Making Room for Recognizing Care Exploitation

Imagine Marie. She is concerned with the interests of others and helping them flourish, affectively bound up in their well-being – she cares about how things go for them. This isn’t for self-interested reasons, though. Rather, she’s oriented towards the world such that she feels compelled, without external motivation, to help them. Marie is likely similar to someone you know. Now imagine she has a sibling close to her in age: Alex. The two of them find themselves in a difficult situation because their mother is in need of constant support due to her age, and they’re unable to find a home health nurse that suits her needs. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that they both have careers they enjoy and must maintain in order to live comfortably. Marie is particularly torn. Not only does she love her mother as Alex does, but she additionally cares about her mother. If only Marie leaves the job she loves and give up some creature comforts, she could meet her mother’s needs. And she’s willing to do this, despite understanding the costs and wishing there was a better alternative that allowed for her personal pursuits. Unbeknownst to Marie, Alex has decided what the obvious solution to this problem is: they’ll ask Marie to care for their mother, with the presumption that she’ll agree. Alex’s presumption isn’t unfounded, given Marie’s caring disposition in addition to her love for her mother. In fact, it would be very unlike Marie to turn down an opportunity to help others. Unsurprisingly, Marie agrees.

Despite Marie’s willingly assenting, there is something morally problematic about Alex’s presumption and the solution they proposed. I contend that they have perpetrated an injustice

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1 Throughout I will use “they, them, theirs” pronouns to refer to Alex.
or moral wrong against Marie. Despite her assent, I will argue that Alex has taken unfair advantage of Marie’s caring disposition, and therefore Marie has been exploited.² ³

I. Has Marie’s Case Already Been Addressed?

But what, in particular, is problematic about Marie’s case? Perhaps it’s that the burdens of this agreement are placed entirely upon Marie. It’s possible that Marie likely would have volunteered to care for her mother anyway, but by asking her prior to her volunteering, Alex used Marie’s caring disposition to Alex’s benefit and to her detriment. After all, Alex is able to keep their career and not sacrifice the small luxuries they’re afforded as a result, unlike Marie. This isn’t to say Marie gains nothing at all; she, like Alex, gains the peace of mind that their mother is being taken care of well.

Perhaps what’s problematic is that she’s seen by Alex as merely a means to an end; Marie, by virtue of her caring, is seen as instrumentally valuable in solving the issue of their mother’s care.⁴ Alternatively, one might see this case as problematic because, if one is to understand Marie’s caring as a pre-existing vulnerability, Alex has done something wrong by unfairly benefiting from her vulnerability. Notably, these diagnoses are not mutually exclusive.

² Exploitation is widely accepted to be the unfair taking advantage of one individual by another. Where views part ways is in determining what exactly it means for the advantage taken to be unfair. There is an alternative, nonmoral use of exploitation that means “to make use of”; this is not what I’m concerned with here (Wertheimer, 5).

³ Exploitation is most often taken to be an issue of justice. Allen Wood resists this claim, arguing that exploitation is often morally problematic but not a matter of justice (1995). For the purposes of this work I leave it an open question whether exploitation is a moral wrong or injustice, which may be dependent upon whether the exploitation is structural or interpersonal.

⁴ Evidence for this lies in their complete failure to compensate Marie for costs. If they were to respect Marie, they would see that she is of the same moral worth as they are and – although they lack the proper caring disposition – share in the distributable costs of caring for their mother. If you see someone as having the same worth as yourself, it makes little sense to not share in the costs of an agreement because you would not permit others to use you merely as a means.
It may be the case that the wrong of care exploitation draws on a number of these explanations, but it’s useful to tease apart possible ethically salient features of the case.

