which she is too quick to dismiss considering that the problem goes back millennia (as in the Socratic debate if virtue is knowledge or if virtue can be taught). But it seems undeniable that Mahony's study is a remarkable book that scholars of Arendt and political ethics can only ignore at their own peril.

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Matthew R. McLennan. *Philosophy and Vulnerability: Catherine Breillat, Joan Didion, and Audre Lorde,* London: Bloomsbury, 2019. 183 pp.

In *Philosophy and Vulnerability*, the author sets out to put a certain idea of philosophy to work by commenting on the writings of three artists, activists and thinkers: Catherine Breillat, a French filmmaker, novelist and professor; Joan Didion, an American political writer; and Audre Lorde, a poet, feminist, and civil rights activist – none of whom are professional academic philosophers.

McLennan's book pursues the argument of his previous book, from 2015, in which he adopts from Alain Badiou and Jean-François Lyotard "the notion of philosophy as an activity" (4) in contrast to the notions of philosophy or philosophies as 'opinions', 'worldviews', or 'systems' (4). Let us say, right away, that he does not exclude the common canon of Western philosophers, but given the importance of the distinction he makes between philosophy as *a body of doctrine* and as *an activity of thought*, he shows preference for more marginalized figures who "[…] pull up stakes and start anew as necessary" (5).

This may seem trivial at first glance, considering how often philosophers contradict each other and are prone to 'clear the slate' to start anew, but the author, a Canadian philosophy professor, has his own specific canon in mind: those who are "[…] willing to leave everything behind as her thought process dictates" (5) including Lyotard, Putnam, Russell, Wittgenstein and Weil, but apparently not Descartes or Kant, whose "true master" was perhaps "the system" and not the "vocation" (5, 6, etc.). The reader might be surprised by this choice of examples if the author would not have revealed elsewhere that philosophy as *an activity of thought* is perhaps more accurately described by philosophy as social activism, say, as contemporary thinkers of queer or racial theory, and not as the traditional idea of philosophy as an art of living, as in the Stoics.

The author inveighs especially against the "corrosive myth of self-sufficiency" (2) that pervades social thought, from "[…] classical social contract theories to contemporary neoliberal discourses of personal accountability" (2), who are said to blame those who are vulnerable and discourage solidarity. How someone in the (philosophy) profession is able to evade these evils is presented in the conclusion based on the author's own experience of a local project in Ottawa that offers non-credit courses to homeless or low income students (150-151).

The general path of the book is paved by a distinction between what the author calls the "existential and disciplinary versions" of philosophy (29). The former is the 'activity' of philosophy which we all almost all engage in, at least at some points in our life (147), whereas the latter is the mentioned canonical view.

The stated aim of the book is to "[…] rework the definition of philosophy *itself* according to the theme of vulnerability" (3) or more modestly, to show that his vision of philosophy is *plausible*, as his part of the "[…] labour in the counter-hegemonic project of unseating neoliberalism" (3).

What connects this newfound idea of philosophy to that of vulnerability? According to the author, the two terms are joined as follows: "[…] philosophy is a self-conscious activity of finitude reaching beyond itself, though itself; finitude describes or encompasses human vulnerability" (26).

The author points out fittingly that if light was shed on the concept by recent collections from Mackenzie (in 2013), Butler (in 2016) and the moving work of Tod May (2017), the idea has gained momentum since 2001 under different labels or parallel concepts, such as 'fragility' (Nussbaum, May), 'precarity' (Butler), 'dependency' (Kittay, Macintyre), 'debility' (Puar) and even human 'animality' (Macintyre, Nussbaum, Taylor), etc.

In search of a 'working definition' of vulnerability, the author points to two basic aspects: human finitude or boundness, and exposure to accident or luck (17). The latter came to the fore in the work of Martha Nussbaum on the Greek Tragedians, and Aristotle (Plato being essentially blind to it), and Bernard Williams on the nature of morality (our 'peculiar institution'); but human finitude seems to be less fundamental than the first basic aspect, considering how the author expressly rejects May's account of us (as vulnerable animals) in terms of 'projects' (18). As a result, what the author provides is not just an alternative, but more precisely an illustrated alternative to the many usual accounts of us finite animals, in a contingent world, as 'practical reasoners'. On account of the idiom of such illustration, these controversial and interesting ideas are left largely unexplored in the book in the manner usual of disciplinary philosophy. How then does the book proceed?

After a rather promising introduction, the author goes on to present the works of Breillat, Didion, and Lorde "from an existential perspective" (29). Chapters 2 and 5 present the filming and reflections of Breillat on sex as evolving out of "[…] a struggle to overcome shame and self-loathing", and then her experience of stroke and hemiplegia, as well as abuse. The key, the author avers, is the erotic suspension of the ethical, which really amounts to saying that her (largely pornographic, as the author admits) work is not really about sex, but about vulnerability (34, etc.). Chapter 3 focuses, paradoxically, on Joan Didion's memoir, *Blue Nights,* which is not about hardness, but "subjective fragility" (30) and Chapter 4 focus on Lorde's solitary struggle with cancer as an example of connectedness.

Is the aim to democratize philosophy or to put it in an interdisciplinary matrix? If the latter, it is not clear to us that philosophy is democratized enough. To be fair, the author does not simply take disciplinary philosophy and generalize it so that it amounts to crypto-elitism. We receive a definition of his 'existential' kind: "*the activity of the self-conscious mastery of one's being mastered.*"

However, the book must be measured against its own ambition. The author's goal is, as he states at the outset, "[…] to rework the definition of philosophy itself according to the theme of vulnerability" (3) by depicting it at the pre-disciplinary level by showing its plausibility.

The successive presentations of a filmmaker, a novelist and a social activist, all women, portrayed by a man, make for controversial if not paradoxical readings, but it is unclear how they shed light on the notions and realities of vulnerability, or its exploration at the 'pre-philosophical' stage, to add flesh to the bones of the introductory remarks.

The author, out of modesty, acknowledges at the end of the venture that the book simply takes a step in addressing the question. But his final claim that '"[…] women wishing to pursue philosophy in a *disciplinary* sense face hurdles both as students and professors" (154) is just as true as it is trivial, not giving much credence to the ambitious goal stated at the outset.

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