

# “Maternal thinking” and the concept of “vulnerability” in security paradigms, policies, and practices

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## Abstract

This article takes as its starting point Sara Ruddick’s discussion of “vulnerability” in her 1989 groundbreaking book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. It examines the kind of thinking about vulnerability that Ruddick describes as developed through maternal practice and uses it as a heuristic device for rethinking the conceptions of and responses to vulnerability that permeate national and international security discourses. It explores the specific forms of practice and reason that are implicated by these different stances toward vulnerability and shows that the (often unexamined) assumptions underlying these stances are profoundly consequential for both policy and practice. Specifically, it takes both nuclear weapons and the so-called Global War on Terror as particular forms of response to perceived vulnerability and scrutinizes the practices associated with each in light of the forms of rationality arising from maternal practice. It also explores the assumptions underlying the concept of “vulnerable groups” commonly employed in international policy institutions, teasing out their implications for politics, policy, and action. Overall, it argues that Ruddick’s articulation of maternal thinking provides a valuable resource for reimagining transformed and transformative security practices.

## Keywords

Maternal thinking, nuclear weapons, security, vulnerability, war on terror

This article takes as its starting point Sara Ruddick’s discussion of “vulnerability” in her groundbreaking book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989). It

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examines the kind of thinking about vulnerability that Ruddick describes as developed through maternal practice and contrasts it with the conceptions of and responses to vulnerability that permeate national and international security discourses. It explores the specific forms of practice and reason that are implicated by these different stances toward vulnerability and shows that the (often unexamined) assumptions underlying these stances are profoundly consequential for both policy and practice. Specifically, it takes both nuclear weapons and the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) as particular forms of response to perceived vulnerability, and scrutinizes the practices associated with each in light of the forms of rationality arising from maternal practice. It also explores the assumptions underlying the concept of “vulnerable groups” commonly employed in international policy institutions, teasing out their implications for politics, policy, and action.

From the outset, I need to make clear that my intention is to use Ruddick’s delineation of the form of reason arising from maternal practice as a heuristic device; that is, I want to take the ways in which vulnerability is conceived and responded to in maternal thinking and to use these as a way to make visible and “make strange” the ways in which vulnerability is conceived and responded to in forms of reason which derive from and govern other social practices. Political discourses of national and international security institutions employ and produce assumptions about vulnerability—and about appropriate responses to vulnerability—which are taken as self-evident givens; Ruddick’s work can help us both to notice those assumptions and to denaturalize them. Furthermore, it provides a valuable resource for reimagining transformed and transformative security practices.

## Clearing the path

Ruddick’s work on maternal thinking has often been used, misused, and mischaracterized in literature on women, war, and peace—so much so that a few preliminary clarifications about the nature of her intellectual project are in order. Most critically (at least for the purposes of this article), Ruddick’s goal was not to describe *people* (mothers) but rather a *mode of thought*. That is, it was not to make claims about what mothers (whom she believed could be female or male) are like, or how they behave, or what their political stances are (i.e. whether they are more peaceful than non-mothers). Rather, her intention was to describe a form of thinking, of reasoning, that derived from maternal practice. She then claimed that this form of thought (and those who employ it) *could* become, but are not inherently, a resource for a politics of peace.

Ruddick was trained as a philosopher, and her claim, which was astonishingly radical (in philosophical circles, as well as others), was that mothers think. More specifically, she argued that they develop a distinctive form of thought which arises from maternal practice, and that that form of thought was worthy of philosophical attention and investigation. She was influenced by the work of philosophers who articulated a “practicalist” conception of “truth,”<sup>1</sup> which argues that there is no single transcendental truth, and no single or superior form of rationality, but rather “that distinctive ways of knowing and criteria of truth arise out of practices” (Ruddick, 1989: 13):

From the practicalist view, thinking arises from and is tested against practices. Practices are collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims. The aims or goals that define a practice are so central or “constitutive” that in the absence of the goal you would not have that practice ... The goals that constitute a practice determine what counts as reasonable within it. (Ruddick, 1989: 13–14)

For Ruddick, to be committed to the practice of mothering was to take on the responsibility of caring for one or more children. The constitutive demands of that practice, imposed by both the child himself or herself and the social world within which the mother works, are for preservation, growth, and social acceptability: “to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training” (Ruddick, 1989: 17). And it is these constitutive demands that “shape, and are in turn shaped by, the metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities, and identification of virtues that make up maternal thinking” (Ruddick, 1989: 11).

So Ruddick’s project was a philosophical and political one, in which she understood mothering as a practice—shaped both by one’s social group and by the inherent demands of caring for a being that is initially helpless and longer dependent—and endeavored to describe the forms of thought and reason engendered by that practice; she also then explored the conditions under which maternal thinking could become a force for peace. I stress that it was a philosophical and political project, rather than an anthropological or sociological one. Subsequent scholarly contestation about whether all mothers “think maternally” in the same way in all societies<sup>2</sup>—across time, place, culture, race, and class—has raised some interesting issues, but it is also, in a sense, irrelevant to both Ruddick’s project and my own in this article. What is critical here is that all practices, including mothering, give rise to distinctive ways of knowing, forms of reason, and criteria for truth which are tested against the goals of that practice. And that Ruddick’s description of the thinking arising from what she identifies as maternal practice can serve as a useful heuristic when we examine the forms of thinking found in other social practices.

Ruddick writes that maternal practice gives rise to ways of thinking not only about children but also about the world: “Throughout, my aim is to articulate distinct ways of thinking about the world—for example about control, vulnerability, “nature,” storytelling, and attentive love” (Ruddick, 1989: 12). For Ruddick, these ways of thinking offered important resources for developing peace politics. In this article, rather than addressing what this form of thought can bring to peace politics, I begin to explore what this form of thought, and in particular, its distinctive forms of reasoning about vulnerability and control, might bring to our thinking about security—national, international, and human.

## **Origins and caveats**

This article is part of a larger project which explores the nature of security discourses in the United States and in international organizations, and in which, from the outset, the concept of vulnerability has figured prominently. Here, I use “security” and “security discourses” broadly, to refer to a constellation of discourses which have different forms

of security as their referent, including nuclear strategic theory, US national security discourses, and security discourses employed in international organizations such as the United Nations and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In this article, although space limitations preclude a more thorough-going examination of the multiple ways in which Ruddick's work on maternal thinking can illuminate security discourses, I will at least sketch some of the dimensions of this part of the project.

That Ruddick's voice, and her articulation of maternal thinking's distinctive attitudes toward vulnerability, has been a counterpoint to my engagement with security discourses stems in part from an accident of personal history. As close friends and colleagues who taught at the same small college, we spent many evenings talking together about our work. As it happens, at the same time that she was in the midst of developing her ideas about the thinking that arises from maternal practice, I was encountering a community of nuclear strategic thinkers (or "defense intellectuals") and trying to describe the technostrategic discourse they employed when thinking about nuclear weapons (Cohn, 1987, 1989, 1993). The contrast was stark; in our talks, it was strikingly apparent that the metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities, and identification of virtues characteristic of maternal thinking were *so far* removed those which characteristic of, and valued in, the thinking of nuclear strategists. And, since I found technostrategic discourse was deeply problematic on multiple grounds, I would repeatedly find myself thinking, "if only we brought maternal thinking to bear on nuclear weapons practices, and ultimately on national security practices more broadly, those practices would be so much more rational!"