I argue that the kind of exploitation Marie has been subjected to – care exploitation – has been inadequately addressed in the literature. Here’s a preliminary formal characterization:

\[ \text{Exploitation}_{\text{CARE}}: \text{One party, A, takes unfair advantage of (or unfairly relies upon) the quality of caring in another party, B.} \]

This characterization can be understood in a number of ways, depending on what one takes to constitute an “unfair advantage” and what “the quality of care” entails. In future work I’ll suggest that to care is to have an orientation towards the world such that one is affectively bound up in the success of the project of helping others flourish or achieve greater well-being. Caring is unlike other characteristics\(^5\) in that it predisposes one to answer calls to improve others’ well-being. So, for A to unfairly take advantage of B’s care is for A to call\(^6\) B to aid in others’ flourishing when A will benefit\(^7\) from doing so (actually or perceived) and knows it’s improbable B will refuse due to their caring nature.

One might think the reason care exploitation hasn’t been appropriately considered is because the instances of it are few and far between. This is not so. Care exploitation pervades several spheres of our lives.\(^8\) Perhaps the most common case of care exploitation is the expectation of a mother to make great (and disproportionate) sacrifices in her life for the well-

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\(^5\) e.g., being truthful, or exercising moderation

\(^6\) I do not specify here what a “call” amounts to, but when I turn to articulating the problematic nature of care in later work, I anticipate I will find that it amounts to more than A merely making a request of B when B has full information. Rather, the call will be manipulative in some way.

\(^7\) I’m using benefit here loosely, to indicate not only a gain, but also the prevention of a loss.

\(^8\) Consider the public-school teachers that care about helping children achieve their goals by providing them with a proper education and are expected to do so by parents, even with abysmal pay and little appreciation. There are the domestic care workers that look after infants for parents with demanding work schedules and in doing so begin to care for the infants such that the parents can impose more demanding expectations with little to no additional compensation.
being of her child, which mothers often meet because they bear a caring orientation towards their child. You likely don’t have to think for long to find examples that resonate with you. This paper is devoted to taking stock of contemporary theories of interpersonal exploitation and demonstrating that they are currently ill-equipped to account for the care exploitation that surrounds us.

There are a number of ways one might carve up the extensive literature on exploitation, but here I mention three: (i) accounts that consider interpersonal exploitation vs. accounts that consider institutional exploitation, (ii) accounts that understand exploitation as necessarily harmful, and those that grant it can be mutually beneficial, and (iii) accounts that locate unfairness either in the outcome of the exploitation (i.e., substantive unfairness), or the process by which one exploits (i.e., procedural unfairness). Each of the interpersonal views I consider happen to grant that exploitation can be mutually beneficial, while also maintaining that it’s impermissible. They do, however, fall on both sides of the third contrast drawn.

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9 I don’t mean to say that all or only women have a caring disposition. Rather, of those that do, great sacrifices are made that align with gendered expectations. By having this caring disposition that is easily called upon by others — including one’s partner — women often end up with career setbacks. While on maternity leave, they’re passed over for a promotion. When they stay home to take care of a sick child, they’re perceived as having comparatively poor attendance (which might have a resounding effect on earnings). Men, however, typically do not face the same setbacks.

10 I focus on interpersonal exploitation because Marie’s case is isolated to an interpersonal relationship.

11 Interpersonal exploitation is also commonly referred to as “transactional” or “micro-level” exploitation.

12 Institutional exploitation is also commonly referred to as “structural” or “macro-level” exploitation.

13 It may strike one as odd that I’m writing about exploitation but there is no mention of Marx. This is primarily because his account is structural (although it could arguably be applied to interpersonal situations), and centers on the relationship between market prices and labor value. Additionally, it seems to be a stretch to claim that the relationship between Marie and Alex is one of employee and employer, or that the problematic feature of their relationship is Alex deriving surplus value from her labor.
I’ll address the vulnerability account\textsuperscript{14}, Kantian account\textsuperscript{15}, and maldistribution account in turn, considering each in light of the reasons one might offer for thinking Marie has been exploited. In doing so I indicate their shortcomings with respect to describing the wrong of care exploitation.

§II: Vulnerability Accounts

\textbf{Exploitation}_{\textsc{vulnerability}}: One party, A, takes unfair advantage of the vulnerabilities of another party, B, for A’s (perceived or actual) gain.

