# Care and the Self: A Philosophical Perspective on Constructing Active Masculinities

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# Care and the Self: A Philosophical Perspective on Constructing Active Masculinities

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**Abstract**

Our paper focuses on the philosophical perspective of constructing active (as opposed to reactive) caring masculine agencies in the contemporary feminist discourse. Since contemporary feminisms are not simply anti-essentialist but, more importantly, polyphonic, we believe that it is far more appropriate to talk about 'masculinities' as opposed to 'masculinity.' We are proposing a revised understanding of the self in which the self is not defined primarily in the dichotomous, categorical one-other relationship. We use Paul Ricoeur's anthropology to describe the self as relational, as well as Joan Tronto's recent perspective on care, which fits well with a Ricoeurian reconstruction of the self. We also engage with Raewyn Connell's discourse on masculinity and, more specifically, hegemonic masculinity. By using 'caring masculine agencies' as an alternative to 'masculinity as reactive anti-femininity,' we are proposing a paradigm shift that hopefully is flexible enough to respect the dynamism inherent to any act of gender-identification.

**Keywords:** hegemonic masculinities, reactive masculinities, active/caring masculinities, ethics of care, relational self

Our research aims at opening a new narrative space for masculinity within a feminist context. More specifically, we will focus on the philosophical perspective of constructing caring masculine agencies that would be active (as opposed to reactive) in the contemporary feminist discourse. Since contemporary feminisms are not simply anti-essentialist but, more importantly, polyphonic, we believe that it is far more appropriate to talk about 'masculinities' in the plural, as opposed to 'masculinity' in the singular.[1] We believe that as far as the masculinity discourse is

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[1] We accept R. W. Connell's understanding of masculinities as "socially constructed configurations of gender practice" (Connell 2005a, 1805).

concerned, it is already embedded in the feminist discourse.[2] However, this discourse has often been described as a reactive type of masculinity, a masculinity entrenched in the dialogue, or the lack thereof, between the categorical 'one' and 'other' (sex), where the 'other' has been defined either more radically, as exclusively 'feminine' and underprivileged, or more moderately, as standing in an opposition to the 'one.' We believe that it is time to revise the classical feminist discourse of the 'one-other' relationship with the hope of moving away from it and constructing new masculinities which are not (still) anchored in a discourse of power.

In light of this, we would like to propose a revised understanding of the self in which the self is not defined primarily in the dichotomous, categorical one-other relationship. We will use Paul Ricoeur's work to describe the self as not only narrative but, more importantly, relational. While we fully recognize the richness of the literature on relationality (relational ontology), we have chosen Paul Ricoeur's perspective of the self for two main reasons. First, and also practically, Joan Tronto, whom we use extensively in our paper, herself engages in a dialogue with Ricoeur's anthropology. Second, we feel that bringing in a thinker who is entrenched in the continental tradition, however tentative the divide may be, increases the intersectionality of the analysis which is, we are convinced, necessary for the purposes of constructing the possibility for caring masculine agencies. In taking relational ontology as our starting point, we thus recognize that relationships with others are essential for the existence of the self. Thus, we will argue that the self is constituted in and through relationship with others. This relational picture of the self necessitates a new discourse involving the notion of care at its center. We will use Joan Tronto's recent works where she proposes a new perspective on care which, we find, fits well with a Ricoeurian reconstruction of the self. Tronto advocates a structural approach to care (as opposed to treating care as a personal attitude only) where care is viewed as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Tronto 2013, 19). We share Tronto's belief that until we transform our social and political power practices into caring practices, where all institutions are reformed to embody the care for the 'life-sustaining web' built by the self and its relationships, including to itself, we cannot really hope to live peacefully and democratically as equals. This

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[2] We use the term 'masculinity discourse' loosely here but with emphasis on how masculinity has been handled in the feminist academic literature. This would point in the direction of "masculine domination" and "modes of thinking that are themselves products of millennia of masculine domination," "the historical social structures of masculine rule" as Pierre Bourdieu calls it (Bourdieu 1996–1997, 191).

transformation requires, among other things, redefining such key concepts as agency, autonomy, and vulnerability, all intimately connected to the 'ethics of responsibility.' We thus hope to show that although the relational self is gender-informed (we do not limit the genders to two), it is free to engage in various feminine as well as masculine discourses and behaviors all at once.

