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Incredulity and the Realization of Vulnerability, or, How it Feels to Learn from Wounds

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ABSTRACT



Wounds teach us what we were vulnerable to and what vulnerabilities we may yet bear. But wounds are often met with doubt and disbelief, suggesting that their lessons may be hard to learn. Through an analysis of advocacy movements to believe victims of sexual assault set in conversation with Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Thomas*, this paper argues for an understanding of vulnerability as part of a process of learning from wounds that is sometimes marked by emotional incredulity, an expression of doubt or denial of what one knows to be true because of the way its realization feels. Emotional incredulity in these circumstances is not a denial of vulnerability that pretends to mastery, but one that expresses the challenge of learning, together, how much we do not know of ourselves.

KEYWORDS

Vulnerability; incredulity; responsibility; wounds; astonishment; Doubting Thomas; Sexual assault

A large body of theoretical work on vulnerability emerged after the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the actions of states seeking their redress. The United States learned, or relearned, in these events that it was vulnerable to such attacks, and it responded by trying to mitigate or eliminate its vulnerability in a variety of violent ways, including an ill-defined “war on terror,” wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a significant broadening of sovereign powers over citizens and others in the name of security. Critics of these actions like Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero argued that they constituted a denial of vulnerability in the fantasy that it could be fully overcome, if all threats are eliminated by striking first and with sufficient force.¹ They urged that instead of prizing violence to eradicate what threatens, we should look for “a basis for community in these conditions” of woundedness and mourning, taking them to be a realization of vulnerability as an inescapable condition of ethical and political life.²

These calls to reclaim vulnerability from its denial in “fantasies of mastery” argued for the need to embrace a conception of a constitutively vulnerable self, an ontology of vulnerability as an inescapable human condition.³ But my understanding of myself and my vulnerabilities changes over time, as I succumb to specific vulnerabilities in wounds

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¹Butler, *Precarious Life* and Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*.

²Ibid, 19.

³Ibid, 29.

(*vulnera*) of many kinds.⁴ Wounds can surprise me. They teach me in their particularities. I learn from my wounds something about what I was susceptible to, what I may yet be susceptible to, and what ways I may be newly susceptible because of them. Even if I have left behind fantasies of shoring up vulnerabilities or wholly eliminating them, or the related fantasies of restoring a prior, “whole,” uninjured self, I have a complex project of trying to learn from my wounds about my vulnerabilities. What do they show me I am vulnerable to? What do they show me I should do to protect myself? What do they show others about me, and about themselves, and what do I learn, in turn, from others’ wounds? And how do these lessons, and our efforts to learn them, *feel*?

My aim in this essay is to recast recent conversations about vulnerability in ethics, politics, and theology by this light: as a process of learning from wounds about who we are, what we are susceptible to, and what we should do with our understanding of that susceptibility. Learning these lessons can be painful. We might avoid them in ways that make care for existing wounds or preparing for future ones more difficult. We might even deny them precisely as we’re learning them, or deny learning them about ourselves while accepting them about others. If the denial of vulnerability is considered part of a process of learning from wounds, it might suggest different interventions than the insistence on a conception of a constitutively vulnerable self.

In particular, it might require greater attention to affect than ontology, to how it feels to learn about ourselves, not just what positions and propositions we accept. One starting point for contemporary affect theory is Spinoza’s idea that “no one yet knows what the body can do,” requiring consideration of the process of becoming beyond what we know of ourselves.⁵ I propose that vulnerability would be better considered as part of such an ongoing process, a concept with which to articulate where and when we are situated in it, what we are learning, and what we do not yet know.⁶ Doubt and denial as we learn may be evidence, then, of how these lessons *feel*, not articulations of fixed beliefs. I will call this form of doubt and denial *emotional incredulity*. Its relationship to ideas and actions dependent on propositional knowledge—assigning blame, taking responsibility, seeking justice—might then be considered differently by these lights. Not all denials of vulnerability are assertions of invulnerability or pretensions to mastery. They might be expressions of how the realization of vulnerability feels, and how it feels to learn that the world might not be as one thought.

This is an argument about knowledge and time: about what I know of myself now, what I understand I do not yet know, and how I confront the partiality of my knowledge

⁴I use “wounds” here in a broad sense, following the custom of recent discussions of vulnerability that emphasize the derivation of the word “vulnerability” from the Latin *vulnus*, the wound. Wounds are most strictly lacerations and other cuts, punctures, and impacts on the body from outside the skin that penetrate its boundaries. I will use the term here to include other forms of penetration, permeation, and impact of generally harmful kinds, including mental and emotional wounds.

⁵Spinoza, *Ethics: On the Correction of Understanding*, 87. Cited in Seigworth Gregory and Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” 3. This version of the line is most common in discussions of affect theory, though it obscures some of the concerns of the original context with respect to being “taught by experience” as an “extension” of nature. Consider, for example, RHM Elwes’s translation: “However, no one has hitherto laid down the limits to the powers of the body, that is, no one has yet been taught by experience what the body can accomplish solely by the laws of nature, in so far as she is regarded as an extension. No one hitherto has gained such an accurate knowledge of the bodily mechanism, that he can explain all its functions ... The body can by the sole laws of its nature do many things which the mind wonders at.” Spinoza, *Ethics*, RHM Elwes, trans., Project Gutenberg edition.