The vulnerability theorist identifies the wrong that makes the advantage taken by the exploiter unfair as acting in such a way that one is “playing for advantage in situations in which it is inappropriate”, where those inappropriate situations are those where one violates the norm of “\textit{protecting the vulnerable}” (Goodin 1987, 187; emphasis original). As Goodin formulates it, this duty to protect the vulnerable has two parts: “it involves a general duty to suspend ordinary rules of behaviour in dealing with those who are particularly vulnerable to you” and “it involves a duty to take positive measures to assist those who are particularly vulnerable to you.”\textsuperscript{16}

(1987, 187) So, for A to exploit B is for A to unfairly take advantage of B’s vulnerability for A’s

\textsuperscript{14} The most prominent proponent of the vulnerability account is Robert Goodin (1987). Agomoni Ganguli Mitra & Nikola Biller-Andorno (2013) also offer a vulnerability account in the context of bioethics, drawing attention to the ways “vulnerabilities are often embedded within existing structural injustices.” (91)

\textsuperscript{15} The primary defender of a Kantian account of exploitation is Ruth Sample. Tea Logar is another Kantian, but separates herself from Sample by arguing her reliance upon vulnerability is problematic (2010).

\textsuperscript{16} Arguing in \textit{Protecting the Vulnerable} from a consequentialist standpoint, Goodin establishes that we ought to protect the vulnerable because the duty to do so “follows straightforwardly from welfare consequentialism”. (Goodin 1985, 114) Welfare consequentialism holds that the more one’s welfare is affected by another, the more heavily the effects upon one should be weighed by the other determining what should be done. Being vulnerable to another simply means that one is more strongly affected by their actions. In light of this, the actor ought to give “special consideration” to the vulnerable, since they (the actor) are “in an especially good position to protect” the individual they are affecting. (Goodin 1985, 115) To fail to protect the vulnerable is a violation of welfare consequentialism, and so the wrong of exploitation on Goodin’s vulnerability account. Goodin goes on to argue that the duty to protect the vulnerable is also compatible with non-consequentialist views, but I set that aside here. For the argument, see Goodin 1985, p. 115-17.
gain in such a way that A is violating the norm of protecting the vulnerable in playing for advantage over B.

There are four ways articulated by Goodin that one can unfairly strategize to gain advantage over the vulnerable (i.e., exploit). These include strategizing for one’s own advantage against another (i) that has intentionally chosen not to strategize for their own advantage, (ii) that is unable to strategize for advantage altogether, (iii) that is no match for oneself, and (iv) when one’s advantages are derived from another’s “grave misfortunes.” (Goodin 1987, 185-86) This is a procedural account of exploitation, finding the wrong in the process rather than the outcome.17, 18

17 This is because it’s particularly difficult to articulate exactly what a fair distribution of costs and benefits would be, but “we nonetheless can say with confidence that one party has sometimes exploited the other.” (Goodin 1987, 181) This point about the difficulty of identifying fair distributions – and perhaps the usefulness of distributions altogether – is bolstered if we accept that affections are simply not something that can be distributed. This is helpfully illustrated by Jean Hampton in “Feminist Contractarianism”: “One cannot distribute the pain that a parent feels when her teenage child gets into trouble, the happiness felt by someone because of the accomplishments of her friend, the suffering of a woman because of the illness of a parent.” (240) Another reason offered by Goodin in favor of a procedural account is that “it is a mistake to reduce [justice] to distribution.” (1987, 181). Iris Marion Young argues for this in Justice and the Politics of Difference (15). She offers two reasons: (i) reducing justice to a matter of distribution focuses exclusively on the distribution of material goods, while ignoring “the social structure and institutional context” that determines the distributive pattern, and (ii) if distribution is extended to nonmaterial social goods (e.g., legitimate interests), they are problematically represented as static rather than as “a function of social relations and processes.” (Young, 15-16). Young claims that when we consider the injustices that are the products of social structure, institutional context, social relations, and social processes, remedying distribution is not what will solve the problem. Rather, elimination of domination and oppression are required to address these injustices. The exploitation of care strikes me as being one of these injustices.

