. Her work has challenged the patriarchal norms and traditions that are deeply ingrained in many religious institutions, and has paved the way for a more inclusive and diverse approach to faith. Ackermann has contributed significantly to establishing an intersectional approach to gender, race, and religion. These are valuable insights to which I return in the next chapter, in which I discuss the perspectives of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann together.

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<sup>603</sup> Ackermann, "Defining Our Humanity," 13–23.



## 6. Emancipation

In this chapter I return to the aim and the research question given in the introduction, and examine how subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality have been interplaying dialectically in the work of the three feminist ethicists I have examined. The goal is to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the resources for emancipation offered by these key concepts in Christian feminist ethics.

In this study, I develop a comprehensive understanding of how subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality intersect and impact Christian feminist ethics, which seeks to promote emancipation for subjugated groups and individuals. The research question is: *How do different understandings of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality relate to Christian feminist ethics and its emancipatory potential?*

This has been explored in the previous three chapters, and I discuss and compare the perspectives of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann further here. All three theologians offer different perspectives on the topics at hand, highlighting and engaging with perspectives from different theoretical and contextual settings.

### 6.1. Feminist Ethics and Emancipation

So, what are the central components of an emancipatory Christian feminist ethics? I argue that several components and perspectives are needed for ethics that entail critical resources that could contribute to emancipation. Feminist ethics, as illuminated by the works of Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann, challenges traditional ethical theories by centering on women's experiences and highlighting the interconnectedness of gender, power, and justice. All three theorists provide accounts of ethics that integrate feminist perspectives of various kinds.

To begin, I wish to highlight the critical aspects of feminist ethics concerning the character of ethics itself. In line with Namli and Grenholm, I adhere to the notion of viewing ethics as the critical scrutiny of moral conventions.<sup>604</sup> This view is different than Parson's perspective, which views ethics as a textual and discursive field concerned with the good. Still, it is compatible with her idea of ethics as deliberative praxis.<sup>605</sup> As we have seen, Parsons searches for critical resources within a communal project of a good human life. This approach inherits the challenge to make relevant differences visible in a specific community.

Keller and Ackermann, in turn, highlight the need for ethics to be critical of dominant power structures and to challenge the status quo, locally and globally. I believe that this perspective holds significant emancipatory potential compared with the search for "the good," as it provides resources to disrupt oppressive systems and to provide open spaces for marginalized voices and perspectives, which translates into how philosophy itself should be understood.

I view philosophy as a critical discipline that is in line with the understanding described above. Many, or perhaps even most, philosophers view their discipline as the pursuit of truth, which aligns with Socrates's understanding.<sup>606</sup> However, I argue that philosophy, including ethics, should not solely be concerned with a quest for truth (whatever that may be). Instead, it should embrace its critical nature and constantly challenge what is taken to be the truth. This critical approach to philosophy encourages the examination of dominant narratives and a questioning of the assumptions and biases that may be embedded in them. It is especially important in feminist ethics, as it allows us to challenge the traditional patriarchal structures that have shaped ethical frameworks for centuries.<sup>607</sup> To further this perspective of feminist ethics as a critical ethics, I think that it should be seen as aligned with critical theory.<sup>608</sup> Ackermann holds such a view, which I believe to be most

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<sup>604</sup> Namli and Grenholm, *Etik*, 9.

<sup>605</sup> This should be seen in relation to her Thomistic and Aristotelian view, and how she focuses on "the good" rather than on "the right."

<sup>606</sup> Jacob N. Graham, "Ancient Greek Philosophy," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed April 20, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/ancient-greek-philosophy/>.

<sup>607</sup> Margaret McGladrey, "On Making Academic Feminism More Public," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 4 (2022): 1035–57.

<sup>608</sup> Ackermann, "Critical Theory, Communicative Actions and Liberating Praxis," 21–26, 33–36.

sound. Critical theory also emphasizes the importance of lived experience and contextualization, which is crucial for feminist ethics. Contextualization also intersects with the subjugation from which one must be emancipated. Parsons wishes to navigate between different paradigms; in doing so she feels that the foundation of gender is challenged along with sexism and the subordination of women. For Ackermann, writing predominantly in the South African setting, clearly rejects the intersection of sexism and racism that has been prevalent both during and since the apartheid regime's rule. Keller views this intersection in respect of sexism, ecological disaster, and political narratives that dominate and exploit others. I believe that all these examples are valid when one analyzes the need for emancipation. In my view, a central tenet concerns the contextual domination of others; but one must always see it in a larger setting. Domination and subjugation can be different in different contexts, but a core problem concerns how being restricted to predefined roles restricts human agency. This could be in the form of discursive practices such as sexism and racism, but also in a more material sense that interacts with discursive praxis.

Contextualization is one aspect of concern in ethics. Feminist ethics views communities as contexts that shape moral agency and ethical action. As stated earlier, Parsons argues for a normative vision of an inclusive and diverse community that is characterized by mutual care and support. She emphasizes the importance of collective responsibility and of cultivating relationships that promote justice and equality. This sense of community, as Parsons argues, is crucial for the development of a truly emancipatory Christian feminist ethics.

As feminist theologians, Keller and Ackermann also emphasize the significance of community, albeit on different levels. As I have argued, Parsons should be viewed as a communitarian, while Keller offers a cosmopolitan position. Ackermann advocates a relational ethical understanding that recognizes the interconnections and interdependencies among individuals, communities, and the local environment to a much larger extent—a result of the setting in which most of her writing has been done. Keller argues for a global ethic that extends beyond individual communities, focusing on the interconnectedness of all people and the need for solidarity across borders. Moreover, Keller promotes an ethic of ecological justice that recognizes the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world, emphasizing the importance of caring for

and preserving the earth for future generations with her ecofeminist perspective. This holistic approach to ethics considers the well-being and flourishing of all human and non-human beings within a larger framework of interconnectedness that spreads outward. Keller's cosmopolitan views align with the idea of a global community that transcends borders and embraces diversity. The South African case provides challenges with which Ackermann has grappled, and highlights the importance of community in addressing systems of oppression, particularly in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Many years have passed since the official end of apartheid; and yet Ackermann's focus on the intersectionality of racism and sexism remains relevant, perhaps even urgent.