The paper follows a 'backward' tripartite structure in which we gradually build up to the discussion of active masculinities. We first expose what we believe is the best normative platform for constructing active masculinities. We make a case for ethics of care as the alternative normative platform of choice in which the (moral) agent is interpreted as a caring agent. We believe that, on the one hand, ethics of care pairs well with another type of alternative normative ethics platform, such as virtue ethics, in that both of them put at the center the self/agency as opposed to various principles of action. We consider it an advantage for the ability of a normative theory to co-operate, as it were, with another normative theory. On the other hand, ethics of care leads directly to relational ontology in which the self/agent is constructed relationally (as our construction of a Ricoeur-inspired relational self will illustrate), as opposed to dichotomously, for example. It is in this nondichotomous milieu that we think active masculinities can be successfully constructed and sustained. It needs to be noted at the outset that what we mean by active masculinities is caring masculinities, a term which will be put together as the very last stage of the paper, on the backdrop of Connell's discussion of "hegemonic masculinity."[3]

### Care as Structure: Noddings's Model of Care

In her 1984 seminal work, Nel Noddings argued that it is care, which we are all born into, and not duty, that is at the base of ethical behavior. We have chosen Noddings's version of ethics of care as we very much sympathize with her effort to build an alternative bottom-up normative ethics which kills many birds with one stone, as it were. Our sympathy is based on two main merits the discussion of her theory brings to our project. First, it shows how ethics of care *can*, in fact, function as an alternative normative ethical system, one with heightened sensitivity to gender issues. And second, the Noddings-Tronto debate is not only exemplary in that it allows us to see the carving up of a normative ethical model in action, so to speak, but it also leads us to a new and, we believe, highly potent (from a theoretical point of view) consideration of care, namely, care as structure. We believe that it is care as structure that holds the key to proposing a different model of looking at types of masculinities within the gendered self. Put otherwise, we believe that, if we accept the platform of ethics of care where the agent/self is

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[3] See Connell 2005a, 2005b.

formed and continuously 'evaluated' in relation to all other agents/selves, we will comfortably make the transition to considering the agent/self as a polyphonous gendered self.

**Tronto: Care as Structure**

Joan Tronto was one of the early critics of Noddings's ethics of care. Tronto, along with disability scholars such as Sunaura Taylor (2014) and Christine Kelly (2013), cautions that even under ideal circumstances, care as a moral attitude poses problems. Care is often asymmetrical and labor intensive; it requires a constant displacement of one's self in order to meet the needs of the other. Under Taylor and Kelly's criticism of care, we need to be mindful of the possibility of using care for the construction of just another ableist picture of justice.

But if we interpret care as a structure, as opposed to a moral attitude, as Tronto ends up doing, we are bound to accept relational ontology, and we can at least map out various forms of formal and informal care practices on the basis of which different public policies can be built. (It is a long-standing criticism of Tronto's that Nodding's platform of care has difficulties being applied outside the family structure.) Although the *logic of care* is in direct opposition to the logic of domination, applying the former will require a close look at things like purposiveness, politics, particularity, and plurality (Tronto 2010, 162). The bottom line is that the logic of care requires a constant negotiation of the ends of care, the relationship between the existing power relations and care relations, as well as reconciling the needs of diverse populations. Since care structure is intimately linked to recognizing and catering to the needs of groups and individuals in a *unique way*, as opposed to a standardized way, it is paramount that the complex—and often fraught with ambiguity and vagueness—discourse of determining needs (as opposed to, or in conjunction with, wants) is taken seriously. This realization presents us with a model whose complexity and multidimensionality are further amplified by the fact that the model itself is to be constantly renegotiated in real time. The requirement of renegotiation makes us aware that care is, in fact, a *process of caring*. In other words, if we want to understand care as a process and not a commodity, it is inadequate to appeal to an *a priori* organizational purpose, or to cater to the desire of holism, which is, no doubt, imbedded in care itself. To make sense of the complexity of care as structure, we need to ask: How does the institution understand and negotiate its own needs? How is the effectiveness of care evaluated? How are the responsibilities within the organization allocated?