⁶I borrow the language of process with respect to Spinoza and affect theory from Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*. With reference to Deleuze’s use of Spinoza, see Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

in any moment. It is also an argument about the pain of learning, and how our feelings shape our ability to understand our conditions and respond well to them. Finally, it is an argument about the social life of how we learn from wounds: the ways we reject each other's experiences, cannot believe our own, and still pursue further understanding of our vulnerabilities together. To consider these problems of vulnerability and incredulity, I will turn to two very different scenes of responding to wounds. First, I will look to one of the most urgent discussions of vulnerability and wounding in contemporary political life in advocacy for victims of sexual assault to be *believed*. Cast by advocates as a social problem of incredulity that impedes both care and justice, it well displays the challenges and stakes of the process of learning from wounds. I will then consider a Western icon of both woundedness and incredulity in Caravaggio's 1602 painting *The Incredulity of Thomas*. From a conversation between these very different examples, I will sketch some of the feelings about learning from wounds that I am suggesting should be important to critical considerations of vulnerability. Understanding vulnerability as part of a process of learning from wounds can help to describe what happens when wounds are met with incredulity—and why incredulity would be better met, in turn, with attention to the process of learning as it occurs over time, instead of assertions of ontological vulnerability. If we hear incredulity as part of a process of learning, it is not the end of the conversation. It need not harden into a rejection of vulnerability and the relationships in which we are vulnerable. Instead, it might require, and allow, the strengthening of relationships precisely through recognition of how difficult it is to learn, to know, and to confront the partiality of our knowledge.

This way of thinking about vulnerability orients us away from the rejections of sovereign subjectivity that have occupied much of the recent literature on the concept, as I will discuss further in the first section. Sovereignty and subjectivity are also the terms from this literature that may seem most familiar to traditional conceptions of political theology. But incredulity, possibility, and unknowing are familiar concerns of political theology as well. They define the sense of vulnerability I will develop here. Talking about vulnerability and incredulity in these ways is thus properly, and even especially, a project of political theology.

The denial of vulnerability

Critical considerations of vulnerability over the last two decades have often been interested in the question of how our understanding of vulnerability changes the way we respond to wounds. We respond violently, some suggest, when we think vulnerability can be overcome, denying that it is a constitutive condition of human life. Judith Butler describes the actions of the United States after 9/11 in this way as a denial of vulnerability and a reassertion of sovereignty “precisely at a moment in which the sovereignty of the nation is bespeaking its own weakness.”⁷ “In recent months,” they wrote in 2002, “a subject has been instated at the national level, a sovereign and extra-legal subject, a violent and self-centered subject; its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction

⁷Ibid., 40.

of its multilateral relations, its ties to the international community.”⁸ The nation conceived itself as a subject defined by mastery over others, sovereign insofar as it can vanquish all that threatens and thus escape vulnerabilities that might otherwise exist in its relationships with others, including allies. This cutting off of relationships reveals an understanding of itself as independent and whole without others, not in need of relationships, able to exist—better to exist—without them. “It shores itself up,” Butler wrote at the time, “seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features ‘other to’ itself.” The United States recreated itself as invulnerable and reasserted its sovereignty against vulnerability. And this denial of vulnerability must be corrected, Butler argued, or it will continue to “fuel the instruments of war.”⁹

The denial of vulnerability in assertions of sovereignty can be an ideal for individuals as well, sometimes represented in critical projects by the character of the “sovereign subject” of modern ethics and politics. Adriana Cavarero calls this character of modern thought the “*homo erectus*,” ideally upright, invulnerable, and alone.¹⁰ He—and he is paradigmatically *he*—is not inclined in care for another or exposed in other relations. He sees disinclination toward others, literally and figuratively, as strengths to be pursued. And he sees inclinations toward others as weaknesses to be overcome, lest the vulnerabilities they create are realized. This sovereign subject is self-governing, self-assertive, and self-sufficient. He is not dependent on others and ideally limits his exposure to others to minimize the possibility of harm in that exposure. He sees freedom in independence, safety in strength and singularity, and vulnerability as a weakness ready to be exploited, and rightly so.

This is the ideal of subjectivity against which Butler and Cavarero argue for a recognition of vulnerability as an inescapable human condition. The “ontological status of humans” is “in fact a constitutive vulnerability,” Cavarero writes; we are “socially constituted bodies,” in Butler’s terms, “attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.”¹¹ We are made by our connections with others and in our exposure to them, and so we are constituted as vulnerable beings. These arguments thus assert the ontological status of vulnerability against its denial in violent “fantasies of mastery,” and contend that a different understanding of vulnerability would allow us to respond differently to wounds.

But what response do they recommend? Cavarero’s argument for the acceptance of vulnerability as “the ontological status of humans” brings her to an entanglement of ethics and ontology in which the vulnerability of others demands care.¹² Taking the figure of the infant as her paradigm of vulnerability, made radical by its coincidence in infancy with helplessness, Cavarero argues that vulnerability presents two “poles” of possible response, care or violence, as not to care would be to do violence.¹³ Less radical vulnerability still suggests the same, she argues, or at least recommends care

⁸Ibid., 41.

⁹Ibid., 20.

¹⁰Cavarero, *Inclinations*.

¹¹Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 20 and Butler, 20.

¹²For a more detailed analysis of the entanglement of ethics and ontology in vulnerability, see Murphy, “Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism.”