All of these perspectives offer valuable insights, and, as I have argued in the chapter on Parsons, the communitarian view of community provides a strong foundation for ethical action, emphasizing the importance of relationships, care, and justice in a specific community context. However, that is not enough to make global injustice and ecological crises the objects of social critique. As Keller advocates, a cosmopolitan or global ethic addresses these larger systemic issues. A complex dynamic exists between individual communities and the larger global community. How exactly to navigate this dynamic is too broad a question to be fully answered in this dissertation. What I wish to highlight, rather, is the importance of solidarity and interconnectedness, the very recognition that our actions and choices have ripple effects beyond the boundaries of our immediate communities. If we acknowledge that we are all interconnected, then we have a moral responsibility to work toward justice and ecological sustainability on a global scale. This might start in the local setting, but, from an ethical perspective, it must be extended to encompass the global community as well. Furthermore, a cosmopolitan ethos prioritizes interconnectedness and solidarity, and acknowledges every individual's inherent worth and dignity, regardless of nationality or cultural background.<sup>609</sup> This is tied directly to the idea of personal and systemic bias and to how morality is shaped, both in a positive and a negative sense, and includes personal failings and bias.

So, how should feminist ethics mitigate bias? A central trait that Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann highlight in their writings, and that I fully endorse, concerns the importance of self-reflexivity in feminist ethics. This self-reflexivity demands the continual examination and critique of

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<sup>609</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 12, 15–16, 67–68.



one's own biases, privileges, and assumptions. As all three theologians have argued, this self-reflexivity is essential for a feminist ethics that aims to challenge oppressive social systems. I argue that a central tenet of self-reflexivity concerns recognizing and acknowledging one's own privilege and complicity in systems of oppression. By acknowledging and addressing their own privilege and complicity, feminist ethicists can actively work toward dismantling oppressive systems and creating more just and equitable relationships—all aspects of concern for Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann.

Central to the self-reflexive account, I propose that we adhere to the notion of “failing better,” as suggested by Keller.<sup>610</sup> Here, a humble approach should be endorsed to promote perspectives that do not lend themselves to domination. However, this does not equate to any relativistic notions. Instead, the ideals sought should be firmly grounded in respect and in egalitarian perspectives for all.

As discussed primarily in relation to Keller, concerning the role of Levinas' theory of the other, I believe that there is more to the matter. As previously stated, I argue that there is potential in the perspective offered by Levinas, which emphasizes our moral responsibility toward the other and challenges traditional notions of selfhood and detachment. By introducing a sense of vulnerability and relationality into his moral phenomenology, Levinas opens up possibilities for moral encounters that go beyond the limited framework of dualism. Even more importantly, the perspective offers a normative claim that is grounded in recognizing our interconnectedness, and thus in the moral obligation to care for one another. This pertains to a shift in understanding morality, in which the embodied experience is brought to the fore.

The recognition of our interconnectedness shapes our moral obligations toward others when individuals are not seen as separate but as interconnected on a profound level. This gives subjectivity a key role, since we cannot separate ourselves from our bodies. Therefore, our subjectivity is inherently tied to our embodiment and our moral obligations toward others. I argue that there is a dialectic relationship between subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality that should be at the heart of feminist ethics. Not viewing the concepts as separate, but rather as dialectically related, creates valuable critical resources for feminist ethics—even more so when they are grounded in the embodied experience

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<sup>610</sup> Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 143.

of the self, as Ackermann has advocated in discussing the feminist praxis of anti-racism. This pertains to the inclusivity of feminist ethics.

Regarding inclusivity, I believe that, even though feminism is rooted in the notion that women are systemically disadvantaged—and this must change—feminism is not an issue for women only. Patriarchal structures limit women and men alike, and this is an injustice. In this sense, feminist ethics has the potential to emancipate women and men from their respective interpellated categories devised by patriarchal structures. Interpellation into categories under patriarchy only provides certain choices in life for women and men alike. By opening up the categories, the individual's agency could be enhanced instead of being restricted to predefined categories. This is highlighted by Keller in particular and, to an extent, by Ackermann—even though she is aware of the difficulties that men engaging with feminism encounter. This concern is most valid; and the key here is that those who are better off should be in solidarity with the subjugated. Solidarity is of the essence; and men should embrace feminism as part of the transformation of the world. As I have argued in the chapter on Ackermann, Mohanty adds valuable insights that show the complex nature of solidarity between women of different classes, races, and contexts.<sup>611</sup> In any case, many feminists are united by their material interest in ending patriarchy and, therefore, have a strong motivation to seek new models of solidarity among the genders, but also in the realms of poverty and intersecting racism.

## 6.2. Gender and Anthropology in Context

In my view, gender and anthropology are mutually dependent and intertwined. The concepts of gender and of what it is to be human cannot be separated. Additionally, they are always located in a specific context—just like other aspects of human identity and experience. Gender cannot be detached from culture, society, and history. This also means that the concepts are never innocent or neutral,<sup>612</sup> but always carry a specific power and influence that is formed through discourse.

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<sup>611</sup> Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 106–23.

<sup>612</sup> Hallamaa, *The Prisms of Moral Personhood*, 257.

To understand and address the complexities of gender and anthropology, it is crucial to consider intersectionality and the interconnectedness of various social identities such as class, race, sexuality, ability, and nationality, as well as the context in which they are formed. As previously discussed, intersectionality helps us to understand how different social identities and categories intersect and influence one another, shaping individuals' experiences of gender. Parsons, for example, opts for an essentialist, albeit modified, understanding of gender that, in her view, reduces the risk of diminishing women's future contribution and status. However, intersectionality and essentialism, even if modified, are not easy to combine.

In many respects, an intersectional approach is framed as a critique of essentialism. This is a challenge in Christian feminist ethics, in which the tension between essentialism and intersectionality must be navigated not to reproduce harmful stereotypes or to exclude certain groups of people.<sup>613</sup> As discussed throughout the study, intersectional feminist ethics should recognize the complexity and diversity of human experiences and seek to center the voices and perspectives of marginalized individuals and communities. In order to do so, we should refrain from reducing gender to a single essentialist category and instead embrace intersectionality as an anthropological framework for understanding the interplay of various social identities in shaping individuals' experiences of gender.<sup>614</sup> When moving beyond essentialist notions of gender, a great range of self-determination and expression is possible, since the predefined categories can be destabilized and a greater agency for each subject is enabled for her own identity.

As Keller has argued, gender should be viewed as a social and cultural construct that is shaped by various intersecting factors rather than fixed by predefined biological characteristics. For this process to unfold, I argue that it is essential not to restrict it to a particular context that risks becoming static. The internal dynamics of communitarianism risk being rigid, as the porous character of belonging is not correctly represented. As Keller<sup>615</sup> and to some extent Ackermann have pointed

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<sup>613</sup> Zandria F. Robinson, "Intersectionality and Gender Theory," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*, ed. Barbara J. Risman, Carissa M. Froyum, and William J. Scarborough, *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 69–80.