We suppose that relational responsibility does away with a substantive account of responsibility under which we abide by a formal set of relationship properties which entail each other. Thus, a given community, in caring for the relationships which are immediately formed among its members, will try to refine

the understanding of the moral beliefs, extend the consensus, and eliminate the conflict where this is possible. Along the same lines, accepting the logic of care does not, in fact, allow us to ignore the existing power structures. This is especially true for placing care in a global context. While it remains a brute fact that we are born and live for the duration of our lives in relationships, which creates various degrees of dependence among the members of a given community, we cannot ignore another fact, namely, that relationships imminently carry power differentials. Failing to understand this, as Tronto puts it, creates moral harm 'on its face' (Tronto 2012, 313). The understanding that new relationships develop within the network of existing ones (which exist within a communal framework) should tip us off that relationships are ever-growing complexities, and understanding them means understanding the dynamics, including the power dynamics, within them. It is this tension between care structure and power structure that will be explored in a subsequent section of this paper, where we will map out a possible new model of constructing active/caring masculinities. But before we get there, we need to shed more light on what we mean by the relational self, since it will be the relational self that acts as a springboard for caring masculinities.

**The Relational Self: From *Oneself as Another* to Caring Masculine Agencies**
*The* idem *and the* ipse*: Ricoeur's Attempt at Shifting the Understanding of Selfhood*
       Our proposed perspective on caring masculine agencies fits well, we find, with Ricoeur's anthropological model of the self. After expounding briefly on Ricoeur's model of the self, we will respond to Tronto's objections to using Ricoeurian anthropology in ethics of care. We are hoping to shed light on the fact that both can be used in conjunction to open up a post-dialectical, or a post-binary, perspective on identity and selfhood to show that, if there is always tension with otherness, that otherness is (a) not always exterior to ourselves and (b) does not always come neatly in pairs, but is, most of the time, invested in a complex web.
       In the introduction to *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur expresses his endeavour to move away from an atemporal understanding of the self as an isolated and immediate 'I,', as a subject that can in turn either be over-evaluated or under-evaluated. By introducing otherness as constitutive of one's own identity, Ricoeur draws attention to the mediated and relational quality of selfhood. By proposing the overarching dialectic of "on one side, identity as *sameness* (Latin *idem*, German *Glechkeit*, French *mêmeté*); on the other, identity as *selfhood* (Latin *ipse*, German *Selbstheit*, French *ipséité*)," Ricoeur attempts to explain how we, in fact, live the tension between the continuity and the discontinuity of our temporal existence (Ricoeur 1992, 1). While sameness allows us to account for our permanence in time, selfhood structures the internal discontinuities that arise from the fact that we live in spatial-temporal contexts that include a variety of discontinuous events. For

Ricoeur, we make sense of this tension through narrativity, by constructing and telling our life story within a social order and a web of relationships.

**The Autonomous/Vulnerable Self**

Ricoeur's narrative construction of selfhood through time allows him to introduce agency as the playing of multiple roles. For example, just as identity is never divorced from otherness, for Ricoeur, autonomy is never dissociated from vulnerability. Translated into a context of ethics of care, this means that each individual has the capacity to both *receive* and *give* care. It is also important to note that, just as otherness is never only an external opposition to the self, autonomy and vulnerability are not polar opposites whose respective powers wane as the other's grows stronger. It is tempting to conceive of autonomy as belonging to a self with a greater degree of agency that is as invulnerable as it can be, yet:

> For Ricoeur, however, the two notions are bound together inseparably. Each form of autonomy has a corresponding figure of fragility (i.e., vulnerability) (76). Autonomy needs the experience of vulnerability: it turns autonomy from a general supposition into a task to be performed. The highest form of autonomy, then, does not consist in the vindication of vulnerability, but in the mediation of both notions in the social order. (Hettema 2014, 496)

Therefore, when evaluating selfhood, we cannot abstract ideas of activity from ideas of passivity, or notions of *power* from notions of *powerlessness*. As beings capable of reflecting on their own constructed selfhood, all humans experience these tensions at the very core of what we consider to be our own 'identity.'

Our narrative must be open to criticism and challenges. Identifying with different masculinities, for example, is never only an autonomous-invulnerable choice, but is always also the result of various instances of vulnerability within each individual. Thus, by proposing a perspective on caring masculine agencies, we are not positioning ourselves against what could be regarded as 'substantial' qualities of hegemonic masculinity such as power and autonomy. Rather, if agency is inseparable from passivity, this necessitates that we include people who identify themselves within the masculinities spectrum without exhibiting 'substantial' masculine qualities, or in addition, and even on the contrary, exhibiting 'substantial' feminine qualities. This means not only that they are capable of providing care as opposed to forcefully oppressing (taking care), but also that they need to receive care for themselves. Thus, caring masculine agencies must also imply caring masculine passivities. A philosophical approach to discourses about masculinities can therefore propose a complex relational model of selfhood that could encourage meta-dialectical considerations of gender identification. We recognise that this kind

of identification happens within social structures, and that is why we believe that structural practices of care can inform and be informed, in turn, by the relational construct that is selfhood. This statement, however, cannot be made without reservations and we must acknowledge that Tronto herself raises issues with the use of any kind of philosophical anthropology as a basis for an alternative normative ethics (i.e., ethics of care). We will address these issues next.

**Responding to Tronto's "Practices All the Way Up" Objection to the Ricoeurian Anthropology**

By conceiving of care ethics from a structural, care-about point of view, Tronto and her coauthors advocate for a "practices all the way up" approach to ethics that builds upon the moral questions that arise from caring practices as supposed to being deduced from moral theories (Tronto, van Nistelrooij, and Schaafsma 2014, 489). They are wary of using any specific philosophical anthropology as a foundation, including Ricoeur's, because any anthropological foundation will inevitably exclude other diverging accounts of human beings and their relationships and should therefore not be used as the basis for a normative ethics. However, it is our position that Tronto's project of structural care, especially with its emphasis on the relational and *nested* qualities of care, is not incompatible with Ricoeur's exploration of the autonomous/vulnerable self. On the contrary, the possibilities that Ricoeur's anthropology opens up are rather amenable to a "practices all the way up" approach.

First, Tronto, van Nistelrooij, and Schaafsma stress the fact that "caring practices are always contextual and relational" (2014, 489). This relationality is what Ricoeur puts forward in his analysis of the construction of selfhood. He multiplies the dialectics (*idem*/*ipse*, sufferer/agent), but we believe that this can be opened up into a horizon in which strict dialectical poles are not the only way to make sense of the selfhood landscape. By highlighting how dialectical tensions within an individual are always intertwined with external relationships and oppositions, we maintain that Ricoeur, while not completely abandoning binary concept couplings, frames selfhood in a less rigid and decisively nonlinear way. Thus, using Ricoeur's anthropological framework to conceive of various dynamic practices and fluid conceptions of the self would not be committing hermeneutical heresy, and neither would it preclude us from expanding its foundation.

Second, Tronto and her coauthors underline the *nested* quality of caring practices that can be related to the *embedded* quality of the self, as per Ricoeur's theory. One could object that the difference that Tronto et al. claim between practices and theories still holds in this case; however, we do not think that the analogy should be so easily dismissed. As a reflexive construct, the self evolves in space and time, in relation to other individuals as well as to institutions. Thus, when

Tronto et al. claim that the ends of individual caring practices are parts of larger, institutional and societal care practices, we are convinced that they are echoing Ricoeur's assertion that the self is narratively constructed not only in contact with other individuals, but also with institutional and societal discourses. It is, therefore, not incongruous that we turn to both Tronto and Ricoeur in trying to understand what kind of philosophical discourse contributes the most to evaluating and, subsequently, constructing conceptions of masculinities.