¹³Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 20.

where an ontology of sovereign subjectivity would recommend either violence or isolation, lest any engagement lead to the realization of vulnerability in wounds.

Butler is also interested in the connection between vulnerability and care, but they warn that we must not imagine that the recognition of vulnerability will somehow inspire “a sudden and widespread outbreak of ‘care.’”¹⁴ They are more often interested in the recognition of vulnerability for the consideration of its unequal distribution, differentiating in later work between an ontological vulnerability and the forms of vulnerability created, unequally, by policy and practice.¹⁵ But in their early turn to vulnerability after 9/11, Butler’s interest in the critical reconsideration of the concept did emerge from concerns about vulnerability’s denial fueling violence. Instead of pursuing security and invulnerability with body scans and pre-emptive strikes, they argue, we should look for “a basis for community in these conditions” of woundedness and mourning.¹⁶ Mourning teaches us about our boundedness in and to each other, as we find ourselves “undone” by the other’s loss and so discover that we were made by our relationship to them.¹⁷ We see, then, that we are constitutively exposed to others in these bonds, and that wounds—both the wounds that robbed us of the other, and the wounds we suffer in our loss of them—are an inescapable possibility of being relationally constituted in this way. To close ourselves off to others in response to wounds would be to attempt to create ourselves as ideally alone and invulnerable precisely as we experience the necessity of our entanglements with others most acutely.

Butler is arguing here for an ontology of vulnerability, but also about how we learn about vulnerability from wounds, which other arguments for the ontology of vulnerability emphasize much less. They are describing that we might learn from wounds, loss, and mourning that we are constituted in relationships with others and thus constitutively vulnerable. But to understand vulnerability more fully in this way, I want to suggest, critics interested in correcting denials of vulnerability need to consider that denial is not always a full and final response, and might instead be an expression of how learning something *feels*. Butler is significantly interested in the feelings we experience in response to wounding—“mourning, fear, anxiety, rage”—but seems not to hear denials of vulnerability as possible expressions of feeling as well.¹⁸ Perhaps this is because they are focused on the denials of vulnerability that already take the form of violent action, but even these seem potentially cast as part of a process of learning. Such actions may become shameful and mistaken in new ways by these lights, as poor understandings of what has happened and what may yet. Their violence would remain contemptible, and irredeemably so. But situating these denials as part of a process of learning suggests that something else might be learned other than the fantasy of escaping vulnerability entirely—that other possibilities might be presented and someday realized, or at least imagined beyond what we know now we can do.

In later work, Butler develops their understanding of vulnerability through a conversation with Emmanuel Levinas on accountability and responsibility. They argue, with Levinas, that ethical responsibility emerges from the “unwilled, unchosen” vulnerability

¹⁴Judith Butler, “Rethinking vulnerability and resistance,” 53.

¹⁵See the distinction between “precarity” and “precariousness” in *Frames of War*, 25.

¹⁶Butler, *Precarious Life*, 19.

¹⁷Ibid., 23.

¹⁸Ibid., 28.

to others that we all bear in the relations in which we are constituted.¹⁹ Our responsibility to and for others emerges in this way as “an ethic from the region of the unwilled,” something we encounter because of conditions of exposure that we never chose and never could have chosen.²⁰ Where Butler argued after 9/11 for the need to give up the fantasy of independence represented as sovereignty, national or individual, they argue here against a fantasy of independence in the form of the possibility of fully accounting for oneself, narrating the self wholly and without the aid of others. Denial of vulnerability in this context is the denial that there are things we don’t know about ourselves, or can’t say: a denial that there are things to learn from others as they tell parts of our stories we can’t tell about ourselves. Insisting on the limits of self-narration, Butler argues, allows the concept of responsibility to be transformed from something I bear “alone, in isolation from the other” to something always embedded in the relationships “in which the problem of responsibility first emerges” anyway, as I am asked what I have done or could do.²¹

I want to emphasize a different but related dimension of narration than Butler is discussing in this work, in the narration of denial itself: expressions of incredulity that might be part of how we account for what we are learning from wounds, and what we are feeling as we learn. Some expressions of incredulity may indeed be denials of vulnerability fully and finally, “fantasies of mastery” that do “fuel the instruments of war.” But they also tell a story of learning that we do not yet know everything that is possible for our bodies and selves. In the terms of Butler’s engagement with Levinas, they are not rejections of vulnerability in the realm of the *unwilled*, but of vulnerability as a name for the *unknown*. They express that I want to believe I already knew everything about what could happen to me, and that this thing, this unbelievable wound now suffered, can’t be possible because I didn’t imagine its possibility before, or because it suggests past or future possibilities I want not to be able to imagine now. In such expressions, as I will argue in the coming pages, we are not necessarily committed to denying our vulnerability or cutting ourselves off from the relationships in which we might learn and narrate what we know to each other. Indeed, our expressions of incredulity are embedded already in the relationships in which we are vulnerable, and may even strengthen those relationships as we come to terms, together, with what we have learned. These are relationships of unknowing seeking understanding, together. Theologians know this project well—it is a version, or perhaps an inversion, of the project of faith seeking understanding. Theologians also know that sometimes it begins in denial and incredulity: rejections of possibilities that seem most impossible precisely at the moment their possibility becomes clear.