Of course, that is a problematic formulation, and I do not believe that maternal thinking could actually be lifted out of maternal practice and dropped into the relations between states. First, it simply makes no sense from a practicalist perspective: how can you take a form of thought arising from one practice, in relation to one set of constitutive aims and demands, and say, "let's see if that kind of thought might work, might count as rational, in a different practice with a different set of aims and demands"? That mothering and nuclear strategy are practices with wildly differing aims only heightens the point.

But a practicalist approach then does provoke a series of questions. What *are* the aims of nuclear strategic practice and of national security practice more broadly? And if my analysis of nuclear and national security practice led me to conclude that what counts as rational within these practices is, in essence, *irrational*—that it does *not* actually serve the stated aims of the practice (e.g. to ensure the freedom/safety/security of the state's citizens)—then the question is, why not?

Perhaps the stated aims of the practice are not the actual aims? This is a point I have argued in relation to nuclear strategic discourse—that rather than ensuring people's safety, its aim is to make a weapon which is seen as not useable militarily politically useable instead—that is, to make it a source of political power (Cohn, 1987, 1989). The disjuncture between stated and apparent aims of security practice has also motivated the development of the concept of "human security" as an alternative to national security; as many feminist and critical security scholars have pointed out, while the stated aim of national security practice may be ensuring the security of the citizen from external threat via ensuring the security of the state, state or regime security do not necessarily redound to the security of individual, and, indeed, in many cases run counter to it.

Or perhaps the “aims gap” is not the—or the only—problem? Perhaps distortions of rationality, or of what counts as reasonable, have their source in cognitive maneuvers that serve emotional purposes, or in cognitive distortions arising from unexamined gendered assumptions? As an example of the former, I have elsewhere argued that nuclear strategic discourse’s characteristic abstraction and euphemism, and its positioning of the speaker as a user rather than a victim of nuclear weapons, serve the emotionally protective function of separating the speaker from apprehending the human suffering that would be caused by the weapons’ use; but that that same protective distance also badly impedes nuclear defense intellectuals’ ability to think about nuclear weapons in a truly realistic (as opposed to “realist”) way (Cohn, 1987). Regarding the cognitive distortions produced by implicit and unexamined gendered assumptions, I have elsewhere argued that national security discourses misapprehend states as men; that is, they transform complex assemblages of people, institutions, and social, political, and economic processes into unitary masculine actors, and then on that basis form expectations about how states will behave (Cohn, 1993)—expectations which, as many commentators have noted since the end of the Cold War, have repeatedly been proven wrong.

These questions are but a few that could be raised when examining security discourses through the lens of practicalism. For now, suffice it to say that a practicalist approach should give one pause before assuming one could transpose a form of rationality developed in one practice over to a very different sort of practice. But it should also suggest the need to reexamine the aims of states’ security practices, and the ways in which their concomitant constitutive demands are understood and responded to. And, I would add, to the extent that state security practices have been predictably destructive to self and others, we bear ethical and political obligations to rethink both the aims and modes of reasoning that characterize those practices.

Beyond the questions provoked by a practicalist approach, there are two additional caveats, two reasons why transposition of maternal thinking to security thinking should give us pause, and why it is that using maternal thinking as a heuristic is what I propose instead. The first is that if, as just argued, states are not men, neither are they mothers and children, and the assumption that forms of thinking that arise out of intimate human relationships, be they competitive or caring, can be transferred wholesale to relationships between states is highly problematic. An additional caution concerns the need to be alert to the complexities of unequal power relations. Maternal thinking arises in a context of an unavoidable, initially biologically based, power imbalance in mother–child relationships, conjoint with clear limits to mothers’ power in the wider world. What are the implications of taking a form of thought developed in a practice based in inequality (although also, most often, in love and responsibility), and using it to think about relations between states? This is an especially acute question for thinking about national security when located in the United States, or in any state with colonial or imperial ambitions, where security practice has often been premised upon the desirability of unequal power relations, and presumptions of the “right” and even “need” to dominate, based on moral or material superiority. That imperial relations have often been justified through a discourse of paternalism or “paternalistic caring” (Narayan, 1995: 135) might further alert us to the potential dangers of “maternalism” as justification for unequal relations between states, even though the connotations of the two are different. So simple

substitution cannot be the goal; nonetheless, the comparison between the ways that inequality is addressed in security discourse and maternal thinking can potentially be productive, as explored below.

In sum, I do not believe that one can or should simply take a form of thinking and attempt to transfer it wholesale from one set of practices to another. However, I argue that it is valuable to take maternal thinking as an articulation of a distinctive form of reason which can help us denaturalize, defamiliarize or “make strange,” and destabilize dominant forms of security thinking—including the conventions of what counts as rational within them, as well as their assumptions about how the world works, the kinds of action it requires, and the kinds of responses that are most effective. Furthermore, once that denaturalization occurs, maternal thinking can be helpful as an aid to imagining alternative ways of thinking about and responding to security issues.

### **Vulnerability: Denials and displacements**

Ruddick writes that three demands—for preservation, growth, and social acceptability—constitute maternal work: “to be a mother is to be committing to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training” (Ruddick, 1989: 17). Of these three demands, the one that most obviously is an equally central demand of state security practice would be *preservation*, classically in the form of preservation of the (one’s own) state. (It would be very interesting and potentially fruitful, though, to imagine what it might mean to security practice if preservation and growth of “Other” states, and social acceptability of one’s own state, were included among the central demands of security work.)

The demand for preservation stems from the fact of vulnerability, and indeed, vulnerability is implicitly one of the concepts at the core of both maternal thinking and security thinking, although how and where it does or does not make its appearance, and what counts as a “rational” response to it, is strikingly differently in each. A foundational contrast is found in the object of preservation, that is, in *who or what* is seen as vulnerable and in need of preservation. Clearly, in maternal thinking, it is the human child. In contrast, in the technostrategic discourse of nuclear strategists, human vulnerability is entirely absent, literally unspeakable; when the word “vulnerable” appears, it is in discussion of the “vulnerability” of both weapon systems themselves and the technological communication systems which are central to the “command and control” of those weapons (Cohn, 1987). In broader US national security discourse, the vulnerability of humans is also effaced, and it is the vulnerability of the state to penetration of its physical boundaries that is of concern, as well as the vulnerability of its stability and its “interests.” (“Interests” can be understood as an extremely plastic concept that has allowed US security practice to extend far beyond the state’s own borders and into the territory or political affairs of many other state whose activities have been labeled as threatening to what the state has broadly defined as its “interests.”)

Two things are striking in this contrast between who or what is seen as vulnerable in maternal thinking, on the one hand, and in these security discourses, on the other. The first is that while maternal practice and thought is centered on and responsive to the vulnerability of the mother’s Other—the child—in national security discourses the

vulnerability of the state's Other—other states—goes either unimagined or imagined only as weaknesses to be exploited; certainly, it is rarely if ever imagined as requiring or evoking a preservative response (the very limited exception might be among states deemed as close allies, extensions of the Self).