### Caring Masculine Agencies: The Philosophy Angle

When we were researching this paper, our main concern was to reflect on what a philosophical approach had to offer to a discourse on masculinities. Such a discourse is a reflection on the 'form,' on the 'act' of identification and self-identification. Both our readings in the sociology of masculinity and in feminist philosophy have pointed out the somewhat common-sense negative definition of masculinity as anti-femininity. We, therefore, approached the definition of masculinity/ies as a question about whether it would be possible to shift this inquiry outside the binary, dialectical power polarity, and what this 'outside' would look like. In addition to our choice of ethics of care as the most appropriate normative ethical system, Ricoeur's anthropological account of the mediated, constructed self, although still employing dialectical couples, provides another platform from which we believe conceiving of a post-polarized perspective on masculinities is made possible. We have termed this perspective 'caring masculine agencies.' We would like to attempt an explanation of what we mean by that, knowing full well that we will not exhaust the subject in any shape or form.

### Shifting from Reactive/Active to Caring Masculinities

As we have already discussed, when considering the relationality of the self, one of the consequences of defining selfhood as *constructed* by the mediation of our relationships with others, with social environments and institutions, is that it is no longer possible to think of it in terms of strict dichotomies. For example, autonomy and vulnerability are not to be conceived as being mutually exclusive or to be impermeable to one another, but rather as being bound together to better represent human lived experiences from the point of view of being simultaneously an agent and a sufferer. Furthermore, we can take away from Tronto's critical appraisal of ethics of care that a care structure on a social and political level would understand care in a broader sense and, therefore, allow for the construction of caring masculine agencies that do not necessarily need to position themselves as being feminine or anti-feminine, since the existential reality of the "need for care" has been "redistributed" to all humans, regardless of gender. From this premise of

care as a socio-political structure, the self-defining, identity-building value of "consideration" can be derived.

If the notion of care can enable us, through normative precepts, to recognise the otherness in ourselves and the constant inner tension between autonomy and vulnerability, we propose that we can draw from it an ethical attitude of consideration. To be considerate within a caring framework is to enact one of the instantiations of care. It is an attitude, a posture that one can adopt to perform the awareness and affirmation of the self, and as such, it is a fruitful way of showcasing how active masculinities could be formed. To be considerate in this way means to practice the dual exercise of assessing our capabilities and vulnerabilities and becoming aware of the capabilities and the vulnerabilities of others in order to act upon this knowledge. It is not self-effacement, as we do have consideration for ourselves, but neither is it an exclusionary and atomistic affirmation of self. When the agent is considerate in her actions, she makes an effort to not only assert herself in the world, but also to understand how she is of the world. Within the caring framework that reminds us all of our co-constructed identities that need to draw upon our environment (physical and socio-political), consideration may seem a tad pragmatic, but we believe it is a useful way of grounding the social skills that are necessary to enact care, such as the skill to negotiate the self–other landscape.

We do acknowledge that opening a dialogue between masculinity and femininity is a good strategy to expose the fluidity of gender as well as its significant influence on institution formation. However, what we believe is even better, is placing masculinities in the context of care interpreted as a structure of thinking, conversing, and socializing. We believe that, through care, a very important aspect of social practices is brought about, namely considerate negotiation. Negotiation requires relational ontology as well as acting, as opposed to merely observing and analyzing. In other words, we believe that the use of the model of care as structure can be expanded further. (So far, we have seen in the literature the model of care being used to redefine the human–animal relationship in ecofeminist scholarship, or to criticize the existing capitalist socio-economic model, as Tronto does.) On the one hand, it offers what Lorraine Code (1991) calls "mitigated relativism," under which a middle ground is opened up where the creative tension between the personal and collective experiences and histories, material circumstances, and social structures is maintained without precluding an open dialogue (320). On the other hand, care retains a form of normativity necessary for the creation and functioning of social practices, without turning it into rigid normativity under which "the unwarranted assumption that role and identity correspond" threatens to set us back to the dialectical-dichotomous-adversarial framework of reactive masculinity (and reactive femininity) (Connell 2005b, 70).