Theologians have also long considered that incredulity can be as much a resource as a problem. What we doubt, deny, or can’t bring ourselves to believe can motivate inquiry instead of ending it, and our encounters with the limits of our knowledge can be the beginning of complex relationships with unknowing and the unknown. But what political theologians must add to this understanding is that incredulity can have a social life as well. When I express incredulity *to* others, they may reasonably understand it as the end of a conversation, defining what I am willing and unwilling to believe. “I don’t believe it,” “I can’t believe it,” “I won’t believe it” sound like static statements in this way. It can be

¹⁹Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 100.

²¹*Ibid.*, 84.

hard to hear them as part of a larger process of learning what one will come to believe. It may even be inappropriate to interpret them that way, lest you discount that I mean what I say. “You still have much to learn” is not often a particularly respectful reply, nor an effective one.

It may, however, be a necessary corrective to incredulity that directly harms others. To deny my own vulnerability may lead me to isolation or fantasy, and violence may result, as we’ve seen Butler and Cavarero suggest. But to deny another’s report of their vulnerability or its realization in wounds creates a different kind of problem, and may be already, itself, a form of violence. This is the incredulity against which advocates for victims of sexual assault have fought: the refusal to believe a story of wounding, entangled with judgments that the victim should have known better, and earlier, what they were vulnerable to. Problems of incredulity emerge in these cases with and from the pain of learning from wounds, both individually and socially. Denying their lessons is often appealing, though the necessity of learning them often urgent. What we learn determines who we blame for what happened, how we hold each other responsible, and how we understand what violence we are, and were, vulnerable to. Let us turn now to these cases and their concerns.

Start by believing

A powerful strand of advocacy for victims of sexual violence has focused on responding to victims’ stories with *belief*. “We believe you,” write activists Annie Clark and Andrea Piño in the opening and title of their book of survivors’ stories collected during their time as leaders of the organization *End Rape on Campus*.²² *Believe Me*, another book insists, described by its editors as “not just a book” but “a rallying cry, a plan for action, and a theory of change.”²³ “Start by believing,” a prominent advocacy campaign demands on posters hanging in schools and universities, police departments, military bases, hospitals, and social services organizations across the United States.²⁴ The posters frame examples of replies to reports of sexual violence between two faces in profile, looking at each other: “I believe you. I’m sorry this happened. How can I help?” Just below, in bold, “Your response makes the difference.”²⁵

Advocates for these approaches explain that their emphasis on belief responds to a persistent tendency to disbelieve. Victims of sexual violence, they argue, have been told for generations that they must have misunderstood what happened, that their violation wasn’t what they say, or that they must be remembering things incorrectly. They have also been accused of lying, trying to get attention, or trying to skirt responsibility for willing and willful action. Either they misunderstood something innocent to be an assault, they’re told, or they understood perfectly but are now trying to play innocent, pretend to unwillingness, retell regrets today as rejections the night before. And skeptical inquiries can replicate forms of violation and abuse, advocates argue, as doubt in the story recalls other deprivations of voice and authority.

As a correction to what Miranda Fricker calls “testimonial injustice,” “when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credulity to a speaker’s word,” the call to “start

²²Clark and Piño, *We Believe You*.

²³Valenti and Friedman, *Believe Me: How Trusting Women Can Change the World*.

²⁴End Violence Against Women International, “Home,” <http://www.startbybelieving.org/> Last accessed 24 October 2021.

²⁵Ibid., “Resources,” <https://www.startbybelieving.org/resources/> Last accessed 24 October 2021.

by believing” is powerful and well targeted.²⁶ Victims of sexual violence often belong to multiple groups subject to epistemic prejudice, and advocates argue that being a victim of sexual violence is itself to belong to one of these groups. Overlapping disadvantages in being heard and believed are compounded when those accused of assault belong to epistemically privileged groups, people who are given an inflated level of credulity because of their social position. “It’s telling,” writes lawyer and activist Alexandra Brodsky, “that ‘he said, she said’ has become shorthand for an unsolvable case.”²⁷ “He” and “she” belong to different social positions, subject to different forms of epistemic prejudice.²⁸ What each says is given different levels of credulity. An epistemic correction seems apt, and urgent.

The emphasis on belief, however, has also exposed advocates to considerable criticism that sometimes seems to distract from their aims. “Believe all women” or “believe all survivors” is “easily misinterpreted,” as Brodsky argues, to mean “believe all women, all the time.”²⁹ This “straw feminist” interpretation, as she describes it, tramples “the central tenets of fairness,” providing an easy target for opponents who emphasize the rights of the accused.³⁰ A fair adjudication of an accusation cannot be conducted under the principle of believing one party at all times, though that isn’t what advocates mean on any reasonable interpretation of the phrase.

It also focuses the discussion on adjudication, when advocates’ emphasis on belief begins from a focus on care.³¹ To “start by believing” is important because starting from disbelief, asking for evidence or requiring proof of what’s being said as a threshold to further conversation, impedes care for the victim precisely at the moment they ask for it. Advocates have fought to “start by believing” so that epistemic injustice doesn’t interfere with care, not so that injustices are inverted, and any person accused is believed guilty of the charge without further inquiry.

