

James Kuzner. *Open Subjects: English Renaissance Republicans, Modern Selfhoods, and the Virtue of Vulnerability*.

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The central argument of this book is that vulnerability did not carry exclusively negative connotations in the republican tradition, but that it could be a positive or even salutary value. As James Kuzner puts it himself, “whereas republican figures are usually understood to regard vulnerability as that which community ought to minimise, I show how these figures also embrace vulnerability as that

which community has to offer” (10). He links this argument with debates about the modern self and concludes that it is misleading to regard modern selfhood and bounded selfhood as synonymous.

Kuzner makes his case by discussing Cicero alongside specific texts by four early modern English authors, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton, all of whom he labels as republicans. His analysis of friendship in book 4 of *The Faerie Queene* is meant to show that “Spenserian selfhood is defined by boundaries that do not hold, by a vulnerability to others that undercuts self-control” (39). In *Coriolanus*, Caius Martius has often been seen as desiring “total boundedness, complete severance from community” (87), but, as Kuzner interprets the play, the hero in fact loves battle because there he can “erode the borders of his social and bodily self” (97). Marvell and Milton are seen as detailing “how linguistic vulnerabilities have existed and may yet exist” (125). Vulnerability thus includes “republican outlooks, the attitudes toward social existence that define republican selves in an everyday sense” (19), a devotion to “civic virtue” and “the public good” (15), and a willingness to “risk themselves without hope of reward” (23).

Many of Kuzner’s analyses of individual early modern texts are interesting and valuable in themselves, but whether they establish his more general claims is another matter altogether. Although he is critical of those who see the modern self as a bounded one, the main targets of his criticism are those scholars who have recently upheld a neo-Roman notion of freedom as non-domination. There are however several problems in Kuzner’s account. Even if we ignore the question of whether Spenser or Shakespeare can in any meaningful sense be classified as republicans, we can still question Kuzner’s bracketing of the recent republican or neo-roman discussion of freedom and invulnerability with bounded self and, more importantly, his depiction of vulnerability in contemporary republican theories.

As to the first, Kuzner cites Philip Pettit’s definition of freedom as non-domination, i.e., freedom from arbitrary interference, but uses such communitarianists as Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel and their notion of freedom to participate in government to criticize Pettit’s definition, ignoring Pettit’s own robust critique of this definition of freedom. Such a move enables Kuzner, misleadingly, to link freedom as non-domination with the notion of bounded self. Needless to say, Pettit and other recent theorists of freedom as non-domination do not use this notion.

What about vulnerability? Kuzner claims that Pettit and others want “to minimise vulnerability . . . and thus to foster selves who are bounded, discrete and delineated” (2). Is this correct? I don’t think so. Admittedly, Pettit invokes vulnerability, but does so in connection with arbitrary interference. Freedom as non-domination, in other words, does not mean that other people do not interfere; it simply means that they are unable to interfere “on an arbitrary basis in your affairs” (Philip Pettit, *Republicanism*, 1997, 122). Moreover, republican liberty, for Pettit, requires “republican community” and all the values it entails. This means

that “the state that is devoted to republican causes and policies, interfere systematically in people’s lives” (171); its members need to display “a public-spirit character,” “civic virtue and good citizenship,” to “establish linkages of trust” (245–46) and “to cherish . . . the social body” (260). These are close to Kuzner’s depiction of the salutary values of vulnerability but a far cry from bounded selves, as construed by him. When Pettit poses the question, “are they not required to espouse an image of human society in which everyone does their utmost not to be beholden or indebted or vulnerable in any way to another,” his answer is “absolutely not” (265–66). It follows that “people must be willing to accept the fact of often having to be vulnerable to others” (266).

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