The second, perhaps even more fundamental, issue which emerges in this contrast is the *invisibility of human vulnerability* in nuclear and national security discourses, and its displacement onto weapons and states. So in nuclear technostrategic discourse, for example, when human death must be referred to, it is euphemized and abstracted into “collateral damage,” and this construction “makes sense” because human suffering *is* in this discourse collateral to the only vulnerability which matters—that of the discourse's subject, which is weapons (Cohn, 1987). Similarly, in US discourses on conventional warfare, the death and injury of civilians is also referred to as “collateral damage.” So while *human* vulnerability is at the center of maternal thinking, it is beyond the margins of national security discourses, the reality of its inexorability unaddressed, while anxieties about vulnerability are displaced elsewhere.

Although this article's focus is the way vulnerability is treated in security discourses, it is worth briefly noting that human vulnerability's absence, denial, and displacement have characterized much of Western social and political theory, as well as the institutions and policy frameworks to which they have given rise. It is only in recent years that this lacuna is starting to be named and explored, and that vulnerability has started to be more attentively theorized. Martha Fineman (2008, 2010), for example, argues that the rational, autonomous, instrumentalist subject posited by political and legal theorizing in the liberal tradition fundamentally denies the vulnerable and interdependent nature of human beings, and that “the vulnerable subject,” rather than the “liberal subject,” should be at the heart of our theoretical and political projects. Her interest is in moving beyond discrimination-based models to more substantive equality, and she argues that the understanding that vulnerability is “universal and constant, inherent in the human condition” can and should become the basis for “a more responsive state and egalitarian society” (Fineman, 2008: 8). Moving from the state to interstate relations, Beattie and Schick (2013) bring the idea of the vulnerable subject to a rethinking of international relations (IR) theory; their starting point is that IR's rationalism denies vulnerability as anything other than a problem to be solved. Judith Butler (2004, 2009) finds in universal human vulnerability not a problem rather a potential basis for community and a nonviolent ethics; a central concern is the way in which some people are made more vulnerable than others and their lives less grievable. Erinn Gilson (2011), too, sees vulnerability as “not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us” as “a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn” (p. 310). The emphasis on the relational aspect of vulnerability found in Butler's and Gilson's work is also found in Peadar Kirby's (2006a, 2006b) work on the value of the concept of vulnerability in theorizing globalization's social impact. Kirby (2006a) argues that the inherent relationality in the concept of vulnerability makes it a “surer concept” than human security, as human security lends itself to the methodological individualism, militarism, and commodification characteristic of the concept of state security, from which it is derived (p. 646). These and other authors who have been engaged in the retheorization of vulnerability take the universal, inexorable vulnerability of humans,

rescue it from its denial and displacement in rationalist liberal social and political theory, and make it a cornerstone of their theorizing, instead.<sup>3</sup>

There has been, in the last few decades, another, more common, albeit more partial, form in which vulnerability has appeared in theory and policy, and that is in the concept of “vulnerable groups” or “vulnerable populations.”<sup>4</sup> Vulnerable groups is a concept used in discourses ranging from human rights to humanitarian assistance, development assistance, bioethics, research ethics, ethics of care, public and global health policy, and environmental policy. In contrast to the centering of vulnerability as a universal defining feature of human life in the work of the theorists above, “vulnerable groups” discourses focus on defining which human subgroups are especially vulnerable, at risk and in need of protection. The literature variously locates the sources of a group’s vulnerability in multiple factors, including physiological frailty or dependency; limited capacity or freedom (Macklin, 2012); the violation of human rights (Reichert, 2006; Turner, 2006); the ways that people are positioned in economic, political, and social structures and processes (Aoláin, 2011; Ben-Ishai, 2012; Luna, 2009; Rogers et al., 212); warfare (Turner, 2006); globalization and neoliberalism (Kirby, 2006); the physical and social conditions that facilitate the spread of disease (Bluhm, 2012; Edström, 2007; Onuoha et al., 2009); the ways that people’s geographic location and livelihoods have made them susceptible to humanly—and/or naturally produced environmental change or disaster (Alaimo, 2012; Kirby, 2006) or environmental conflict (Perry et al., 2010); and the myriad factors that lead to human displacement and statelessness (Butler, 2004; Hanafi, 2009).

Logically, there should be no intrinsic incompatibility between a universal human vulnerability approach and a focus on vulnerable populations—that is, between understanding *all* humans as vulnerable, and then exploring the specific factors that make some more so than others (e.g. at particular moments in a life cycle or within specific political and economic relationships). Indeed, most universal human vulnerability approaches tend not only to acknowledge but also to give serious attention to the latter. Yet, in both theory and practice, the concept of “vulnerable groups” has in many ways been at odds with an approach which apprehends vulnerability as a defining aspect of the human condition; instead, it tends to treat vulnerability as the property of some groups, not all (more on this below). Human vulnerability is then, in a sense, displaced onto a subset of humans.

I believe that the reasons for the various denials and displacements of vulnerability referenced above (as well as later in this article) are multiple and complex, and require a thoroughly multidisciplinary treatment that is far beyond the scope of this piece. For the moment, however, I want to briefly address what I think is one important piece of the puzzle—the ways in which vulnerability is intensely gendered at a symbolic level. It seems noteworthy, and not coincidental, that the majority of theorists who have focused on the implications of human vulnerability have been women, and many of them feminists. Prevailing Western gendered meaning systems associate vulnerability with femininity, weakness, dependency, passivity, lack of control, emotionality, and victimhood; at the same time, they associate invulnerability with masculinity, power, autonomy, agency, control, cool rationality, and stoicism. As I have argued elsewhere, this means that in national security discourses, there is an extremely high premium on avoiding thinking about human fallibility, vulnerability, and suffering. To admit those things not only

threatens the constructions of rationalist hegemonic masculinity that are built into the entire intellectual project; they also tend to threaten the legitimacy and identity of the speaker who brings them up, because in speaking about them, one assumes the “feminine” (and thus devalued) position in the discourse (Cohn 1987, 1993). Although my own empirical research has been only in national and international security communities, my experience in those locations suggests that vulnerability’s symbolic gender coding as feminine would make it hard to put the inevitability of universal human vulnerability at the center of other masculinist projects of theory or policy as well.

Whatever the range of motivations and mechanisms that underlie the denial and displacement of vulnerability, I think the phenomenon itself should be of grave concern. When theorists and policymakers are not grounded in an apprehension of their own bodily contingency and frailty, and their own physical and social dependence, a host of consequences follow. When it is only the “Other” who is vulnerable, it is much easier to cut or destroy social safety nets, to support violently repressive rulers in the name of “stability” or of protecting one’s own interests, to start and prolong wars, or to put profit over the health of the planet’s ecosystems. At the very least, this suggests that we should be wary of any security discourses which invisibilize the universality of human vulnerability, and try to imagine security practices which center it, instead. Hence, we return to Ruddick.