I am interested in this point of friction around the rallying cry to “start by believing” not to argue for one side or the other, or for its entrenchment as a debate. Advocates probably should emphasize different approaches in different circumstances, and usually do; the debate is largely strategic, not theoretical. But I want to borrow its interest in doubt and belief to recover another narrative of incredulity about sexual violence that is common to victims’ stories, though less often a focus of advocacy. Victims of sexual violence must also believe themselves. They must believe that they were assaulted, that they were hurt, that they are wounded or otherwise harmed by the violence they have suffered. They need not accept others’ definitions of that harm, but they need to

²⁶Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.

²⁷Brodsky, *Sexual Justice*.

²⁸The example is representative of the social assumptions both about the genders of victims and perpetrators and the epistemic prejudice against them. Perpetrators and victims are not always “he” and “she,” respectively, and the persistent assumption of male aggression and female victimization is part of the epistemic problem as well. I will use gender-neutral language for victims and perpetrators to recognize that it is not strictly a problem of men hurting women. Many of my interlocutors do not, as they are trying to discuss the social assumptions that emerge with the greater frequency of male perpetration against female victims. Where relevant to the argument in this way, I will follow their example.

²⁹Brodsky, 134.

³⁰Ibid. For more on the construction of debates about sexual assault as between victims’ advocates and advocates for the accused, see Grigoriadis, *Blurred Lines: Rethinking Sex, Power, and Consent on Campus*.

³¹See, for example, references throughout the “Start by Believing” campaign to care through comparisons to other caregiving contexts: a doctor saying that he would “start by believing” a person who presents with a stomachache, so he will start by believing a person who presents with a report of sexual violence; a social worker saying she would “start by believing” economic hardship, so she will start by believing sexual violence as well. End Violence Against Women International, <http://www.startbybelieving.org/>.

believe they have suffered what harm they name. Coming to believe in one's own wounds can itself be a process of doubt and disbelief, skepticism about oneself, what happened, and how it is possible that it could have happened. In this last sense, victims must believe that they were vulnerable to such wounds by definition of having suffered them. They must confront, then, that they may still be vulnerable in these ways, and might be newly vulnerable because of their realization.

Disbelief, in these conditions, can be appealing. Victims' stories are shot through with it, rhetorically, at least: exclamations that it seems impossible, that they can't believe what happened, that they keep expecting to wake up from it, as if from a dream, or a nightmare. In her recent book on searching for the material artifacts of her sexual assault, Laura Levitt describes wanting to hold the objects taken as evidence the night it happened because they would "testify to the fact that these events are not a figment of the imagination." The clothing she was wearing, her bedding, and whatever else was taken by the police would be "one important way we know that these events actually happened, that this is not a dream."³² Levitt doesn't doubt her story in the sense that advocates to "start by believing" are worried about, yet she seeks evidence for it, proof that it really happened and material details about what occurred, in response to what seems to be a kind of emotional incredulity that what she knows to have happened really did. This is the sort of incredulity I want to consider here, as part of the process of learning from wounds.

Doubt and astonishment

One of the most famous depictions of incredulity in the Western canon is also a depiction of incredulity about a wound. Caravaggio's 1602 painting *The Incredulity of Thomas* depicts what is generally considered an epistemological drama: the demand by Thomas, in the Gospel of John, to see and touch Christ's wounds before he will believe that the man before him is Jesus Christ resurrected. Jesus accepts the demand, but Thomas is condemned for having made it. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus challenges him after his profession of faith; "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe."³³ Caravaggio's depiction of the story seems to join the condemnation of Thomas's demand by rendering it as a kind of gruesome, physical violation: not only does he not believe, but he thrusts his unwashed finger into Christ's side. Thomas's hand is painted in gross detail, his thumbnail outlined by black grime and the skin marked by ruddy splotches. His forefinger has entered Jesus's wound far enough that its tip is no longer visible, and it appears to push the skin of Christ's side up above it, wrinkling around where the finger penetrates. The penetration adds injury to insult, and seems to confirm Thomas's alliance with the faithless skeptics, and later the scientists, who insist on testing, verification, and prodding inquiry, where others have faith and perhaps a greater respect for the dead.³⁴

³²Levitt, *The Objects that Remain*.

³³John 20:29, New Revised Standard Version.

³⁴The composition of the painting was imitated by Rembrandt in *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*, with Thomas replaced by doctors dissecting a corpse, prodding the flesh of the dead in some pursuit of truth where others might show respect and care by leaving it untouched. Whether with reference to Rembrandt or Caravaggio, it persists as a common composition for portraits of scientists at work, easy to find in photographs on university websites or accompanying newspaper articles about scientific inquiry.

The penetration by Thomas's finger into Christ's wound is actually never mentioned in the Gospel of John. In the text, Thomas demands to touch, and Jesus says he may, to which Thomas only replies—verbally—“My Lord and My God,” his profession of faith (John 20:28). The image of his famous finger in Christ's wound seems to come later, perhaps as a result of the difficulty of representing a modal verb in pictures, as Glenn Most has argued: “one can show ‘he touches’ but hardly ‘he may touch’ or ‘he must touch’ or ‘he wants to touch.’”³⁵ To tell the story in an image on stained glass or a chiseled stone, Most suggests, there must be a bodily action, not just words exchanged. And so Thomas's incredulity is translated into a kind of physical assault, a response to wounds in a touch of the worst kind—prodding and prying in multiple senses, violating with both doubt and a lack of care.