18 While Goodin provides a lengthy justification for why failure to uphold both parts of our duty to the vulnerable is exploitation, he spends little time explicating what it actually means for one to be vulnerable. Examples of vulnerability that he provides include letting one’s guard down with those they trust, having weakness of will, lacking bargaining power, and being a victim of a natural disaster or disease. As it stands, Goodin’s account of vulnerability is vague and underspecified. This is deemed problematic by Allen Wood, and, in turn, Tea Logar. Wood contends that “it would be implausible to the point of absurdity if someone were to suggest that any need or desire constitutes a vulnerability” as Goodin seems to. (Wood, 143) While I grant the general point of vagueness, it seems mistaken to read Goodin’s characterization of weakness of will and being a victim of the natural lottery as entailing all desires and needs amount to vulnerabilities.
In terms of care exploitation, vulnerability accounts have the following to say about Marie’s case, provided we understand care as a vulnerability:\(^\text{19}\):

Care Exploitation\(_{\text{VULNERABILITY}}\): Alex takes unfair advantage of the vulnerability of Marie’s caring disposition, for their (perceived or actual) gain.

Does the vulnerability account capture the wrong of Alex’s treatment of Marie?

Regarding whether Alex is unfairly strategizing for advantage in Goodin’s first way, it’s not the case that Marie has renounced strategizing for her own advantage. It may not be that her own advantage is her primary objective in this transaction, but that hardly means she has intentionally chosen not to strategize altogether. Marie stands to gain from this transaction simply because she has an interest in helping her mother flourish. This isn’t only because it’s her own mother, but also because the nature of her caring is such that she’s bound up in the success of the project of helping others flourish, generally. While Marie stands to gain far fewer advantages than Alex, it’s not none at all. So, (i) fails to capture what has gone wrong.

The second way of unfairly strategizing is also insufficient. While caring compels one to answer calls to aid others in their own flourishing, it doesn’t necessarily require that one sacrifice their own well-being altogether, intentionally or otherwise. In other words, Marie’s caring disposition doesn’t render her unable to consider and pursue personal advantages.

The third way seems a more promising explanation – it’s substantially less likely Marie will reject the call to aid another in their flourishing than Alex (due to her caring disposition that Alex doesn’t share). But this difference between Marie and Alex isn’t of the same kind that Goodin or other vulnerability theorists have in mind when one isn’t a match for another. (1987, 185) Goodin follows others in characterizing two parties as not being a match when one, the

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\(^{19}\) If we don’t treat care as a vulnerability, it’s not clear that we can even claim the treatment of Marie is exploitative on the vulnerability account due to her caring trait being what is exploited.
exploiter, has “vastly disproportionate” bargaining power compared to the exploitee, who needs what the exploiter has to offer desperately. (1987, 185-86) But Marie’s situation is hardly comparable to the typical exploitee in these scenarios; she has what Alex needs – the ability to provide care. Additionally, Marie doesn’t stand to gain anything above and beyond what Alex gains, much less the satisfaction of a desperate need, if she chooses to participate in this transaction.

Finally, Alex’s unfair advantage might be derived from her “grave misfortunes”. But we can suppose that Marie came to be caring not because of some grave misfortune, but because she saw a caring person as a moral exemplar early on, or because she’s particularly empathetic and realized she was well-positioned to help others. This means that Alex’s advantages aren’t exploitative due to violating the duty to protect the vulnerable in this way.

In short, none of the four ways of exploitation that the vulnerability suggests captures Marie’s case as exploitative.  