## Vulnerability: Contrasting conceptions

Ruddick’s work on maternal thinking offers us more than a prompt to focus on the question of “whose vulnerability?” is acknowledged in a security discourse and whose is denied, displaced, and effaced. Attention to the metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities and habits, and identification of virtues that are part of maternal thinking about vulnerability, when contrasted with those that are part of security thinking, help to make the strangeness and dysfunction of security thinking more evident and to make alternatives to its logic more imaginable. In other words, even putting aside the question of whose vulnerability is acknowledged in a security discourse, I would argue that in, for example, the most state-centric conception of national security, the conventional assumptions about and logics of how to best respond to the demand for preservation of the state can be thrown into relief, and rethought, by attending to the ways of thinking that Ruddick described as arising out of maternal practice. So in this section, I will consider some of the metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities/habits, and identification of virtues that Ruddick wrote about as characterizing preservative love, and have a look at what they make especially strange about national security thinking.

“To give birth is to create a life that cannot be kept safe, whose unfolding cannot be controlled and whose eventual death is certain” (Ruddick, 1989: 72). Clearly, Ruddick is talking about a human life here, which, as we have already established, is not the principal referent of either nuclear or national security discourse. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to use this sentence as a heuristic for thinking about the state, and the moment that we do, the contrast with US national security thinking could not be more apparent. In maternal thinking, we find the acknowledgement of the *impossibility* of creating perfect safety or invulnerability, the *impossibility* of control, and the inevitability of decline. US national

security policy, in contrast, seems to be based in denial of each of these, as vast human, financial, and natural resources are spent in the effort to make the US militarily invulnerable, to control the United States' own fate via controlling the actions and regimes of other states, and to maintain the belief that "We're Number One" and that we can and must continue to be so far into the future. In a sense, US national security policy might best be metaphorized by President Ronald Reagan's "Strategic Defense Initiative" (SDI), also popularly known as "Star Wars"—the vision of erecting an impermeable shield around the United States to protect it from a possible attack by strategic nuclear missiles; that is, to try make the United States invulnerable at all costs, even though most scientists agreed it was technologically impossible, and the financial cost would have been extraordinary (Cohn, 1989). But while SDI may work as a metaphor of the quest for invulnerability and the denial of its impossibility, there is at least one way in which the metaphor falls short. Reagan's protective dome was to cover only the territory within US borders; in contrast, US national security policy has characteristically sought invulnerability, control, and supremacy by taking military action far outside its own borders. In the so-called GWOT, for example, the United States uses drone strikes in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen to kill individuals whose actions are seen to make the United States vulnerable.

What maternal thinking can open to us, then, is the question: what kind of national security policy would be recognized as rational if we acknowledged that *vulnerability is inevitable*, that control has limits, and that ultimately decline is unavoidable? What alternative policies would be crafted? How would we think about security, and about preservation of the state, as well as of human beings and the planet? What kinds of military, foreign, and economic policies might appear most rational, if we acknowledged those realities?

Exploration of these questions has typically been foreclosed in security policy circles by the symbolic association of vulnerability with the "feminine"; that which is associated with the feminine, or inadequate masculinity, is not only devalued in national security discourse, it is also excluded from deliberation as inherently inadequate (Cohn, 1993). However, admitting irreducible vulnerability does not, despite policymakers' apparent fears, equate with giving up, passivity, or powerlessness. Ruddick describes one response to vulnerability as the development of a "mental habit or cognitive style" that she calls "scrutinizing": "mothers are on the lookout for dangers before they appear" (Ruddick, 1989: 71–72). At first, this cognitive habit might sound just like US security thinking, but in maternal thinking, this habit is tempered in several ways. First, in Ruddick's account, both scrutinizing and protective love involve a kind of double focus—furtive glances at potential dangers even while one goes about normal events, and simultaneous awareness of the near and the eternal (Ruddick, 1989: 78). In contrast, the capacity for a split focus, for a complex rather than singular attention that can take in both short- and long-term dangers and values sounds like something that is too often missing in US security practice. "Furtive glances at potential dangers even while one goes about normal events" describes a state of being aware of *potential* dangers, but not letting them dominate your decision making, not letting fear of them reorient your priorities, not giving up or diverting resources from the sustaining activities and projects of daily life, all of which is arguably *not* a description of the balance between US attention to and investments in

countering potential military threats, and its attention to and investments in the projects and practices that sustain daily life and long-term societal growth, from health care and education to public utilities and transportation infrastructure. Similarly, a split focus that attends to both short- and long-term dangers at times seems notably absent from US security policy; an example can be seen during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, when the United States decided to encourage Islamic groups from around the world to come to Afghanistan and to provide billions in Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funding for building those groups up, despite warnings from Afghan experts that this would have disastrous longer term consequences (Hartman, 2002).

Ruddick also warns that scrutinizing is a watchful gaze that can become “obsessive or intrusive”; however, at its best, it is tempered by a kind of *metaphysical humility* about what one can actually control (Ruddick, 1989: 72). Writing just a few weeks after the leaked revelations about the US National Security Agency’s “PRISM” program of covert electronic surveillance and mass data collection, focusing on the danger of “scrutinizing” within national security practice becoming “obsessive or intrusive” would seem gratuitous. And, in fact, I think it is the “metaphysical humility” that is of deeper interest here. Ruddick does not see this metaphysical humility as either automatic or unique to mothers or mothering practices; instead, it is an attitude that the drive toward preservation will have to cultivate if it is done with some reflective awareness. “Thus this wise attitude about the limits of control is not innate to the practice, but emerging from a thoughtful engagement in the practice” (Ruddick, 1989).

Untempered scrutinizing, being on the lookout for dangers before they appear without the benefit of metaphysical humility, is many ways a perfect description of a cornerstone of US national security practices of assessment and planning, known as “worst-case thinking.” A prominent part of Cold War thinking, and still exemplified today in new doctrines such as AirSea Battle, the strategist imagines the very worst thing that could possibly happen and then plans backward from there, assuming that the only way to prevent it is the development and deployment of weapons (Wass de Czege, 2012); through worst-case planning, gargantuan investments of energy, research capacity, and money in weapons technologies come to appear rational or justifiable, even though they most likely will never be needed or used. Critically, in worst-case thinking, the question of how likely it is that a particular hypothetical threat will materialize is ruled out of bounds; if in a strategist’s wildest imagination a threat can be conjured as *possible*, how *probable* it is is considered irrelevant. Similarly, although there might be means other than military ones to forestall the hypothetical threat, such as diplomacy, alliance building, or disarmament (and these could affect probability), worst-case thinking abjures these considerations.