Or so we should say if we read the “incredulity” in the painting's title traditionally, as a reference to Thomas's initial disbelief, the doubts ascribed to him in the usual epithet indicating the want to see and touch in order to believe. In this reading, the question of the painting is whether Thomas does or does not believe that Christ is divine and stands before him resurrected, and whether he will rise from his inquiring crouch to stand with the faithful or with non-believers.³⁶ But Caravaggio's painting offers another referent for Thomas's incredulity. At the center of the painting, light hits Thomas's forehead to intensify its ridges, raised in a look of astonishment. He looks surprised, even shocked, discovering something more than inquiring into it cynically or skeptically. While the other two men in the painting peer into the wound with narrowed gazes and furrowed brows, Thomas's brows are raised. His eyes are wide, if partially in shadow. The other faces each have eyes drawn thin and dark, almost as lines across them, while Thomas's eyes are triangular, open to the wound, their longest side to what they're seeing. The painting seems most energetic in his raised brows and astonished expression. The penetration may be the action most clearly depicted, but Thomas's astonishment seems to be the painting's subject as much as the prodding finger or the wound.

Astonishment is related to incredulity, but if this is the sense of incredulity displayed, then ‘the incredulity of Thomas’ wouldn't refer to his initial doubt of Christ's divinity and request to see and touch before he would believe. Caravaggio instead has drawn the moment of incredulity forward, both in the planes of the painting and in the sequence of the story. If the incredulity of Thomas refers to the moment of touching the wound

³⁵Most, *Doubting Thomas*, Chapter 1.

³⁶Some might phrase the question as whether Thomas believes *in* the divinity and resurrection of Christ, not *that* Christ is divine and stands resurrected before him. The first takes Christ's divinity and resurrection as the object of belief; the second takes the proposition *that* Christ is divine and stands resurrected as the object of belief. Which is more appropriate as a matter of theological and scriptural interpretation is beyond the scope of my discussion here. But in the context of Caravaggio's painting, I find the propositional version of the question more appropriate. Throughout his work, Caravaggio plays with the project of telling stories in paintings by flattening their narratives into something closer to propositions: *that* Paul is converted (in *The Conversion of St. Paul*, 1600/1601), *that* Peter is crucified (in *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*, 1600). “We may say of these paintings that they are born of a story,” writes Davide Panagia, commenting on Louis Marin's famous interpretation of the artist, “but these are also paintings about which no story can be told other than its title; both these paintings are committed to announcing an event (a conversion and a crucifixion) without having to recount it.” The announcement, in this context, is a proposition. Here, the primary announcement is Thomas's incredulity, *that* Thomas disbelieves. But it seems consistent with Caravaggio's work to suggest he doesn't believe another announcement, *that* Christ is divine and stands resurrected. Panagia, “The Effects of Viewing: Caravaggio, Bacon, and the Ring” (*Theory and Event*, 10.4, 2007). See also Marin, *To Destroy Painting*.

instead of the earlier insistence on the inquiry, it becomes the kind of incredulity that can accompany discovery and even belief: the quick denial that “it can’t be true” that so often follows our seeing and believing, instead of the kind of doubt that might precede it in stating an intention to investigate further or require a certain kind of proof in order to believe. This is the incredulity of “that can’t be!” and “tell me it isn’t true,” of discovering what seems unbelievable and finding the only proper expression of how that knowledge *feels* to be its very denial.

Thomas’s astonishment in this moment seems of a joyful sort, in the discovery that the incarnated God stands before him, resurrected, in the figure of Jesus Christ. In other cases of wounding, astonishment takes a very different cast, distraught and self-protective, wishful, and petitionary: *let* it not be true; *make* that not have happened; tell me it didn’t, and maybe it won’t have. These are familiar phrases in hospital hallways, clinics, emergency shelters, and other social services centers, where news that almost demands disbelief can seem to come in every update. And in those looking on or even caring for the wounded, this disbelief may be accompanied by an incredulity that such wounds could happen to them, that they too are vulnerable to what horrors appear: that this wound tells them something about themselves—not just about the other—that they may wish not to have known, because they want for it not to be possible. This isn’t the astonished incredulity of “that can’t be!” but an acceptance that it could be—for someone else. It just couldn’t happen to me. *I* don’t bear that vulnerability; I am not or don’t render myself susceptible in those ways. This is the unwillingness to believe that *I* might learn from *your* wounds about my susceptibility to wounding, a doubt sometimes justified by claims to superiority, greater strength, or “knowing better” than to have done whatever seems to have led to your state.

Emotional incredulity

At least some of the doubts that concern advocates to “start by believing” look different by this light. If incredulity in response to wounds is sometimes an expression of astonishment rather than suspicion of the reported facts of a victim’s story, a listener’s questions might express that it’s hard to believe something like this could happen, not that they don’t believe it did. These statements of incredulity may still be harmful and impede care, but the difference is significant. Finding it hard to believe something could have happened—that has—doesn’t need to be an epistemic problem of requiring further proof in order to believe the truth of the proposition. It might express instead the pain of that knowledge and a want to reject that pain, or surprise because the event was unlikely, or because it is hard to accept that even relatively common events can happen nearby, to you or someone you know. This is the expression of what I would like to call *emotional incredulity*, a feeling about something I know to be true that makes me relate to that knowledge with denial or doubt, though I might have no trouble stating my belief in it plainly if asked for the fact. Incredulity in this sense is an expression of emotion about, in, and through the process of learning that something has happened and incorporating that knowledge into my understanding. Hence the difficulty might be in believing something like this *could* have happened: I struggle with the possibility even more than the fact of its realization, because it changes the world as I know it by changing what I understand it can be. We can see here the recursive

temporality of the lessons of wounds: a wound present now teaches us something we were vulnerable to before, and might indicate what susceptibilities we still bear, or newly bear because of it. The wound defines my vulnerability as what was, and suggests what could be. It also indicates the possibility of how much I don't yet know. I might be incredulous about what I learn at, and of, any moment of this procession.