<sup>614</sup> Gill Valentine, "Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography," *The Professional Geographer* 59, no. 1 (2007): 10–21.

<sup>615</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 26.

out, a social constructivist approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of gender that takes into account the intersecting influences of race, class, sexuality, and other social identities that are formed and negotiated in specific socio-cultural contexts.

Yet the socio-cultural context must be open and porous to allow for transformation and differences. This has multiple political-moral implications, such as how one views the right to migrate and to seek refuge in order to escape oppression and discrimination, while also recognizing the importance of maintaining cultural diversity and respecting the self-determination of different communities. In the case of Ackermann, who wrote mainly from the South African apartheid and post-apartheid setting, it is evident that the historical and political context of racial segregation and oppression profoundly influences her analysis of gender and intersectionality. I believe that Ackermann's critical analysis of particular forms of injustice is a good example of how to show that being restricted to a specific context could limit one's understanding of gender and provide norms that further oppression. To grasp fully the complexities of gender and intersectionality, adopting a cosmopolitan framework that transcends narrow contextual boundaries is crucial.

Let us further the discussion about gender as a social and cultural construct. Keller opts for a constructivist view,<sup>616</sup> close to Butler's perspective in several ways.<sup>617</sup> They both emphasize that gender is not inherent or predetermined, but emerges through social processes and interactions. They also stress the importance of recognizing the multiple and overlapping ways in which individuals experience both oppression and privilege because of their intersecting identities. Both Butler and Keller argue that an understanding of gender must consider how power operates within and through intersecting social categories, and how these intersections shape individual experiences and opportunities in relation to gender. This stands in contrast to Parsons, who argues for an essentialist understanding of gender, viewing it as rooted in biological sex and as distinct from other social identities.

In no way does Parsons provide a simplistic view of gender. She offers a theory that modifies essentialism in order to minimize the risk of normative relativism, which she believes has become part of the post-modern feminist paradigm. Still, it is evident that the traditional Catho-

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>617</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

lic theological framework limits her analysis of intersectionality in relation to constructivist perspectives. Gudorf has noted this, and my analysis confirms the value of her critique of Parsons.<sup>618</sup> I argue that we should adopt a constructivist view of gender and intersectionality that acknowledges these categories' fluid and dynamic nature, emphasizing the social dimension of identities. A common criticism of a constructivist approach to gender and intersectionality is that it can be seen as "made up" or "fluid" in an almost voluntarist manner. This critique concerns not only gender construction but also constructivism as a concept. It is important to recognize that social constructivism does not imply that gender and intersectionality are arbitrarily constructed by individuals. Instead, a constructivist approach recognizes that these categories are deeply meaningful and have real-world consequences, but that their meanings and effects are neither fixed nor universal.

I argue that a constructivist approach, to a much greater extent than an essentialist position, captures the complexity and nuances of human experiences, and allows for a more inclusive understanding of gender and intersectionality that does not restrict itself to narrow categorizations. Therefore, a constructivist approach to gender and intersectionality allows for an understanding of these categories as not fixed or predetermined. Gender and intersectionality emerge and evolve through dynamic social processes and interactions, opening up the space for recognizing and validating diverse identities and experiences.

Essentialist positions do not provide the same resources when engaging with injustice in different contextual settings. Essentialism retains the risk of being static and, therefore, provides a justification for stereotyping genders. Parsons claims that, although they are different, women and men should be considered complementary and equal.<sup>619</sup> I suggest that we move beyond this dichotomy and instead see humans as complex beings who cannot be restricted to "gender essentials." Here, we should prefer Keller, who understands gender as multiplicitous instead,<sup>620</sup> and Ackermann, who sees gender as one, albeit central, dimension of what constitutes humans.<sup>621</sup> In this way, we could move beyond dualisms that risk creating dichotomies that, in turn, could legitimize social hierarchies.

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<sup>618</sup> Gudorf, "Feminism and Postmodernism in Susan Frank Parsons," 524.

<sup>619</sup> Parsons, "Ad Imaginem Dei," 146–47.

<sup>620</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 41.

<sup>621</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 38.

Keller claims that the feminine is also present within the male psyche; one just has to embrace it. Additionally, Keller sees men as captives of the patriarchal order, being part of structural injustices that limit what they can be and become in relation to gender roles. Keller states that males should endorse and engage with other parts of the Creation, not trying to separate themselves from family, children, etc.<sup>622</sup> I believe this to be a crucial notion and of great importance for feminist ethics, since it further destabilizes the essentialist understanding of gender, and instead shows how constructivist perspectives could open up the discourse on gender to provide the broadest array of possible identities. I argue that this directly relates to the idea of the feminist struggle as an inclusive struggle for freedom and justice, as it shows how the limitations of patriarchal (and essentialist) perspectives also restricts men to certain roles and perspectives rather than striving for emancipation for all. On a larger scale, for Keller this also relates to the ecofeminist notion of men trying to separate themselves from Creation when they should embrace how intertwined they are. This opens up the space for also engaging with all parts of Creation, not only those with previously relegated to a feminine sphere (such as family and children). Instead, men should embrace the Creation and see how intertwined all parts are, not as separate but as mutually constitutive. In doing so, one could further destabilize the idea of the separation of women and men, as well as that between humans and all other parts of Creation.

### 6.3. Ethics and Theology as Mutually Reinforcing

A central aspect of the theological contribution to feminist ethics resides in eschatology, or so I claim. Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann all—albeit to different degrees—remain steadfast in the promise of the Christian Gospel and that a teleology is present that offers hope for the transformation of human relationships and the healing of the world. Eschatology provides a horizon that one should strive toward. By using different Christian sources, feminist theologians such as Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann offer unique insights into ethics that challenge traditional patriarchal norms and promote inclusivity and justice for all individuals, regardless of their gender or social status. This aligns with the Christian message of love and with the prophetic vision that one day

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<sup>622</sup> Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 203.

the lion and the lamb will lie down together.<sup>623</sup> I believe that this is a powerful insight that provided hope during previous dark times, and continues to do so today. In a world ravaged by war and ecological disasters, when all too many people seem intent on opting for “strong” leaders and hierarchies among genders and races are reinforced, the divisions between humans are prevalent, and the domination of others is a goal. More than ever, there is a need for an alternative vision for the future.