For all that worst-case thinking is justified in the name of “realism,” when viewed through the lens of maternal thinking, the scrutinizing of worst-case thinking can be seen to be obsessive, as well as lacking a realistic metaphysical humility about the limits of control—and the moderation which would follow from that humility. In Ruddick’s account, “although protecting work is never finished, there are no perfectly protected children and ... the best control provides for the limits of that control” (Ruddick, 1989: 73). According to Ruddick, maternal thinking develops distinctive ways of thinking about control; the task of preserving a growing, changing, and self-directing being within

a tumultuous, complex, and dangerous environment engenders *distinctive attitudes about the recalcitrance of the given*, and the “recalcitrant givens” include both complex human beings and complex and dangerous environments. In other words, although a mother recognizes the dangers that threaten her or his<sup>5</sup> child, and might wish to perfectly protect the child from hunger, disease, accident, failure, self-harm, violence or heartbreak, she or he knows that this perfect protection is not possible. Instead, a reflective maternal practice will include acts of preservative love, nurturance, and training designed to equip the child with resources for avoiding dangers when possible and for otherwise dealing with the consequences of dangers that neither mother nor child will be able to perfectly control.

Metaphysical humility about the limits of control and the recalcitrance of the given, then, can lead to more rational thinking about responses to threats. The mother in the United States who recognizes her or his daughter’s vulnerability to sexual violence might decide to send her daughter to self-defense classes but will recognize that attempting to identify all the men who might ever assault her and to target them with drones would not only be illegal and immoral, but also not the use of resources most conducive to family health and happiness. Taking maternal thinking as heuristic, we would need to ask whether worst-case thinking, untempered by metaphysical humility, is any better for the state than it is for the family. And if unbridled worst-case thinking were renounced as a basis for national security strategy, how might policymakers within the state (including but not restricted to the military branch) think in new ways about both avoiding dangers and dealing with their consequences?

Critically, maternal thinking about control not only sees its limits but also, and perhaps even more importantly for thinking about state security, incorporates an awareness of the damages (to self and other) created by the attempt to control that which cannot be controlled or to make invulnerable that which simply can never be made perfectly safe. The project of seeking perfect invulnerability is, in and of itself, damaging in both predictable and unpredictable ways to the person or state one is trying to make invulnerable. (For the moment, we will put aside the damage it does to *other* people or states, as avoiding damage to others is simply not a constitutive aim of national security thinking.) This is easily seen in maternal practice. In the example above, we see (grotesque) moral injury to the child and her family, as well as the cost in attention and resources that could otherwise be devoted to the multiple kinds of relationships and activities that enrich family life, promote the growth and acceptability of the child, or make the world a better place for her to live in. Or, in another example, while a mother might wish to protect a child from not only sexual violence but also multiple other potential threats (e.g. being hit by a car when crossing the street, being abducted on her way to school or from her bedroom, being badly injured while playing a sport or in a drive-by shooting, being attacked because of her race or sexuality, being in a car accident caused by a drunk, texting or drowsy driver),<sup>6</sup> even the most minimally reflective maternal thinker understands that attempting to put the child in the most perfectly controlled and safe environment is not the answer. While locking one’s child away in a room with armed guards outside the door (a domestic version of SDI?) might at first appear to protect the child, the intrinsic psychological and social harms of doing so mean that it would fail to meet maternal practice’s wider aim of “preservation,” not to mention the other two aims of growth and

social acceptability. Indeed, one cannot even assume that this locked room would meet the aim of physical preservation. Worst-case thinkers might immediately point out the threats of fire, earthquake, bombing, indoor air pollution, and so on; similarly, SDI, even if it were technologically feasible, might protect the United States from strategic nuclear missiles, but not from nuclear explosives brought in by container ship or suitcase, nor from chemical weapons in the subway or biological weapons in the water supply. But my point for the moment is not the *impossibility* of invulnerability but rather the inevitable *harms* of the futile effort to secure it.

Using maternal thinking to think about national security practice, what then becomes starkly visible is that awareness of the potential harms of attempting to control and make invulnerable appears to be utterly absent from national security thinking, or dismissed as irrelevant, or relegated to only the most peripheral consideration. This can be seen over and over again in nuclear strategic thinking. Repeatedly decisions have been made to develop new nuclear weapons systems “for our own defense,” despite the fact that from a purely military perspective, they are strictly offensive, not defensive, weapons. The only way nuclear weapons can be claimed to serve purposes of defense is if one decides to believe in deterrence theory, which posits that what defends one from attack is the opponent’s awareness that even after you have been attacked, you will still be able to strike back. While long histories of warfare and human irrationality, and more recent histories of suicide bombing, might make one less than sanguine about deterrence theory, let us for the moment accept it. Even so, the harms should be evident. The development of more advanced offensive nuclear weapons systems in the United States have predictably made opponents feel more vulnerable, and thus prompted their development of more advanced offensive weapons systems, in turn making the United States more vulnerable, and so on, back and forth (this is the dynamic behind “arms racing”). And the US development of weapons technologies, including but not limited to weapons of mass destruction, inevitably loose into the world technologies, knowledge, and (fissile or chemical or biological) materials which are then picked up by other potentially harmful actors. But the harms of these and other efforts to make the United States (militarily) stronger, less vulnerable—be they military, environmental, social, financial, or moral—go uncounted in dominant national security thinking.

The United States’ GWOT provides another example of where attention to the damages (to self and other) created by the attempt to control that which cannot be controlled, or to make invulnerable that which can never be made perfectly safe, would arguably provide a needed corrective. United States attempts to contain potential terrorists (e.g. in Guantanamo or various “black sites” around the world), or to wipe them out (e.g. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan; drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen; and US military support for repressive regimes who have rebranded their opponents as “terrorists”), at the very least harm the United States’ own *growth* and *social acceptability*. But even when examined from the perspective of *preservation*, the aim the GWOT ostensibly serves, one would need to ask whether the antipathy and anger the GWOT engenders produces such a large number of future terrorists and such a decline in US “soft power” that it might actually damage rather than serve the aim of preservation.<sup>7</sup> The financial costs of the GWOT, as the same time as the decline in the United States’ economy and global comparative economic advantage, would lead to the same question. And the GWOT’s steady

erosion of US citizens' civil liberties also calls out for a more layered, and political, understanding of preservation. Ultimately, then, maternal thinking can valuably focus our attention on the ways in which the quest for invulnerability can actually create greater vulnerability instead.

Another important facet of maternal thinking's approach to thinking about control is found in Ruddick's contrast of control with domination:

Mothers are also tempted to give up the patient work of control and resort to domination ... Nuclear thinking gives an illusion of control ... for mothers, too, the dream of perfect control is dangerously seductive but in identifying humility as a virtue they relinquish the fantasy of dominating the world. (Ruddick, 1989: 73, 150)

A focus on that contrast seems important, especially since it is exactly "the recalibration of the given" and the fear of not being able to control it that often leads to the temptation to dominate. A careful, imaginative, sustained thinking-through of what it means to exercise control that is not dominating and does not aspire to completeness, and which thus serves rather than undermines the aims of preservation, growth, and social acceptability, could be a productive project. It could be particularly so if it incorporated doubled vision—not only of the shorter and longer term but also of the self and other; that is, if the aims of preservation, growth, and social acceptability were considered to apply not only to one's own state, but to peoples and states beyond one's borders.