Emotional incredulity is an attitude in relation to a belief I have, not a lack of that belief. If I believe that I have been assaulted, I might be emotionally incredulous that such a thing occurred, without denying that it did. I might be incredulous because I did not know that what happened was possible, and interpolating that discovery into my sense of the world is challenging. But the reason it is challenging—in such a way that I am emotionally incredulous, as I am using the term, instead of epistemically incredulous—likely has to do with the way I think things *ought to be* more than beliefs about what is and can be. Emotional incredulity emerges in this sense from my thinking that what happened ought not to happen, or even ought not to be possible. It strains my sense of how the world *should be*, not my beliefs about how the world is.³⁷

One way of finding a story of sexual assault unbelievable might be in this sense of emotional incredulity. I resist my knowledge of a case because I want there not to be sexual violence, and perhaps especially because I want there not to be sexual violence near to me, in my community.³⁸ I desire as much because of what I want for people generally or my community specifically. I might also be focused on myself: if I share the conditions of the victim, I may share their vulnerability. What I am learning in their wounds is that I may be vulnerable to the same. Incredulity, then, is self-protective, indicating the burden of learning about one's own vulnerability from another's wounds. I ask for more details, sure there must be something more to learn, because I want there to be something else to the story, some other factor that could separate us so that I don't need to see the victim's wounds as potentially my own.³⁹ Incredulity could move quickly here from astonishment to aggressive inquiry of the kind advocates and victims decry, as I look for a reason these wounds occurred that need not implicate me in their possibility.

The victim, of course, suffers differently from implication in their possibility and cannot distance themselves from it in quite the same way, but our process of learning from our own wounds can take a similarly recursive form. I learn from my wounds

³⁷I am grateful to Molly Farneth for suggesting these clarifications of the concept.

³⁸Prejudice often shows itself most clearly at this point. Few people listening to the first-person narrative of a sexual assault are learning for the first time that sexual violence is possible at all, as something that can happen in the world. But they are learning that a person they know, a person proximate enough to them in their community to be telling them the story, and perhaps even someone more closely connected to them, has been violated in this way. Disbelief of the kind I'm describing need not be attached to the event in every circumstance but in some set of its particulars: disbelief that it could happen *here*, to someone I know, to one of my friends, students, patients, colleagues, or neighbours, and likely by someone I know as well, or at least am relatively *near*.

³⁹Consider the common, almost proverbial accusation that a victim of sexual assault was "asking for it" because of something they were wearing, their choice to go to a particular party, or their consumption of alcohol. The phrase expresses a broad condemnation of the victim, often on the basis of misogynistic, racist, or classist prejudices about how a certain sort of person should behave, with the implication that they were assaulted because they didn't behave as they should: that their violation of norms was an invitation to the further violation of them. The distortion of thinking about blame and responsibility in these statements is extreme, and both prejudicial and punitive—an example of what Kate Manne calls "down girl" logic, the working of misogyny as the "enforcement arm" of patriarchy. But it also represents the kind of separation from the victim by the speaker that I'm describing here, especially where the speaker and victim otherwise share a great deal: "*They* were asking for it [but I know better]"—I know how to follow the norms that this victim violated, and thus protect myself from her fate. For an entry point to the recent history of the phrase, see Harding, *Asking for It*. See also discussions of this accusation in Doyle, *Campus Sex, Campus Security*; Manne, *Down Girl*; and Sriivasan, *The Right to Sex*.

that I was vulnerable to them, by definition of having suffered them. Yet understanding this knowledge, incorporating it into my sense of myself and the world, might be complex. I question the wounds themselves, what hurts and what helps, how I came to be wounded in these ways, and what these wounds might tell me about future possibilities. I retrace my steps and my actions. I wonder if there was a moment when I could have done something differently to have avoided what occurred. In the language of advocacy, I make treatment plans and safety plans, for how to care for myself now and how to keep myself safe from further harm. Incredulity that this could happen fuels inquiry into how it did, both to learn how to treat my wounds and how to protect myself better going forward. But in the process, I learn things I might think I should have known before, wish I had known, or maybe did know but didn't act on as I now wish I had. Incredulity might move quickly here into self-blame that I didn't know or believe in this possibility sooner, or take it more seriously. My wounds may remain unbelievable to me to distance myself from this line of thinking, or simply in the desire for such wounds not to be possible at all.