In order to better flesh out what we propose as active or caring masculinities, we would like to relate our discussion to Connell's seminal notion of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 2005b). We echo Connell and Messerschmidt's concern that despite the many transformations of hegemonic masculinity as the main social factor in proliferating the domination of men over women, it is, today, still an active practice, despite its immense internal complexity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 846). The rise of many men's rights movements around the world over the past decades has done little for abolishing gender hierarchies. On the contrary, as Connell aptly points out elsewhere, it seemed to have triggered a wave of neoconservative and antifeminist politics (Connell 2005a, 1806).[4] It seems that hegemonic masculinity, along with gender itself, has become more fluid but, because of that, also more insidious. For example, instead of resorting to forms of violence, mainstream media uses commercial sports to celebrate "force, domination, and competitive success," all unmistakably hegemonic masculine traits (1816). What is more, the visible mechanisms of hegemony, often masked as positive parading of culturally acceptable virtues, are accompanied by invisible ones where the hegemonic masculinity is "withdrawn from scrutiny," as in the many cases of media reports of US high school shootings witnessed over the past decade

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[4] To illustrate Connell's point, we would like to mention a 2016 documentary, *The Red Pill*, directed by Cassie Jaye. The documentary, which has enjoyed high ratings since its release and could be considered to represent a perception of feminism in mainstream US pop culture, follows the young director's own personal encounter with some of the men's rights movements in the US. The documentary ends with Ms. Jaye's confession that she no longer considers herself a feminist. While we believe that the documentary is honest in its intention to present the views on both sides of the gender equality fence, what we found to be a glaring gap was a lack of critical reflection on the types of male voices heard in the documentary. While a certain slant is every artist's privilege, a consideration for the situatedness of the male, and female for that matter, voices heard is of paramount importance when dealing with gender equality issues. And so, instead of enabling men's rights activists to speak on behalf of all men, an emphasis on the specific vulnerabilities that some men face in contemporary US society, would have rendered a much more sensitive and honest approach to the topic. As Connell successfully observes, "In the domain of power, men collectively control the institutions of coercion and the means of violence (e.g., weapons). But men are also the main targets of military violence and criminal assaults. . . . The disadvantages listed above are, broadly speaking, the conditions of the advantages" (Connell 2005a, 1809). "Equally important," Connell continues, "the men who receive most of the benefits and the men who pay most of the costs are not the same individuals" (1806).

(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 835). We take Connell's point that the notion of alliance (between the genders) is really important, both theoretically and practically, for achieving gender equality (Connell 2005a, 1817). We believe that the concept of alliance is founded upon the notion of considerate negotiation, itself based on the ethical attitude of consideration, mentioned above.[5] To go even further, while sidestepping most of the accumulated criticisms of hegemonic masculinity with which Connell and Messerschmidt diligently engage, we would like to single out one concern that active/caring masculinities can help with (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836–845).