One aid in this thought exercise would be to abjure the abstraction that is a central cognitive habit of both nuclear thinking and national security thinking more generally (Cohn 1987, 1993; Cohn and Ruddick, 2004). Ruddick contrasts the abstraction of nuclear thinking with the "open-ended concrete reflection on intricate and unpredictable spirits" (Ruddick, 1989: 150) that arises from maternal thinking. When technostrategic discourse excludes humans as a referent altogether; when worst-case thinking renounces the value of asking what is probable, and thus abnegates the need to understand the Other; when national security strategists assume that an opposing state's reactions will be the same as those of some hypothesized unitary masculine actor; when security theorists assume that how states will act depends on the system they are in, rather than the systems, processes, and subjectivities within them—all of these forewarn the importance of open-ended concrete reflection on intricate and unpredictable actors. In the process, they foreclose not only empathetic understanding but also, I would argue, the possibility of imagining a far broader and more effective array of responses and solutions to the existential and political fact of vulnerability.

One final area of contrast between the way vulnerability is conceived in maternal thinking and national security thinking concerns ideas about the best ways to mitigate vulnerability, and the key assumptions they are based on. In US national security thinking, the means through which invulnerability is to be achieved is first and foremost armed autonomy, both defensive and aggressive, "as needed." (Although, of course, the United States also participates in military alliances, US military force posture and budgets reflect the goal of being entirely able to autonomously take care of one's own military security needs.) While the importance of being independently able to "take on all comers" might seem like a self-evident truism to US military planners, politicians, and citizens alike, maternal thinking's approach to the mitigation of vulnerability points us to

thinking about relationality. As such, it might first call us to seeing and assessing the ramifications of the (invisibilized) relationships upon which that vaunted US “autonomy” rests, such as dependence on autocratic Persian Gulf states for oil or on China for the rare earth elements crucial for so many US weapons systems (Coppel, 2011; Grasso, 2012). It might also lead us to think in a more purposeful, concentrated way about how to create and strengthen complex webs of relationships as a way of mitigating vulnerability, rather than simply as a regrettable cause of it. For this, it would be necessary to go beyond thinking about military and diplomatic alliances, to consciousness and cultivation of far more multidimensional forms of relation.

Thinking about relationality and vulnerability also helps point to an a priori assumption in nationality security paradigms about the kind of response that vulnerability elicits—that is, that vulnerability itself invites attack or, at the very least, invites being taken advantage of. The contrast, of course, is to the idea that vulnerability might elicit care, rather than attack. Even with the critical caution that one should never assume that states and humans behave in the same way, this contrast is worth considering. The idea that vulnerable states invite attack while vulnerable people invite care finds justification in the IR “realist” portrayal of the anarchic, every-man/state-for-himself international system, posited against the caring, altruistic domain of family life—a dichotomy which feminist political theorists have done such a wonderful and multilayered job of deconstructing.

Ruddick herself rejects that idealized framing of family life, emphasizing that for mothers a caring response to vulnerability is neither “natural” nor automatic. She states that “Children are vulnerable creatures and *as such elicit either aggression or care*” (Ruddick, 1989: 166, emphasis mine). And,

I deliberately stress first the optional character of perceiving “vulnerability” and then of responding with care ... Maternal practice begins with a double vision—seeing the fact of biological vulnerability as socially significant and as demanding care” rather than “abuse, indifference or flight.” (Ruddick, 1989: 18–19)

In those few short lines, I think Ruddick upends or at least unsettles one of the metaphysical assumptions of national security thinking regarding both the “facts” of vulnerability and the inevitability of what a “realist(ic)” response to it “must” be. If perception of and response to vulnerability are optional, if there are choices to be made about which vulnerabilities are seen as socially or politically significant and those choices are not predetermined by the Hobbesian or familial system one is in, if care is not automatic in the family or private sphere any more than advantage-taking or murderous aggression is in the public sphere or between states,<sup>8</sup> then we have much more thinking to do about *what* elicits hostile, indifferent or caring responses, and why. In other words, if we do not reify either vulnerability itself or the nature of the systemic relationship within which it is perceived, then there is room for much more fluidity and variation in the range of responses to vulnerability which could be seen as likely, rational, or useful. And, as I have been arguing throughout this article, a look at the metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities, and identification of virtues delineated in Ruddick’s account of maternal thinking can open the way to imagining responses other than those which are currently part of national security thought and practice.

## Where (some) humans are represented as vulnerable: Sitting in at the Security Council

Given the degree to which human vulnerability is simply excluded from US nuclear and national security discourse, along with the optional character of perceiving vulnerability, it seems noteworthy that human vulnerability *does* make regular appearances in the discourse of the UN Security Council (SC), a venue in which state security interests and discourses often predominate. In the SC, though, vulnerability is not attributed to all humans, only to a specific subset—that is, to what are referred to as “vulnerable groups” or “vulnerable populations.” I first became aware of this, and started puzzling over it, during several years of sitting in on the annual open debates on women, peace, and security which Council has held since the adoption of SC Resolution 1325 in 2000. In the statements from Member State ambassadors, women and girls were frequently referred to as “vulnerable groups,” and it was common to hear variants on the phrase, “women, children and other vulnerable groups” (typically the elderly, ill, and disabled). Thanks to feminist analysis, many readers will be alert to some of the problems with this formulation, including the issue of seeing women solely as vulnerable victims, and the dangers of grouping *women and children* into one entity which sees women only as mothers and which does not differentiate between women’s needs and capacities and those of children (Enloe, 1990, 1991).

But sitting and listening to the way ambassadors used the phrase, there was another aspect of it which came to seem striking, and that was the sheer “groupiness”<sup>9</sup> of it. Rather than helping us think concretely about humans and what makes them vulnerable, the construct of “vulnerable groups” communicates that there are specific categories of people in whom vulnerability inheres; by virtue of their membership in some group, some demographic category, certain people are understood as inherently vulnerable.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the construct of “vulnerable groups” or “vulnerable populations” implicitly rests on the idea that there are also groups which are *not* vulnerable. Really? Which ones, exactly? Of course, it is doubtful whether, were it put so baldly, any SC ambassador would claim that there are some groups which are simply not vulnerable. But listening to the ways in which “vulnerable groups” was spoken, I had the distinct impression that the ambassadors were never thinking of themselves when they said it, that it referred to people “out there,” an external category to which they did not imagine themselves ever belonging, even though they had once been children and would likely one day become elderly and infirm.

In other words, the “groupiness” of the formulation allows vulnerability to be seen as ontological, rather than existential; it allows vulnerability to be seen as an inherent property in the nature of the being of some categories of people (and not others), rather than as an existential fact, something that is inherently a part of the human existence of all of us. So although SC discourse is in a sense an improvement over US nuclear and national security discourses, in that it is not displacing vulnerability onto weapons and states, it still manages the denial of the vulnerability of its privileged, mostly male policymakers, via displacing human vulnerability onto so-called vulnerable groups, which are perceived as Other.<sup>11</sup> This displacement may help explain the extent to which the Council’s commitments to bringing women into its work are more focused on women as victims than as agents and remain more apparent in word than in deed. From the perspective of

Ruddick's framework, the Council has taken the option of perceiving vulnerability in some humans but not others and has been very resistant to responding with care, except at rhetorical levels in the ritualized moments of open debates on women, peace, and security.