20 Perhaps a closer examination of care exploitation will reveal additional ways one might unfairly strategize for advantage by violating one’s duties to the vulnerable, but as they presently stand, vulnerability accounts are insufficient. I do, however, want to stave off the conclusions that Wood and Logar reach, respectively, about the core limitation of any vulnerability-based account of exploitation: vulnerability simply can’t be articulated, or it can only be inadequately articulated either too vaguely or too restrictively – especially in personal or intimate relationships. (Wood, 143; Logar, 329) As illustrated immediately above, Goodin’s account does not extend to care exploitation, or other cases where one’s virtues are unfairly taken advantage of more generally, and so seems subject to the criticisms of Wood and Logar. But this is not an irremediable flaw. Rather, the exploitation of Marie by Alex does fail both conditions of the duty to protect the vulnerable; Alex fails to suspend their ordinary behavior when they collectively decide that Marie is best suited for the job, knowing that she is vulnerable to accepting all calls to care, and they also fail to assist her. Assistance can be understood liberally here as either not approaching Marie to take on the job of caring for her mother and letting her decide to do so independently, or engaging in an open dialogue with Marie about other possible options that do not amount to such a great sacrifice on her part (despite being paired with advantages).

So, contra Wood and Logar, vulnerability can be helpfully articulated in such a way that doesn’t problematically overlook exploitation in personal relationships – including care exploitation. To fully dispose of the charge of vagueness, the vulnerability theorist is left with the task of more clearly distinguishing between types of vulnerabilities (as Goodin initially attempted). To do this would ease diagnosing and resolving the specific way that one is exploiting another’s vulnerabilities – the reason why exploitation theorists ought to heed pervasive care exploitation in the first place.
§III: Kantian Accounts

Exploitation\texttext{\texttext{KANTIAN}}: One party, A, interacts with another party, B, for advantage in a way that fails to respect the inherent moral worth of B. (Sample, 57)

Kantian theories are procedural, identifying the wrong of exploitation in the process of using another merely as a means to one’s end (i.e. not respecting another’s equal moral worth).

What is wrong with this is failing to recognizing the autonomy of the exploited individual, which grants them inherent moral worth. What sets the Kantian apart from the vulnerability theorist is stipulating that what is unfairly taken advantage of isn’t necessarily the vulnerabilities of another.\texttext{\texttext{21, 22}} One might fail to respect another by (i) “neglecting what is necessary for [another’s] well-being or flourishing”, (ii) “taking advantage of an injustice done to [them]”, and/or (iii) treating some aspect of another as commodifiable when one shouldn’t. (Sample, 57)

Sample contends that a need requiring satisfaction is “typically (if not always) at the root of exploitation” because it makes it possible for one to be disrespected by another, cashing

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\texttext{\texttext{21}} Allen Wood, another predominant Kantian, is an outlier in stipulating that disrespect \texttext{\texttext{necessarily}} involves taking advantage of another’s vulnerabilities. What sets him apart from vulnerability theorists is that he locates the wrong of exploitation not in violating the duty to protect the vulnerable, but instead in a failure to respect. My objection against (i) below functions as an objection to Wood.

\texttext{\texttext{22}} Notably, Kantian theories consider more transactions exploitative than others due to the use of another merely as a means being sufficient (in addition to being necessary) for exploitation. (Zwolinski & Wertheimer, 23)
out need in terms of Nussbaum’s capabilities.\textsuperscript{23, 24} (74) There is room left, however, for the Kantian to recognize exploitation in ways (ii)-(iii) that doesn’t arise out of need.\textsuperscript{25}

When it comes to Marie’s case, the Kantian theorist defines care exploitation as follows:

Care Exploitation\textsuperscript{KANTIAN}: Alex interacts with Marie for advantage in a way that fails to respect her inherent moral worth.

The first manifestation of disrespect involves the neglect of what is necessary for one to flourish, where one’s needs make it possible for them to be exploited. There are two ways one might be able to categorize Marie’s caring as a need: a need for purposeful employment, or a need for psychological well-being. If it’s considered a need for purposeful employment, this suggests that Marie cares not merely because she’s invested in helping others flourish, but also because it gives her life a purpose or meaning. But this isn’t necessarily true of Marie. We can imagine a case in which she thinks her purpose is to create art or be a historian, neither of which amounts to having a caring orientation towards others. It’s possible to care for others without thinking that it gives your life some deeper meaning or purpose. Psychological well-being, on the other hand, isn’t explained by Sample. Given her appeal to Nussbaum’s capabilities it seems reasonable to think it can be identified with the three capabilities of sense, imagination, and thought; emotions; and practical reason.\textsuperscript{26} Feeling the pull to care isn’t

\textsuperscript{23} Sample identifies disrespect with degradation, with no conceptual distinction between the two.