We agree with S. M. Whitehead's criticism of hegemonic masculinity as an obfuscating concept which results in an "abstract structural dynamics" that does not take into consideration the fluidity of masculinities but instead tries to fit them into an overarching structure of sorts (Whitehead 2002, 94). Put otherwise, hegemonic masculinity can be shown to result in "structural determinism" that erases the subject, a stance with which Connell and Messerschmidt "flatly disagree" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 843). It seems to us that what Connell and Messerschmidt propose in response to Whitehead's criticism is an intersectional (without using the term itself) analysis of masculinity, supported by various social and historical studies of gender. While intersectionality in gender study is indispensable, we worry that intersectional analysis might remain too local (and hence, partial) to be of use, especially on a global scale. We believe that the concept of active/caring masculinities might just provide the structural unity for dealing with all existing ambiguities and tensions that are part and parcel of the process of understanding gender dynamics and, subsequently, for dealing with existing or anticipated conflicts among various masculinities and femininities. The notion of active/caring masculinities would not threaten to lead to structural determinism which obscures and/or erases the self because it has imbedded in it the requirement of ongoing critical evaluation and reevaluation of the notions of agency, autonomy, and (gender) identity. We believe that of all existing normative models, the one grounded in care is the most promising in the sense of being the most flexible and non-content-imposing. In other words, gender analysis focused on practices of care has the potential of bringing together various forms of femininities and masculinities in a decisively nondichotomous way. Thus, it seems to us that an emphasis on constructing active/caring masculinities could serve the purpose of uniting, without homogenizing, the empirical analysis of hegemonic masculinity on the three levels described by Connell and Messerschmidt, namely local, regional, and global (849).

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[5] Connell seems to refer to care almost exclusively in the sphere of domestic practices, if at all. This seems to relegate care to a practice that has a rather narrow reach (see Connell 2005a).

At the same time, an emphasis on care would not only not exclude the social embodment discourse, but quite on the contrary, encourage it (851–852). Care for one's self implies care for one's body. Care for the body, mine and the other's, is necessitated by the understanding of one's vulnerabilities. It is precisely because the self is both autonomous and vulnerable that it requires care.

This means that a model of active masculinity—and, indeed, of any gender-identification—starts with recognizing what is common to all individuals: their inescapable and constitutive relationality and, therefore, their need for care and their capacity to care for one another. This does not mean that genders are, or even should be, undifferentiated. It simply directs the crafting of (self)-identification from the common-to-the-individual self via the acknowledgement of differences, as opposed to the more strictly dichotomous position that the differences between individual people trump their relational situation and place them into binary categories that only produce social sense if they are diametrically opposed to one another. In broad strokes, we could say that while passive or reactive masculinities focus on digging a trench that promptly divides up masculinity from femininity, active masculinities pick their own unique style of building on the ground they share with femininities and other gender-identifications.

**Concluding Remarks**

As history has shown all too well, if 'masculinity' is interpreted in an essentialist way, it can easily lead to ideology. The connection between masculinity, power, and domination is all too evident to be lost on feminist thinkers. We believe, however, that the same goes for reactive masculinities. If masculinity is always interpreted dialectically in opposition to femininity, then the diversity of masculinities recognized within a given social context will not help the case since, at the end of the day, all of the different masculinities will be placed in opposition to all the different femininities. Diversifying masculinity will not end the process of creating masculine institutions, for example, even if women are employed in them. As Todd Reeser (2010, 20) aptly points out, "Various institutions clearly have self-interest in masculinity: the government needs soldiers to defend itself, so it produces military masculinity; the business world needs a capitalistic masculinity to make money, so it makes its version of gender appear ideal."

We deliberately kept the unconventional plural of 'agency' to emphasise even more what we understand to be the plural and multifaceted way that an individual chooses to identify as "masculine." Once more basing ourselves on Tronto and Connell, we believe that a theoretical discourse on masculinities must acknowledge that this concept is made up of 'practices' that must continue to inform its definition dynamically, as opposed to categorically. That is why we propose the integration within a discourse on masculinities of the general structures

of care as well as of the relational self. We believe that it could not only be a first step outside the anti-femininity paradigm towards a more active and positive definition, but also it could propose a viable alternative to some of the issues that Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity encounters or responds to. Furthermore, as structures, these philosophical options do not prescribe strict normative content but rather place the agent within a normative environment in which it can grow, change, and evolve. By using 'caring masculine agencies' as an alternative to 'masculinity as reactive anti-femininity,' we are proposing a paradigm shift that hopefully is flexible enough to respect the dynamism inherent to any act of gender-identification.

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