Christian feminist theology provides new venues to inspire social changes. Most importantly, in my investigation, the three theologians use Christian eschatology to demonstrate that we must recognize the interconnectedness of all beings and extend our ethical considerations beyond our self-interest and immediate communities. These perspectives are also valuable for non-Christians, since they provide openings toward new possibilities that are not constrained by philosophies that seek to ignore all contextual differences. The very use of Christian resources for feminist ethics could inspire many others, and the perspective of a different reality could be endorsed even if one did not adopt the Christian faith. Through ideas that transcend the classical dualisms, theology could point toward new possibilities to inspire change.

Two such notions are when Parsons encourages us to live as the reign of God is present,<sup>624</sup> or when Ackermann suggests that, even in a time of despair, we should try to live as if the coming of God were on us, already here, but not yet.<sup>625</sup> By showing that another reality is possible (or at least conceivable), one abandons the nihilism and passivity induced in dark times and breaks with the dualism of either/or, in the sense that the reign of God is either present or not. The perspectives presented here are excluded from this binary understanding, and instead we are pointed toward new possibilities in which the reign of God is both present and not present, which then becomes itself an exercise in non-dualism. Using eschatology in this sense means that, even if one

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<sup>623</sup> As it is written in Isaiah 11:6–9: “[6] The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. [7] The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. [8] The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. [9] They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

<sup>624</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 187.

<sup>625</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, 55–56.

did not accept all of the Christian faith (whatever that could or should include), it would be a valuable resource, since it would show how to destabilize the current patriarchal order and logic. Sometimes, perhaps, that is what is needed the most.

Another aspect of theology as a critical resource for feminist ethics concerns the defense of human dignity and worth. I agree with Parsons, Keller (although she expands this perspective to include non-human entities as well), and Ackermann that there is a need for a theological understanding of human dignity and worth beyond simply individualistic perspectives. It is essential to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, regardless of their different individual characteristics or social status.<sup>626</sup> This recognition is rooted in the belief that all human beings are created in God's image and thus deserve respect, dignity, and equal treatment. Therefore, theology offers a unique perspective on ethics by grounding moral principles in a larger framework of love, justice, and interconnectedness. Theological perspectives that prioritize love, justice, and interconnectedness could provide a robust foundation for ethical action and social transformation.<sup>627</sup> By embracing feminist and Christian ethics, we could challenge oppressive systems and work toward a more just and inclusive world.<sup>628</sup>

Obviously, theology has been and is still used to justify the unjust status quo. Feminist theology is thus a profoundly self-critical enterprise. For Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann, Christianity has yet to uphold the values of love and justice for all. Instead, the dominant traditions have perpetuated systems of oppression and marginalization.<sup>629</sup> Therefore, engaging in critical theological reflection that challenges and disrupts dominant narratives is imperative for a truly transformative ethics. Feminist perspectives in and beyond theology provide essential insights and tools for this critical reflection, as they challenge the patriarchal structures and assumptions that have shaped traditional theology.

It is clear that theology must evolve and adapt to address the complexities of our contemporary world, and not simply reproduce oppressive systems. Affirming women as full human beings must become the touchstone of cultural criticism, biblical interpretation, and theological

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<sup>626</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 51, 100, 104, 112, 143–44, 157, 361–88.

<sup>627</sup> Carl-Henric Grenholm, "On Revolution in Lutheran Political Ethics," in *Future(s) of the Revolution and the Reformation*, ed. Elena Namli (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 191–209.

<sup>628</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 361–88.

<sup>629</sup> Callewaert, *Theologies Speak of Justice*, 12–15.



truth. The affirmation of humanity is a true sign of the divine will, and those things that deny, diminish, or distort the full humanity of women are to be considered nonredemptive. Therefore, embracing feminist Christian ethics offers a transformative pathway toward justice, love, and interconnectedness. However, this should be done in a non-triumphalist way, in line with what Keller proposes, to minimize any risk of rendering any perspective open to supporting domination.<sup>630</sup>

The question of sin needs to be addressed to elaborate on the problematic issue of theology that lends support to domination. Traditional Christian teachings on sin have often reinforced notions of individual guilt and shame. Feminism provides perspectives in which a structural understanding of sin can be articulated. We need to broaden our understanding of sin to include structural and systemic injustice in addition to personal moral failings. Sin is never devoid of context; and as situated and embodied subjects, we live under particular existential conditions that shape our moral agency. Stripped of its theological aspects, this aligns with Butler's perspective, in which acts are contextually conditioned.<sup>631</sup> Unfortunately, large parts of the Christian tradition have emphasized individual guilt to such an extent that it has obscured the social, political, and economic factors that constrain human freedom and agency. This ignores the reality of structural injustice and how oppressive systems shape and limit the possibilities for agency that would be available to marginalized individuals and to communities alike.

Here, we should invoke a perspective of sin as enmeshed in most, if not all, parts of our lives. If we acknowledge that we are enmeshed in sinful structures and that we are ontologically intertwined, this must have implications for how we understand moral responsibility. This broadened perspective on sin and responsibility challenges traditional Christian individualism, and opens up a space for more relational, contextual, and socially engaged perspectives that focus on sin as separation from and the domination of others, whether manifested through individual action or through systemic oppression. In my view, this has profound moral implications, since it redresses the inherited understanding of sin to provide critical resources that are not directed toward individuals but that address larger systemic issues that perpetuate injustice. This also relates to how discursive practices interpellated individuals into precarious positions that limit their agency. This aligns with

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<sup>630</sup> Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 151–53.

<sup>631</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 15–16.

Butler's view on moral responsibility amid structural formations that one has not chosen.<sup>632</sup> This should induce greater humility and solidarity among moral subjects who are enmeshed in unjust structures. It does not diminish personal culpability, but expands the scope of responsibility to address the social and political forces that shape subjectivities. As already stated, the subjectivities are contextually formed and upheld, and sin is part of the context. This also relates to the question of forgiveness, where Keller offers an important perspective on forgiveness as paramount for the self to reduce or leave behind any resentment. Otherwise, the resentment would be part of the subject, leading us to this very question of subject formation.