\textsuperscript{24} She characterizes one’s needs as what is required for a good life, including what is necessary for one to be able to satisfy physical survival, purposeful employment, psychological well-being, and the standards for self-respect. In an effort to make even more explicit what needs are (i.e., what is required for a good life), she looks to the ten capabilities formulated by Martha Nussbaum. (See Sample, 77-82) Nussbaum offers the capabilities approach as a way to address the question of how to fulfill basic entitlements in the pursuit of social justice. (Nussbaum 2000, 2003) Additionally, Nussbaum makes the further argument that the capabilities approach is particularly useful in achieving sex equality. She provides a list of ten capabilities that are “...central requirements of a life with dignity” and are “...both mutually supportive and all of central relevance to social justice.” (Nussbaum, 2003, 40) A society that fails to adequately guarantee all ten capabilities to every citizen at a suitable threshold fails to be fully just.

\textsuperscript{25} This is contra Sample’s generalization of need being at the root of exploitation.

\textsuperscript{26} Caring for others plausibly involves being able to “use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of [her] own choice”, “have attachments to things and people outside [herself]”, and “engage in critical reflection about the planning of [her] life.” (Nussbaum, 2003, 41)
necessary to satisfy any of these needs, though. There are many ways one might go about satisfying these needs, and again, we can imagine an alternative case. Although caring is seemingly central to Marie’s character and identity, perhaps what is necessary to satisfy these needs is instead her career as an artist (or historian, or whatever else), and without that she cannot satisfy her psychological well-being. So, as with the need for purposeful employment, psychological well-being isn’t the need that Alex has exploited.

Perhaps (ii) or (iii) are better suited to capture the wrong of care exploitation. Recall that (ii) states exploitation occurs when one takes advantage of the injustice done to another in a disrespectful way. Here my criticism is the same as the one I raised against the vulnerability theorist regarding deriving unfair advantage from “grave misfortunes”: we can suppose that Marie came to have the caring orientation that Alex is benefitting from not because of some injustice done to her, but because she had a caring moral exemplar, or is particularly empathetic and well-positioned to help others. (ii) doesn’t adequately capture care exploitation as wrong because Marie’s case fails to satisfy the condition of being derived from injustice.

This brings us to (iii), which locates the wrong of Marie’s exploitation in Alex’s treating her caring as commodifiable when they shouldn’t.27 We ought to resist accepting caring as a commodity because one way a good society is characterized is as a “robust civil society” where benevolent actions28 are done “out of generosity and good will.” (Sample, 155) To allow for all actions, including these, to be bought and sold “decreases the number of those actions performed without compensation” while also depriving agents of the enjoyment that comes

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27 While determining what can be permissibly commodified is a thorny issue with little consensus, here I consider what I take to be the most plausible reason for thinking Marie’s caring is problematically being commodified when it shouldn’t.

28 Examples of these actions could be donating blood, or signing up for the organ donor registry.
with gifting their actions. (Sample, 156) If we treat caring as something done out of generosity that benefits society\textsuperscript{29}, then the commodification of Marie’s caring by Alex might hinder the sense of satisfaction she experiences in caring.\textsuperscript{30} The commodification of Marie’s caring is problematic insofar as it negatively impacts how she experiences caring for others, but it has nothing to say about the unique wrong that an account of care exploitation ought to capture. In short, Kantian theories of exploitation are presently ill-equipped to articulate what is unique about Marie’s case.

§IV: Maldistribution Accounts

\textit{Exploitation}_\textit{MALDISTRIBUTION}: One party, A, unfairly benefits from an exchange of goods with another party, B.