This is at least in part because in the SC's discourse, as in other security discourses, constructions of vulnerability have policy effects. What are the effects of conceiving vulnerability as ontological rather than existential, of identifying some groups but not others as vulnerable?

First, this conception obscures the facts that: *all* of us are vulnerable, all of the time; that each of us is more vulnerable in some life stages than in others; and that the times we are physically strong, capable, and relatively less vulnerable are temporary.<sup>12</sup> This allows policymakers to *exteriorize* vulnerability, whether consciously or subconsciously ("it is not me, I will never be part of that category"). At that point, imaginative empathetic understanding becomes rare, and motivation to act often seems to stem from a less-reliable noblesse oblige or paternalism.

The lack of imaginative identification also seems to contribute to the failure to see members of "vulnerable groups" as agents. This is compounded by the ideas that ontologically vulnerable people are, in their essence, always incipiently victims, and that "victim" and "agent" are mutually exclusive categories. When the agency of people in "vulnerable groups" does not have a lively reality for policymakers, they may perceive the need to protect the vulnerable, but they are far less likely to imagine, notice, and realize the value in supporting the efforts that people in "vulnerable groups" make to change their own circumstances. Nor are they likely to imagine those people as capable partners or leaders; as Scully (2009) asks, in her analysis of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1820, "How do vulnerable women who need protection morph into the strong leaders who will help shape new terrains of liberty and security?" (p. 119). Thus, policy responses to "vulnerable groups" will more likely veer toward the protective paternalist, rather than toward partnership or power-sharing.

The gendered victim-agent dichotomy is very much like the gendered dichotomy of "vulnerable groups" and their implicitly "not-vulnerable" Other; each not only distorts the "vulnerable victim" by erasing her agency but also distorts the "not-vulnerable agent" by making his vulnerabilities invisible. It follows that what becomes literally unthinkable in SC discourse includes the gendered agency of women and girls in nonstate armed groups, who then get excluded from disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs, peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. Similarly, the specific gendered vulnerabilities of able-bodied males are largely unthinkable and unaddressed (conflict-related sexual violence against men, for example, has been slow to be acknowledged).<sup>13</sup>

A fourth issue arises because the vulnerability of ontologically "vulnerable groups" seems to be located in their biology; since "biological" is often equated with "natural" and "unchangeable," this leads to policy responses that see protection, rather than remediation or transformation, as the goal. A caveat is in order here, as many current analyses of the causes of group vulnerabilities do not rely on biology (e.g. the humanitarian and development assistance communities' locating vulnerability in structural disadvantage, or the human rights community's locating it in the violation of human rights). Additionally, we know that even for people who have physical limitations, the degree to which those

limitations become vulnerabilities is very much socially produced. Nonetheless, my sense is that in the Council, where women and children often appear beside the elderly, ill, and disabled (framed as “other vulnerable groups”), the image evoked too frequently is of physiological, rather than social weakness. Certainly, a phrase such as “the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups” would, much more than “vulnerable groups,” evoke awareness of the structural, rather than biological, bases of vulnerability,<sup>14</sup> and thus open the way for a shift from protection to policy responses which attempt to transform social, economic, and political bases of disadvantage.

I have been describing a SC discourse which displaces human vulnerability onto specific groups which are feminized (in that they are seen as weak and unable to protect themselves) and are seen to have little agency. That these groups are conceived of as always-already ontologically vulnerable creates a situation in which there is little impetus to focus on the external factors that exacerbate or produce their vulnerability: factors that are *structural*, such as lack of power, economic resources, or property rights; and factors that are *situational*, such as vulnerability caused by some country sending drones to bomb your village, or some armed group or military chasing you off your land to get access to the gold or coltan or oil underneath it.

The result again calls to mind Ruddick’s point that not only is perceiving vulnerability optional, but so is then responding with care. In the Council, it is only some (Other) groups’ vulnerabilities that are noticed. But even so, their vulnerability, seen as natural and inevitable, was not seen to require policy recognition or response until a massive civil society political mobilization was organized to put war’s effects on children, and then war’s effects on women, onto the SC’s agenda. And even then, response is minimal, militarized, and skewed toward protection, rather than transformation of the situations which exacerbate vulnerability.

Maternal thinking, as Ruddick describes it, not only contrasts with SC approaches to human vulnerability but also offers a rich reservoir of ways of thinking which can be drawn on to reimagine them. Strikingly, it does not fall prey to the dichotomies underlying Council approaches. It does not divide the humans it is concerned with into the “vulnerable”; and the implicitly “not vulnerable,” instead it starts with the recognition of the vulnerability of all. Nor does it equate vulnerability with victimhood and passivity, placing agency on the other side; indeed, the twin simultaneous recognitions of children’s the vulnerability *and* of their intricate and unpredictable agency is one of the constitutive characteristics of maternal thinking. Nor does it rest on an inside–outside dichotomy, a conception of vulnerability as being inherent and unchangeable versus as structurally or situationally constructed; instead, there is an acute awareness of the compound interactions between the two.<sup>15</sup> It is out of these doubled visions that maternal thinking develops its distinctive forms of preservative love, cognitive capacities, and metaphysical attitudes.

A brief look at maternal thinking’s aim of *preservation* might be used both to bring the Council’s approach to vulnerability into higher relief and to enhance the imagination of alternatives. Although at first “preservation” and “protection” appear to be similar aims, the connotations of the words are, I think, quite different. Protection is redolent with the gendered dichotomy of the “protector” and the “protected” (Stiehm, 1982)—the hero in the white hat rescuing the damsel in distress, the capable actor stepping in to save the hapless, passive victim. Protection need not always imply rescue per se; it can also

be the act of providing a barrier against something dangerous. Here, the apt image might be the armed heroes in blue berets protecting Sudanese women from predatory attacks when they go out to fetch water. But in either case, the image is of a strong (masculine) actor who needs to step in to protect those who are too (feminine) weak and passive to keep themselves safe. And, as Peterson (1992) reminds us, the cost of protection is obedience and subordination to the protector (p. 50).<sup>16</sup>

Preservation, it seems to me, differs from protection in several ways. It refers to keeping alive or intact over the long term, rather than solely in a specific dangerous situation. It does not have the same intensely gender-dichotomous coded inequality. And it does not reduce to one person with agency and one without. Instead, maternal thinking about preservation leads to a wide range of kinds of actions, from ones designed to strengthen the capacity and agency of the child so that the child is better able to preserve herself, to ones designed to either change or avoid dangerous or damaging environments. So while protection might mean a benevolent grown up accompanying a child at all times, preventing her from picking up poisonous plants or insects, sticking her finger in a socket, or going off with a stranger, preservation would entail teaching her about those dangers so that she could do her best to avoid them herself. It also entails scrutinizing the environment and taking action to change it when it presents too many dangers—whether that means starting a neighborhood watch program or organizing to prevent a factory from continuing to pollute a local water supply or advocating to get lighting for the latrines in a refugee camp.