#### 6.4. The Dialectics of Subjectivity, Vulnerability, and Relationality

Subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in feminist Christian ethics are deeply interconnected and mutually constitutive. Feminist theologians such as Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann have shown us that subjectivity is not a fixed and isolated entity, but is shaped and formed through relationships, power dynamics, and social contexts. These relationships and power dynamics also expose individuals to vulnerability, as they are subject to potentially harmful or oppressive forces. Although Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann have different understandings of these concepts, they all recognize that subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality are deeply intertwined. The concepts are essential for understanding and addressing the complexities of gender, power, and justice in today's world in ways that avoid any easy categorization.<sup>633</sup> I argue that the dynamic constitution of these concepts provides a powerful tool to develop a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of those concepts in relation to the emancipatory potential of feminist ethics. All three theologians show that a dialectical interpretation of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality offers resources to contemporary feminism. Such feminism does not aim to eliminate vulnerability,

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<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>633</sup> This is also noted by, among others, Burman, "Feminism and Discourse in Developmental Psychology," 56–57.

nor does it give up on individual freedom, which is understood as social freedom rather than freedom from others.<sup>634</sup>

By looking deeply into the mutually constituent factors of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality, the Christian feminists studied here enable a more nuanced understanding of how power operates and shapes our lives. Keller is especially clear that interconnectedness plays a central role in understanding what it is to be human. Still, all three theologians view freedom and autonomy as paramount, but not in a way that diminishes our vulnerability or the relationality that forms our sociality. From how subjectivities are produced, these perspectives show that we have moral obligations toward our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others alike. Moreover, there is a need to analyze critically how power operates and manifests to see how hierarchies and domination are perpetuated under a patriarchal order. I claim that all three theologians provide more nuanced models than traditional liberal feminism when it comes to understanding what it is to be human.

In this study I show that the dialectical interplay between the concepts provides critical resources. Parsons argues that the subject has a *real* presence, and is not *only* a product of discourse. As stated in the chapter on Parsons, I contest this position, since it does not give enough significance to the relational aspect that constitutes subjects and reality. Instead, subjectivity is to be understood as a complex and dynamic process that emerges through our interactions and relationships with others, and discourse is part of the very fabric that constitutes reality. There is no “outside” in the sense that there is no separation between ourselves and our social and cultural contexts. In this sense, relationality is a fundamental aspect of subjectivity and vulnerability. Keller also goes beyond a narrower understanding of these concepts to include the broader interconnectedness of all beings and entities in the world. I believe that one could accept this understanding without embracing all the metaphysics of process theology. This central tenet genuinely abandons the current dominant understanding, devised from Western patriarchal systems, which in turn maintain hierarchies of power and privilege and—not only, but also—can be attributed to the dominance of Cartesian dualism. Therefore, I believe a shift toward a holistic understanding of the subject and of the world is one step toward a position that could encourage engagements and actions that challenge patriarchal oppression and work for the emancipation for all. This is also well in line with Keller’s

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<sup>634</sup> Ziarek, “Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability,” 81–82.

ecofeminist perspective, in which emancipation is sought for humans and for all parts of Creation.<sup>635</sup> In Keller's view, these perspectives cannot be separated, because the idea of an emancipated humanity that dominates the rest of Creation does not sit well with her—a most reasonable attitude.

Vulnerability, as an ontological concept, underpins all of existence. Being vulnerable allows us to engage with the world and to establish meaningful relationships with others. If we were not vulnerable, we would not be able to experience empathy, compassion, or love, since there would be no possibility of change. Vulnerability should, therefore, be seen as the possibility of change and, from a theological perspective, as in line with the Spirit that blows wherever it wishes. The breath of the world, or the interdependent web of existence, connects us all and makes us vulnerable to one another. By endorsing the perspective proposed by Keller, we acknowledge that our subjectivity is not fixed or isolated but is constantly influenced and shaped by our relationships and interactions with others. We are constituted by one another, through one another, and are in a constant state of becoming.

Therefore, a genuinely sound normative position must recognize all beings' inherent vulnerability and interdependence, and how subjectivity is constructed through relationality and vulnerability. The open-ended creative process of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality is where ethical action and transformation can occur.<sup>636</sup> By engaging in emancipatory action and recognizing our inherent vulnerability, we could transcend self-interest and acknowledge the humanity of others.<sup>637</sup> For this to be a viable position, I argue that we must constantly be self-reflexive and critically examine our own power and privilege within societal structures. For those who endorse dominant positions of power and wish to adhere to a position of independence and individualism, recognizing and embracing vulnerability may be seen as a threat to their freedom (understood as independence). However, it is through embracing vulnerability and acknowledging the interdependent nature of our existence that we can begin to dismantle systems of oppression and engage in practices of solidarity.

As I interpret Keller, a sound normative position should prioritize the well-being and dignity of the most precarious members of society

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<sup>635</sup> Keller, *No Matter What*, 143–44.

<sup>636</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 387–88.

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*, 140–44.

and of Creation. The Swedish theologian Teresa Callewaert presents a similar perspective to this, in which the subject must be emancipated through society, since the discursive production of the self is contextually mended.<sup>638</sup> If we accept that we are constituted through one another, the moral implication is that we are responsible for caring for and protecting each and everybody.<sup>639</sup> But I also think that we should radicalize this position, using Christology as a resource. We are called to go beyond mere care for or protection of the precarious, and to work actively for the emancipation of all marginalized and oppressed individuals. In this sense, resources are presented by the three feminists that show that self-giving and justice are not the opposites that they are often presented to be. I think that, by invoking perspectives of solidarity with those living under precarious circumstances, there is potential for justice, both literally and figuratively speaking. Justice, as demanded by the *imago Dei*, is one point; but it is also “doing justice” to our humanity in the sense that we enact and embrace our shared vulnerability in helping others. This would also destabilize the idea of self-giving as negative, since it would be directly tied to the subjectivities that are positively produced. By doing so, we would provide for people’s needs, and support and strive to create a more just and equitable society for all;<sup>640</sup> we would work toward a world in which everyone can flourish. This would result from how subjectivities and embracing vulnerability through relationality could be thought of anew in a way that is not individualistic but interdependent.

A clear example of promoting such a normative position is Matthew 25:40: “And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” I believe that this should be seen as directly linked to our moral obligation to care for and uplift the precarious in society. It also reveals how subjectivities are relationally constructed and are interdependent. Whatever we do is reflected in ourselves; the subject formation is intertwined with how we interact with and care for others.<sup>641</sup> The in-

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<sup>638</sup> Callewaert, *Theologies Speak of Justice*, 367.

<sup>639</sup> Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 388.

<sup>640</sup> Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, *Vulnerability*, 10–13.

<sup>641</sup> An excellent cultural reference to the relational aspect of subject formation is made by the Swedish artist Kjell Höglund, who in his song “Livets flod” sings:

“Allt vad du gör mot en av dessa mina minsta bröder  
det gör du mot dig själv, det är din egen kropp som blöder.”

terplay of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality highlights individuals' interconnectedness and shared responsibility in fostering a just and compassionate world. A moral dimension is clearly present here.