Maldistribution accounts of exploitation are substantive, locating the wrong of exploitation in unfairly distributed benefits gained from a transaction. Wertheimer, a notable defender of this view, argues that one determines if the benefits are unfairly distributed by appealing to the hypothetical market price (HMP) for the good being exchanged in the transaction. (231) HMPs represent “the price that an informed and unpressured seller would receive from an informed and unpressured buyer if the [good or service] were sold on the market.” (Wertheimer, 230) If the good isn’t exchanged at the HMP, then the exchange is exploitative.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} This is a claim I will argue for in Chapter 2 when establishing that care is a virtue.

\textsuperscript{30} It seems likely that less enjoyment comes from seeing an individual make strides in increasing well-being or flourishing when it arises out of one’s own exploitation (compared to when one’s care isn’t being exploited). Whether commodification also decreases the frequency that caring individuals freely choose to care for another (without being the target of care exploitation) is unclear, since one of the distinctive features of caring is that one does not actively seek compensation in return.

\textsuperscript{31} Importantly, the exploiter’s actually benefitting – and not their intention to benefit – is both necessary and sufficient for exploitation to take place. (Wertheimer 209) Wertheimer considers whether informed consent is also a necessary condition for exploitation at length in chapter 8 of his work \textit{Exploitation}. He arrives at the conclusion that it is not, but that exploitation can clearly take place in cases where the expolitee did not offer informed consent. One might think that Wertheimer’s account isn’t substantive after all (and instead procedural) if he is
The maldistribution theorist offers this account of care exploitation in Marie’s case:

Care Exploitation$_{MALDISTRIBUTION}$: Alex unfairly benefits from an exchange of goods with Marie due to Marie’s caring disposition.

Above, in considering Kantian exploitation, I questioned whether care ought to be commodified, arguing that it ultimately shouldn’t. Here I argue further that care simply isn’t something that can be bought and sold on the market. Being invested in others’ well-being often comes along with providing for the needs of another (which is commodified on the market), but it’s simply not a tangible product or service that can be exchanged in the same way. If we abstract away from markets, though, it becomes possible to think about the HMP of caring.

We can imagine Marie stipulating to Alex a fair compensation for taking care of their mother. Alex, once informed of the cost of Marie’s care, would likely reach a similar conclusion about the appropriate “price”. But, given Marie’s caring disposition and Alex’s unwillingness to pay any price at all, the outcome of their transaction is exploitative.

While Marie’s case seems problematic in part because Alex is unwilling to share in the cost, what makes Marie’s exploitation particularly offensive is something about the way they go about exploiting her. Consider an alternative case: Alex and Marie are able to and do hire a home care worker, offering them a fair wage. In hiring the care worker, the siblings avoid exploitation by conforming to the agreed upon hypothetical price, with neither party unfairly willing to grant an exploiter can gain unfair advantage from engaging in a transaction with a non-consenting exploitee. In other words, the process by which the exploiter gains advantage is the wrong-making feature, not the outcome itself. But Wertheimer, in being ambivalent about consent, can maintain that regardless of how the exploiter gains unfair advantage, it is the outcome that deviates from the hypothetical market price and not the way that the deviation came about that is the wrong-making feature.

This is provided Marie doesn’t maintain that care requires no compensation.

Perhaps she would expect that Alex helps compensate for financial losses she would experience in providing for their mother while also being invested in her well-being. Or, maybe she would expect them to provide emotional when caring for their mother is particularly psychologically taxing.
benefiting from the transaction. But simply hiring Marie doesn’t solve the problem – it just shifts it. The problematic feature of care exploitation goes beyond Alex’s failure to compensate her. Unlike the procedural vulnerability and Kantian theories, the maldistribution account is definitionally insufficient due to its being substantive. It cannot properly capture the procedural issue of Alex unfairly taking advantage of Marie’s care by asking her to care for their mother, when they will benefit and know it’s improbable Marie will refuse their request.

If this is all correct, the leading extant theories of exploitation do not capture what is wrong in care exploitation, as exemplified by Marie’s case, and we will need to look for a new account.
References