I don't offer these narratives of emotional incredulity to excuse the doubtful questions that meet victims of violence or to reify self-blame that might emerge from trying to learn from one's own wounds. The latter is often a significant challenge to victims' lives after violence and may need substantial therapeutic redress. And where the former express prejudice or are merely the guise of accusations—that the victim is lying, exaggerating, or has conducted themselves improperly in some way that makes their story unworthy of belief or their wounds unworthy of care—doubts and questions about a victim's story must be condemned. They must also be distinguished from inquiries necessary for care, because without insisting on a difference, we cannot learn what we must to care nor condemn further violence and injustice that pretends to simply “wanting to learn more.” In contrast to these accusatory forms of inquiry, the process of learning from wounds might have care as its object, as advocates argue it must. Or it might have hardly any object at all, but be a response to wounds in astonishment of the kind Caravaggio depicts: astonishment that this thing before me, of me, or in me is really there, and that it thus was possible that it could be there—a fact which might require me to imagine the possibilities of bodies, lives, and the world itself to be different than I had imagined before.

The word *vulnerability* comes from the Latin *vulnus*, the wound, indicating that to which the vulnerable are susceptible. When vulnerabilities are realized in wounds, they are also realized in the colloquial sense: I realize—I come to see, know, or believe—that I was vulnerable in this way because of what I have suffered. Coming to believe that I was vulnerable to what I have suffered, and may still be, is thus part of responding to wounds. So is the inquiry into what happened and how, how it might be understood, and what our understanding might tell us for the future. These inquiries provide ample opportunity for doubt, denial, and blame. They also suggest new imperatives of vulnerability: to protect, care, and prepare for the future, as others have argued vulnerability demands, and also to learn more, and perhaps to know better.

To know better is surely one of our tasks: to learn from wounds about our susceptibility to wounding, and how we might render ourselves less vulnerable or less hurt by the realization of our vulnerabilities where we can. A premise of many forms of care is that we should learn from wounds and try to get better at avoiding them, sustaining them with less harm, recovering from them more easily or fully, or living with them with

less pain. And a principle of many projects of ethics and politics is that we should learn from our experiences, especially our worst ones, to improve our conditions and prepare better for the future. When I learn about my vulnerabilities from seeing them realized in wounds, my own and those of others, I am learning from wounds some of what I might want to do to prepare better for the future. Incredulity may be part of this experience because it may be part of how vulnerability *feels*. And it suggests that the affective experience of vulnerability as we learn about it over time must be considered alongside epistemological and ontological considerations of the condition that have more often occupied theoretical work on vulnerability in recent decades.

“A fullness it can never have”⁴⁰

Where critical discussions of vulnerability focus on the rejection of “fantasies of mastery” and a recognition of vulnerability as an inescapable human condition, they would do well to consider the process that learning about vulnerabilities might take over time. One version of this argument might emphasize the multiplicity of vulnerabilities against discussions of vulnerability as a universal condition.⁴¹ My emphasis here has been on the role of incredulity as an emotion in that process. I have tried to suggest that not all denials of vulnerability are assertions of invulnerability or pretensions to mastery but might be expressions of how the realization of vulnerability feels, and how it feels to learn that the world might not be as one thought. A lesson of this kind is also a lesson in how much more there is to learn, and how deeply unknowing we may be. To learn that we were vulnerable in ways we might not have known or understood is to learn that there is much more we may not yet know. This unknowing might inspire wonder. It may also feel like a wound of its own: a gaping hole defined by its painful edges, giving us something to care for, to tend, without teaching us all we might like to know.

In their analysis of desire and disclosure in Caravaggio’s paintings, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit do not discuss the *Incredulity of Thomas*, but they do consider another of Caravaggio’s depictions of Christ after the crucifixion painted around the time of the *Incredulity*. In the *Entombment of Christ*, Caravaggio paints the figure of Jesus with blindingly bright skin and the people carrying and surrounding him with “displaced gazes,” looking away from Christ’s body as if it shone too brightly to gaze upon.⁴² “We look away from the body whose death has become visible,” they write in their analysis of the painting, “perhaps because we recognize that the blinding body out there is also our own.”⁴³ We cannot look directly at the body, like the figures in the painting, because we cannot help but see ourselves in it, implicated in its wounds and thus its vulnerability. When we have looked, as we do in looking at the painting, “consciousness knows the body it inhabits with a fullness it can never have,” a lack of unknowing that must be, and is, impossible, “as long as the body is—is thought to be—merely alive.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio’s Secrets*, 38.

⁴¹Linn Tonstad has suggested a critique of discussions of vulnerability along these lines, in work in progress presented at the Political Theology Network Winter Workshop, February 2021, held on Zoom.

⁴²Bersani and Dutoit, 36.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

To look at another's wounds is to see my own vulnerabilities, which might inspire me to turn away. To look at another's body succumbed to its wounds in death is to see a realization of vulnerability that I cannot know fully. The figures of the dead might thus represent the fullness of knowledge that cannot be achieved in life—or for a Christian in the body of Christ, the possibilities beyond this life that might yet be known after death. But even here, the process of learning belies any promise of full knowledge. We learn in each wound about this wound particularly and its effects on this body particularly. We are implicated in these wounds but not wholly determined by them. They teach us about our vulnerabilities as one version of their realization, but teach us as well of realizations we cannot yet know—possibilities that might be as hard to understand as “he may touch” is hard to depict in stone. Our incredulity expresses a resistance both to partial knowledge and the knowledge of possibility. To overcome incredulity and learn the lessons of our wounds is to learn that we do not yet know what the body can do, or might become.

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