As I have stated in the introduction of this dissertation, the focus of my investigation is human subjects. I have disregarded almost entirely the intersectionality that includes non-human entities. However, at this point, it is important to acknowledge the advantage of Keller's holism, which seeks to include all Creation in the interplay of vulnerability, subjectivity, and relationality and, therefore, in moral responsibility.

By recognizing the interconnectedness between human and non-human entities, Keller's holistic approach to intersectionality acknowledges that other humans, non-human animals, and our interactions with the natural environment, technology, and other non-human entities such as artifacts shape our subjectivity. The crucial question here, in my view, is not whether we should care for non-human entities, but the extent to which we should embrace the process metaphysics that Keller advocates.

I believe that Keller makes a valuable contribution with her holism when she wishes to create an inclusive perspective containing all necessary parts to create a view of the world. However, this also carries with it a lot of deep metaphysics. This has been noted by the Swedish theologian Lovisa Nyman, in whose dissertation she claims that Keller's metaphysical proposals carry so much baggage that anyone who accepts them must discard a fair amount of classic theology, and that Keller's view in this regard cannot be as inclusive as she strives for.<sup>642</sup> Nyman raises a valid concern about the extent to which one has to embrace process panentheism, especially from a Christian standpoint. In my view, there is merit in keeping to a form of theology with less deep metaphysics, as in the case of Ackermann. Still, on a grander scale, there truly is merit in providing an extensive metaphysical theory that can answer all sorts of questions and concerns. The comprehensive theory of existence that Keller advocates challenges traditional dualistic frameworks, and calls for a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and non-human entities.<sup>643</sup> I believe that this

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Kjell Höglund, "Livets Flod," on *Ormens år* (Stockholm: Atlantis Studio, 1989).

<sup>642</sup> Lovisa Nyman, *Det konstruktiva beroendet: Feministisk teologi i ett individualistiskt samhälle* (Lund: Lund University, 2020), 126.

<sup>643</sup> Lina Langby, *God and the world: Pragmatic and epistemic arguments for panentheistic and pantheistic conceptions of the God-world relationship*, Uppsala Studies in

provides resources for showing how subjects are profoundly interdependent and interconnected on both the ontological and the epistemological levels. In my view, this would, to a much greater extent than less extensive metaphysical positions, challenge current dominant theological and philosophical theories and narratives by providing a more extensive theory that could inspire an ethical critique. This would be valuable for Christian feminist theology, since more types of question could be addressed with more extensive theoretical resources.<sup>644</sup>

## 6.5. Power and Materiality

A critical reflection on power structures and the material conditions of people is crucial in feminist Christian ethics. It recognizes that power is relational and material, and that structural injustices and inequalities must be acknowledged and addressed. Thus, feminist Christian ethics should recognize the intersections between gender, race, class, sexuality, and other social categories to challenge and transform oppressive systems and to work toward social justice; and this must be done with material factors in mind. In this regard, Ackermann is the theologian who provides the most critical account of social conditions and power structures. The lack of material resources and power is a fundamental obstacle to many people's ability to realize their full humanity. For Ackermann, it is clear how sexism and racism have worked in tandem to discriminate against and oppress women and people of color in South Africa. Social injustices, including poverty and a lack of material resources, are of the essence, since they are used to enforce states of precariousness and the domination of those in power. Ackermann argues that a lack of material resources limits one's ability to act according to one's own agency, which in turn reduces the chances of leading a fulfilling life. She believes that this situation calls for a redistribution of wealth and resources, as inequality poses a significant challenge to shared existence. To enhance the opportunities for individuals to act in

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Philosophy of Religion 8 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2023), 18, 94–98, 120.

<sup>644</sup> Unfortunately, the extent to which Keller's holistic theory is valid is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, I believe that there is much merit in the apophatic process pantheism that Keller advocates when explaining interconnectedness in the world.

accordance with their agency, it is essential to strive for economic equality.

One point of criticism shared by Parsons, Keller, and Ackermann concerns the inherent limitations of traditional ethical frameworks that prioritize individual autonomy and the notion of detached “objectivity.” This is amplified by the state of late capitalism, in which individualism and competition are valued over sociality, well-being, and cooperation.<sup>645</sup> In this sense, the relational aspects of human life are suppressed by a neoliberal ideology that prioritizes self-interest and maximized profit. This is reflected in the subjectivities that are produced, and exploits the vulnerable traits of individuals and communities, perpetuating oppressive power dynamics and inducing states of precarity. This includes, but is not limited to, attitudes of commodification, such as how easy it is to replace human beings in certain settings that are valued beyond anything else: profit maximization. In this sense, objectification imposes an instrumental value on human beings rather than seeing them as valuable in themselves. This could stem from ideas of productivity, in which only those who work hard can increase production, and profits are valued. Further, through discriminatory practices, including sexism and racism, certain groups are economically exploited by others as mere instruments. All subjectivities produced under exploitative conditions will include elements that diminish the possibility of human flourishing and reinforce precariousness.

At this stage, it is crucial to challenge the dominant neoliberal ideology that underpins traditional ethical frameworks and maintains the harmful practices of objectification and commodification. By embracing a relational approach to ethics, we could shift our focus from individualism and competition toward interconnectedness, interdependence, and solidarity. By recognizing the inherent interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings, a relational ethical model would allow us to acknowledge the well-being and dignity of all individuals and communities. In this regard, Parsons’ communitarian ethos has some advantages, since it provides practical perspectives on how to ground moral values in an actual context. Still, it fails to capture fully the complexities of subjectivity and vulnerability concerning power dynamics. A key part that is missing concerns the risk of any closed community

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<sup>645</sup> Sporre also criticizes this, referring to the diminishing of others as instantiated by hierarchical thinking that is reinforced by monetary differences. Sporre, *Först när vi får ansikten*, 185–87.



upholding and maintaining unjust power relations that are hard to challenge when the community is not open to other communities. This is a central issue for communitarians. A closed community also risks becoming stagnant when it is not adequately open to other perspectives from outside the community. Even if Parsons also appreciates cosmopolitanism to some extent, I believe that she emphasizes the communitarian aspects too much to be able to embrace cosmopolitanism to the same extent as Keller and Ackermann.

Instead, as proposed by Keller and Ackermann, an approach that emphasizes the need to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures and systems that perpetuate inequality and marginalization would advocate porous, cosmopolitan, and contextual spaces of engagement and solidarity. A central problem with capitalism is the asymmetric distribution of power and resources, which perpetuates systemic inequalities and reinforces the precariousness of marginalized groups.<sup>646</sup> As pointed out by Ackermann, when people believe that there are no alternatives, they risk becoming nihilists.<sup>647</sup> This is fueled further by the constant pressure to conform to neoliberal ideals of success and productivity, which can lead to a lack of agency and a sense of hopelessness. Further, promoting individual resilience in navigating precarity under neoliberalism overlooks the collective responsibility to address systemic injustices.

