The Faces of Human Vulnerability

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Abstract: The philosophic notion of human vulnerability cannot be pinpointed as such in the corpus of classic philosophy. Nevertheless, death and suffering as essential philosophical and theological problems make reference to the dimension of vulnerability inherent to the human condition. Since times immemorial, the fear of death, the avoidance of suffering, or the crisis situations of human existence have laid at the basis of philosophical and religious systems. According to Freud, in the futile pursuit of happiness humans often face misery, which stems from a suffering that threatens them from three different directions: their own body, the outside world, and the relationships with other people. Starting from this angle, the present article furthers the notion of vulnerability by identifying its archetypal themes in relation to human life and its conditions of existence. Two main concepts will guide this study of human vulnerability: a vulnerability inherent to human subjectivity, and one consubstantial to the process of human socialisation. For Levinas, vulnerability has become alike an obsession for others, a full responsibility, which leads to the following formula: it is only a vulnerable person who can love one's neighbour. In accordance with Habermas, the manner in which a human being leaves natural law and accesses social justice is here re-examined, as it stands for a vulnerability structurally determined by the forms of socio-cultural life.

Keywords: *Vulnerability; suffering; subjectivity; socialising; Freud; Levinas; Habermas.*

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1. Introduction

Since times immemorial, fear of dying, escaping suffering, the extreme situations of human existence, have been at the root of philosophical and religious systems. Starting from the analysis of human reactions while facing these extreme situations, Martha Nussbaum (1986), in *The fragility of Goodness*, states that the Greek form an ethical theory. Achilles dies from a wound by an arrow which pierces the only vulnerable part of his entire body. Seneca reminds his interlocutor that Achilles lived as if he were immortal, and that the idea of his vulnerability has never crossed his mind. Philoctetes' drama illustrates in the most tragic of ways the wounding and the exclusion of the vulnerable person from human society, as well as the suffering resulting from such a situation. Philoctetes being the victim of a snake bite which became terminally infected, he was abandoned by his Greek compatriots with no food on the deserted island of Lemnos because they could no longer bear Philoctetes' cries of pain or the sight and stench of his infected wound. Another characteristic example of the enigma of human suffering is represented by Job's drama, stricken to the core of his being by disasters and trials. Deprived of food, of his own children, misunderstood by his wife and his friends, Job considers that he is abandoned by people and God alike and protests against this physical and mental pain that he is unjustly subjected to, while also begging for an explanation. Although knowing that he is strong, Job also understood that he is vulnerable, as well.

In a text which pays homage to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the "founding father of human sciences", Claude Lévi-Strauss (2009) reminds of the fact that Rousseau strongly supported the idea of an "innate reluctance to seeing others suffer" in human beings; if society moved on from nature to culture, from emotional to rational, from animal to human, the human being remains "a living, suffering creature alike all other creatures, before distinguishing itself from these through subordinate criteria" (p. 25).

From this perspective, the notion of vulnerability is one of the beliefs of a recent current of moral and political philosophy, namely *care ethics*. Stemming, especially, from the North American feminist movement, this care ethics, based on the rejection of a universal and abstract morals, privileges the relational dimension based on the orientation towards human vulnerability. This "different voice" (Gilligan, 1982) of moral philosophy actually intends on displacing "the moral of frontiers" (Tronto, 1993) from a moral of obligation towards a moral of attention to particularity, of goodwill and solicitude in order to act towards the care given to the weak, included in

the general category of those in need of care. Vulnerability is thus placed at the center of this care morals.

This challenge of care raised to the level of the human condition becomes more general: it means recognizing dependency and vulnerability, traits of everyone's condition, and not to the one stigmatized as vulnerable. There is no corresponding ontological category, as Patricia Paperman (2005) mentions, "there is nothing exceptional about vulnerable persons" (p. 321).

There is, nevertheless, the risk of making vulnerability an abstract concept which masks the realities specific to real suffering. Hélène Thomas (2008) studied the problems and the usage of the notions of vulnerability, frailty, precariousness, resilience which became central in social sciences and life sciences. In her analysis on the import of vulnerability vocabulary in the human sciences, Hélène Thomas (2008) focuses on the identification of its usage in the medical and social fields. The hypothesis defended here is that of the appearance of a *social neo-darwinism* which follows human adaptability to the changes within the social and political institutions.

Disability, poverty, desocialization, childhood, old age, dependency, a lack of documents or of a place to live represent situations which make people frail and vulnerable. Vulnerability is, therefore, defined in terms of normativity, resulting in typologies, and regulations used in the field of law and social or health institutions.

Humanist and biomedical sciences have taken over the term of vulnerability, its synonyms (frailty, precariousness, passivity), and its antonyms (invulnerability, resistance, resilience). Indeed, for social sciences, or life sciences, the notion of vulnerability of the human subject has echoed so as to disseminate all manifestations of a deficiency, pathology, or frailty which effects temporarily or permanently the human subject.