So preservation as an aim suggests a much wider range of actions—or policies—than protection does. It recognizes the agency of vulnerable humans and sees that it is the support of that agency that is crucial. It also asks not just how to protect against a danger, but how to prevent it, how to transform the circumstances that create it. (Think here, for example, about the difference between a militarized protective response, such as military escorts for water-gathering, versus not only bringing a tap with clean water to a village but also training the women in the village how to maintain it.<sup>17</sup>) It strives to create an environment that is made as safe as possible, while also seeing the limits of control and the necessity of equipping human actors—all of whom are vulnerable in distinctive ways—with the internal and external resources to best cope with whatever might harm them. And it strives to create an environment which is enabling—of capacity and agency, of growth, and of the social relationships upon which preservation depends. What, then, might a human-centered security practice encompass if “Responsibility to Protect” were transformed to “Responsibility to Preserve”?

## Conclusion

This piece has been a thought-experiment. Disturbed by both the inefficacy of and the damages caused by the forms of national and international security thinking with which I am most familiar, I have tried to hold them up next to Ruddick’s articulation of maternal thinking, to see what might become visible, and what questions might be opened up. As a practicalist approach to reason helps us understand, once inside the discursive constructions, institutions, and practices of any security (or other) practice, it is exceedingly difficult to see its particular forms of thought and reason as anything other than

self-evidently rational. Ruddick's description of the characteristic set of metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities and habits, and identification of virtues that are developed through maternal practice offers a set of contrasts that makes the conventions of thought in security practice easier to see and, I think, makes it more possible to imagine alternatives to their limitations and distortions.

In an article of this length, it is only possible to scratch the surface of what might be revealed by a sustained use of maternal thinking as heuristic to make security thinking both strange and new. Here, I have largely restricted myself to considering the demand of preservation and the contrasting visions of vulnerability that underlie it, and used them to try to raise questions and open a few channels of thought toward reimagining security policies. Even so, Ruddick's writing on preservation offers many more insights than I have been able to explore here. It is also my sense that the maternal practice demands of growth and acceptability would be equally worth exploring, and that for all three, a more explicit teasing out of the alternative policy approaches they would engender could be most generative. For now though, it seems worth attending to the multiple forms of denial and displacement of ineluctable human vulnerability that are constitutive in different forms of security practice, and to try to reimagine a security practice that faced human vulnerability head on, with all the complex richness, subtlety, and metaphysical humility of Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*.

### Acknowledgements

Years of conversations with Sara Ruddick are reflected in the ideas expressed in this article; that the article would have been much better if we had written it together, as we once discussed, is a loss both for me and the reader. On an altogether different, but still important, note, I would like to thank Marguerite McHale, Amanda Leonard, and Nancy Yun Tang for their valuable research assistance.

### Notes

1. Ruddick identified the philosophers from whom she drew most closely as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Peter Winch, and, earlier, Jürgen Habermas (Ruddick, 1989: 255n1).
2. See, for example, Keller (2010), Scheper-Hughes (1996), and Rumsey (1990).
3. Other valuable contributions in this field include those of Alaimo (2012), Ben-Ishai (2012), Luna (2006), Kottow (2003), Zehfuss (2007). Of course, since the 1980s, human vulnerability has also been central to the work of feminist care ethics theorists, including Gilligan (1993), Held (2006), Held and Jagger (1995), Kittay and Feder (2003), Noddings (1984), Robinson (1999, 2011), and Tronto (1993).
4. These two terms are often used interchangeably, and I will follow that practice in this article.
5. Here my usage follows Ruddick's argument that both females and males, if they are committed to meeting the constitutive aims of maternal practice, can be mothers.
6. My examples of threats here are clearly reflective of a US context. This is not because I think all children the world over face the same threats, but because I am focusing on US national security in this article, and the parallels between the threats faced by and resources available to families and a country which occupy a place of privilege in the world seems apt—even though, of course, great ranges of privilege exist among families both within and outside US borders.

7. Bergen (2008), for example, argues that “The Iraq War has increased radicalization in the Muslim world and provided al Qaeda with more recruits than it would otherwise have had” (p. 21). Van Creveld (2004) argues that the Iraq War made the development of nuclear weapons more urgent and attractive for Iran. Within the assumptions of conventional US national security discourses, both of these effects could be seen to undermine the aim of preservation.
8. Interestingly, Butler (2004) also makes the point that vulnerability can elicit both the temptation to a violent and aggressive response, or its opposite, although she does not use the language of the “optional” nature of these responses.
9. *Pace* Stephen Colbert’s “truthiness.”
10. There is a wide and interesting literature which explores and also critiques the concept of vulnerable groups. See, for example, Carpenter (2005), Haugen (2010), Luna (2009), and Morawa (2003), and Munro and Scoular (2102).
11. Alaimo finds an interesting parallel in international discourse on climate change, which she finds, creates “a gendered ontology of female vulnerability” in binary relation to “universal (masculine) scientific knowledge” (Alaimo, 2012: 30).
12. This is an insight into a disability rights perspective which points out that we exteriorize disability as belonging to a group of people “unlike me,” rather than understanding that we are variously able and unable throughout the life cycle, and thus that ability is even for the healthiest among us a temporary state. It is also central to Fineman’s argument for why the “liberal subject” should be replaced by the “vulnerable subject” in social theory:

The vulnerable subject does what the one-dimensional liberal subject approach cannot: it embodies the fact that human reality encompasses a wide range of differing and interdependent abilities over the span of a lifetime. The vulnerability approach recognizes that individuals are anchored at each end of their lives by dependency and absence of capacity. (Fineman, 2008: 12)

13. Both of these issues have now been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. For a useful introduction to the issue of women’s and girls’ agency in nonstate armed groups, as well as their disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, see Mazurana (2013) and Mazurana and Cole (2013). For an exploration of the failure to acknowledge or address the vulnerabilities of men and boys in armed conflict, see Carpenter (2005) and Scully (2009).
14. For a discussion of the way that even something as apparently biological as women’s vulnerability to rape is actually constituted through multiple layers of social structure, see Cohn (2013: 28–30).
15. It is interesting here to consider the parallel—and related—argument that Fiona Robinson (2011) makes regarding care ethics as a basis for thinking about human security:

The relational ontology of care ethics—which emphasizes human interdependence and mutual vulnerability—overcome the dichotomies between the “needy” and the “strong,” “victims” and “agents,” “objects” and “subjects” in the construction of categories in humanitarian intervention. Combined with the revised view of “security” described earlier, this approach also destabilizes the “inside/outside” dichotomy by pushing theorists and policymakers to look at the state of care within their own societies. Finally, it breaks down the distinction between “crisis” and “normality,” putting the very idea of “humanitarian intervention” in question. (p. 101)

16. Wendy Brown (1992) makes a similar point, in somewhat different terms: “Whether one is dealing with the state, the Mafia, parents, pimps, police, or husbands, the heavy dual practice of institutionalized protection is always a measure of dependence and agreement to abide by the protector’s rules” (p. 8). See also Iris Young (2003).

17. This example comes from a conversation with Nadine Puechguirbal, Senior Gender Advisor at the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

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