Concerning Keller's view of the process-panentheistic God as luring and inviting Creation into a transformative and relational space, it is vital to consider the material dimensions of such a transformation. The material conditions shape and constrain the possibilities for transformation, and Keller's focus solely or mainly on spirituality or individual agency without addressing the material realities is problematic. It is necessary critically to examine power structures and material conditions that intersect with the production of subjects in actual contexts. Keller writes about how speech "matters" in taking material form, which I still interpret as a form of idealism. In this model, discourse becomes a material power rather than being fundamentally dependent on material factors. In my view, Keller overestimates the transformative power of ideas and of individual subjects' worldviews.

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<sup>646</sup> Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis"; Martha Albertson Fineman, "Beyond Identities: The Limits of an Antidiscrimination Approach to Equality," *Boston University Law Review* 92, no. 6 (2012): 1713–70.

<sup>647</sup> Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, 210.

The material conditions in which power structures operate should be considered in feminist Christian ethics, as they shape and limit the possibilities of transforming subjects and society alike, and thus have a real impact on the emancipatory potential at hand. Again, if the material conditions are not provided, humans' agency and subjectivity cannot be realized to their full potential.

Parsons emphasizes the importance of relationality and interconnectedness in feminist Christian ethics. Still, this emphasis would be even more productive if it included the recognition of specific features of material and sociopolitical contexts. As already stated, Parsons tends to overlook social conflicts and power relations in communities.

Ackermann is the one of the three theologians who has written most extensively on material conditions and power structures. She considers the material conditions and power structures that shape and constrain the lives of marginalized groups and individuals, as well as the material conditions for and obstacles to inter-groups' solidarity (in her case, primarily privileged women allying with non-White South Africans). The subjectivities produced under precarious conditions of poverty, discrimination, and inequality are inherently shaped by those conditions, and any normative position must take this into account. A reallocation of resources is thus necessary, and a redistribution of power and privilege is essential for creating a more just and equitable society. This includes a critique of capitalism, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression that perpetuate inequality and marginalization.

By giving voice to the oppressed, and by engaging in practices of solidarity, we could challenge and transform these power structures and material conditions, working toward a more inclusive and equitable society. In this sense, Ackermann's perspectives challenge the theoretical perspectives used in this study. Both Butler and Foucault emphasize the importance of analyzing power dynamics and questioning dominant narratives, but Ackermann's focus on material conditions adds an essential dimension to this analysis. By incorporating Ackermann's emphasis on material conditions into the theoretical perspectives of Butler and Foucault, we could challenge further and dismantle oppressive power structures to create a more just world. This also points to the importance of lived experience and humans as embodied subjects in order to understand further the complexities of power and oppression.

To address adequately the issues of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality in contemporary Christian feminist ethics, the perspectives

of scholars such as Ackermann that emphasize the significance of material conditions and power structures in shaping both theory and praxis must be incorporated.

Butler is correct in arguing that subjectivity is not a fixed or essential aspect of individuals, but is instead produced and shaped by social and cultural forces. Additionally, there is an invariable public dimension of subjectivity. However, I argue that Ackermann's lived experience adds a new dimension to this understanding by highlighting the material conditions that shape subjectivity and vulnerability. The integration of Ackermann's emphasis on material conditions and power structures into the theoretical perspectives of Butler and Foucault would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. Parsons also highlights the importance of material conditions, but to a much lesser extent.

Regarding Keller's "speech matters," there is a need to recognize the power dynamics and hierarchies inherent in language and communication. The lure thus cannot be only on individual agency and the performative aspects of speech. It should also be attentive to how structural inequalities and power differentials shape and limit the possibilities of communication and speech. Power is upheld dynamically by all who participate in the discourse, and there are no concepts outside of language,<sup>648</sup> which means that language itself can perpetuate and reinforce oppressive systems, depending on how it is construed. Since power operates from both within and outside the subject(s), the discourse itself is part of what is possible to construe, given the context at hand.<sup>649</sup> An all too prevalent example, in my opinion, is how sexist language permeates discourse and thus, through language use, reinforces the oppression of women, since there is no "outside" to the discourse. Again, this could be changed; but power that is manifested relationally and internalized by subjects is not easily changed. The feminist critique should make oppressive parts of discourse visible so that, for example, sexist language could be abandoned.

The lure of the Spirit calls us to recognize and engage with these power dynamics and to advocate justice, equality, and the empowerment of marginalized voices, acting in an open-ended relationship of solidarity and compassion. But speech is never separated from dis-

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<sup>648</sup> Langby, *God and the world*, 27–44.

<sup>649</sup> Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 217–21.

course, and there is a dialectical relationship that intersects and intertwines all aspects of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality. Therefore, it is crucial to deconstruct the binary understanding of power as something one either has or does not have. Instead, power should be analyzed as relational and dynamic, operating through discourses and social structures. In this sense, we can see that the lure is not innocent, as in not being normative, but that its force is deeply entangled in power relations and plays a significant role in shaping reality. This force could be harnessed to instill political change and to challenge oppressive systems. To harness such a force, feminist theology must make injustices visible, and inspire others to act in solidarity with those in need. Part of this is showing how power operates and that the patriarchal status quo can be challenged. This, one hopes, could be translated into social movements that—through political and other actions—work to challenge any system that reinforces and perpetuates oppression. This is no easy task; but if the lure inspires, this does indeed seem like a direction that one should follow.

## 6.6. Beyond Descartes: Non-dualism

As described in the introduction to this dissertation, Descartes is often seen as a starting point for the critique of dualism in feminist ethics.<sup>650</sup> Several feminist Christian ethicists argue that Descartes' philosophy, which separates mind and body, has contributed to a devaluing of the body and reinforced oppressive hierarchies that are modeled on a hierarchical understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world, between men and women, and between mind and body. A central and critical perspective in the works of Keller and Ackermann is their rejection of dualistic thinking in categories such as those just mentioned, since dualistic thinking lends itself to a hierarchical thinking that undergirds the domination of others.

Parsons also discusses dualisms to an extent, but, given her attempt to modify rather than to reject essentialism—especially between women and men as fixed categories—her understanding does not have the critical potential for emancipation that Keller's and Ackermann's perspectives entail. Parsons wishes to refrain from hierarchical thinking

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<sup>650</sup> Budgeon, "Theorizing Subjectivity and Feminine Embodiment," 245–49.

and to re-value the feminine side of gender as a mode of resisting patriarchy. This is what her “thinking with gender” suggests, which is a clear step in the right direction when resisting patriarchy. Descartes’s dualism provides a central starting point that is related to the Enlightenment and to the idea of “male rationality” that has been historically privileged and upheld as the standard of knowledge and reason.<sup>651</sup> The prevalent idea of a detached mind, separated from the body, has been used to justify the subordination of women and the dismissal of embodied experiences.

However, I argue that Keller’s and Ackermann’s perspectives are more potent when seeking strategies to resist patriarchal structures. For Keller, the idea of non-dualisms is a result of her subject formation theory, in which all subjects are intertwined on an ontological level. This grounds her perspective in the ontological realm, and binds all subjects together through the very fabric of reality. Ackermann grounds her understanding of non-dualism in the perspective of the *imago Dei* order to reject hierarchical thinking. Since each and every human being is created in the image of God, it would be a grievous injustice to dominate any other human, since that would also mean that one dominates what comes from God.

Keller’s and Ackermann’s perspectives include a social constructivist account of gender and, therefore, provide a critique that could effectively destabilize gender and ascribed gender roles. Keller, who opts for an ontological understanding of how subjects are intertwined, provides the most prominent critique of hierarchical thinking, based on her non-dualism. By being bound together through mutual subject formation, we should care for each and for all because of this connection. Since we are formed together through one another, we owe it to the other not to dominate them.

I think that this could be developed in two ways. One concerns the theological component of God as part of all embodiments and the materialization of the world, as suggested by Keller,<sup>652</sup> and thus all parts of the Creation are part of God and have received God’s grace. In a sense, Ackermann’s perspective of the *imago Dei* aligns with this, since all—at least human—subjects have some resemblance to God. This incorporates the embodied perspective that counteracts the dualism stemming from Descartes when one does not recognize the division between

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<sup>651</sup> Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 61.

<sup>652</sup> Keller, *Intercarnations*, 188.

mind/body. At least in this world, we do not *have* a body; we *are* a body. If this perspective were taken seriously, hierarchical thinking would have to be rejected, since the domination of others is, in essence, also domination of the divine in them—both physical and spiritual. From a feminist viewpoint, mind–body non-dualism offers a perspective that does not reject or downplay the importance of a corporal reality, but avoids altogether its separation from the mind.

On the second point, from a subject formation perspective, by being formed by and through one another, all subjects are inherently entangled. If one accepts this, as I argue that one should, then the domination of the other is directly mirrored in the subjectivity formed within the dominating subject. As outlined earlier, subjectivity is inherently related to embodiment, and corporeal experiences directly affect the subjectivities that are formed. Thus, to speak of an unembodied subject is unhelpful, since the embodied component of subjectivity is a prerequisite in this world.<sup>653</sup> In this sense, the feminist struggle against patriarchal oppression could be furthered when the idea of any “detached male rationality” were displaced, since it does not offer a fruitful way to describe reality when compared with the feminist notion of entangled mind–body non-dualism. This is a potent resource when framing a critique of those who, like Descartes, wish to retain and uphold mind and body as separate, so that the mind is associated with men and used to dominate women, who are associated with the body.<sup>654</sup>

## 6.7. Concluding Remarks

Entanglement with issues of subjectivity, vulnerability, and relationality requires a dialectical understanding that does not isolate or prioritize one aspect over the others. The perspectives discussed in this dissertation are not meant to provide a definitive answer or a solution to emancipation for the subjugated, but to contribute to ongoing conversations and debates in feminist ethics. The perspectives and theologians discussed here should be considered part of a larger evolving discourse.

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<sup>653</sup> I do not dwell on this specific eschatological perspective here because of the dissertation’s focus. However, it is worth noting that the Apostles’ Creed includes the belief of *carnis resurrectionem*, “the resurrection of the body.” “Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae - Credimus,” The Holy See, accessed October 24, 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism\\_lt/pls1c3a2\\_lt.htm#SYMBOLUM%20FIDEI](https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_lt/pls1c3a2_lt.htm#SYMBOLUM%20FIDEI).

<sup>654</sup> Budgeon, “Theorizing Subjectivity and Feminine Embodiment,” 245–49.

I wish to highlight the importance of self-reflexivity and the power of multiple perspectives when engaging with questions of ethics and social justice. Ultimately, I argue that the goal is to foster a new understanding that endorses mind–body non-dualism and, in this way, rejects hierarchical thinking, since it all too easily lends support to perspectives of domination over others. I argue that the feminist theologians examined in this dissertation provide valuable insights and resources for challenging the patriarchal order and inspiring new ways to think about resistance. The need for further research in this dynamic field is evident, as the quest for justice and love is ongoing.

Finally, I wish to suggest how Christian theology could encourage constantly thinking differently, never being static or restricted to the current setting. In line with what Ackermann suggests,<sup>655</sup> all believers should be continually transformed in the Spirit—the Spirit that always transcends the bonds at hand. We should actively work together with the Spirit, and view it as a team player in moral decision-making; then we could co-create a world in which all individuals are valued, respected, and treated with dignity.

Here, there is a connection with what is written in John 3:8: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Thus, the Spirit cannot be tamed or bound; it blows wherever it wishes, always furthering the possibility for those listening,<sup>656</sup> and showing that there is always the possibility to think differently and never to resort to nihilism. We should embrace the Spirit’s call, and continue striving toward a more inclusive and just society by constantly challenging oppressive systems and the domination of others.

There is great potential in disrupting power structures and challenging oppressive systems to promote justice and inclusivity with theology. Theology is a profound source of inspiration that inspires people to challenge oppressive systems of power and to endorse the values of justice, equality, and interconnectedness. This, again, points to the importance of adhering to a theology that does not promote or support domination or systems that perpetuate oppression.

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<sup>655</sup> Ackermann, *Surprised by the Man on the Borrowed Donkey*, 259.

<sup>656</sup> Lina Langby and Martin Langby, “The Holy Spirit and kenotic loving power,” *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 78, no. 2 (2024): 180–90.

Such a vision of theology, through Christology, pneumatology, and eschatology, calls us to envision and strive for a world in which all individuals, regardless of gender or other identities, are valued and treated with dignity. We must actively challenge and dismantle oppressive systems, and work toward justice and inclusivity to achieve this. Even when emancipation for everyone seems far away, it is a horizon worth striving for, together—*intertwined* as we are.



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