In this article, the notion of vulnerability will be studied by identifying the representative themes of human vulnerability particular to their life and its conditions of being. Firstly, the hypothesis proposed by Freud (2010) in *Le malaise dans la culture* represents the underlying basis of this study on human vulnerability. Next, two important concepts guide the study proposed: the vulnerability inherent to human subjectivity, and the one akin the process of socialising of human beings.

Due to human suffering and its different original instances, the theme of vulnerability can be approached as a trait specific to human beings. Freud claims that in their futile search for happiness humankind is often confronted with misery stemming from the suffering which threatens the individual from three different directions: their own body, the exterior

world, and the relations to other people. These three initial causes which are able to help in studying the notion of human vulnerability are first under focus.

2. Three sources of suffering in Freud

For Freud (2010), mankind, in its pursuit of happiness, is often confronted with unhappiness, which stems from the suffering resulted from three possible sources (p. 90): the body, the outside world, and the other. First and foremost, the frailty of the human body cannot generate anything other than “pain and anxiety”, a reason for which humans have no chance of escaping, a reminder that their own body is destined to “degrade and decay”. Secondly, the overwhelming power of nature is translated by the suffering caused to humans by the unleashing of formidable, unsparing, and destructive forces of the outside world. Furthermore, Freud (2010) nominates as a third source of suffering “the relations with other people”. This suffering is due mostly to the deficiencies of the institutions which regulate the relations between people within the family, the state, and society.

The protection against the first two sources of pain, even if they seem inevitable, is part of the struggles that humanity has faced even from its very beginning against hostile forces of nature and the illnesses that affect the human body. The nature, and the organism of the body will never be fully under control: this is part of nature, and it remains a precarious form, limited in what regards its adaptation and its action. Ultimately, the first two sources are accepted as inevitable, while the human being struggles to overcome these limitations through scientific progress, and, especially, biotechnology.

When human vulnerability is analyzed, the fact that society, being more and more sensitive to utilitarian theses, paid more importance to the principle of “the minimization of suffering” than to the one of “the maximization of happiness” must be brought under discussion. John Stuart Mill (1994) has already introduced the notion of the reduction of suffering to the principle of utilitarianism, which “does not involve only the pursuit of happiness but, also, equally the prevention or diminishing of unhappiness” (p. 26).

The trust in the scientific progress, thus accompanies the objectives that our civilization sets, which will do whatever it is able in order to reduce or even attempt to eliminate the first two sources of suffering: the ones which originate in the body and the ones of the outside world. Nevertheless,

the third source, the one which originates in “social suffering” (Freud, 2010, p. 103), is all the more unbearable as it starts from within the institutions which are created in order to regulate relations to other people, and it uncovers “an unsociable sociability”, according to Kant (1990, p. 74).

Human beings need to establish as primary task the creation of a civil society whose constitution administers rights and guarantees justice between its members. In this regard, it can be argued that in Kant’s reflections on human history, Freud’s later analysis on the dispositions which regulate the relations between people (within family, state, and society) can be foreseen. Indeed, from these efforts - for the coexistence through constraint of the liberties of the members of society – “the most terrible suffering: namely that which people inflict on others” (Kant, 1990, p. 77) can appear.

Kant (1990) and Freud (2010) concur here in order to observe that although culture should protect people against threats which originate in the sources of suffering, in reality it is responsible for a great deal of this suffering. Taking into consideration the failure of human society in guarantying the happiness of its members, Freud (2010) suspects that this aspect should be imputed to “a part of the invincible nature, in this case our own psychic constitution” (p. 103). In his turn, Kant reflexively regards history, which could develop the natural dispositions of humans based on a design of nature, reason playing the part of regulator (alike a “conductor wire”) in order to bring one from their brute state to culture, based on the intrinsic value of the human (in other words, on their social value). Still, for Kant (1990) also, the determinations of nature remain in the background of the cultured human being: “all the culture ... that embellishes humankind, the most beautiful social order is the fruit of unsociability, which is forced to discipline and, therefore, to fully develop through artifice the seeds of nature” (p. 77).

It can be observed that suffering remains a prominent figure of vulnerability by representing an experience which cannot be communicated or justified: an extreme situation of human existence, suffering is a hyperbolic example of human vulnerability. Throughout this study, this duality must be confronted in the approach of vulnerability: an intrinsic vulnerability of human beings, namely of the subject in what regards their body and psyche, on the one side, and a vulnerability generated by their relationships with others, sometimes attempting to mask the first or even exacerbate through rejection or indifference on the other hand.

One of the representative themes of human vulnerability specific to human life and its conditions of existence, which will be discussed in what

follows, refers to the frailty that reflects the subject's vulnerability from the perspective of Lévinas.

3. Subjectivity and vulnerability in Lévinas

Emmanuel Lévinas (2004a) considers that the notion of vulnerability is specific to the sensibilities of the human subject. Vulnerability, characterised as the exposure of the human being to insults and offences, corresponds for Lévinas (2004a) to one of the conditions of the indifferent attention to the other. The ethical relation in which the attention to the other is primordial, attributes this responsibility "as an essential structure, fundamental to subjectivity" (Lévinas, 2004a, p. 91).

The philosophical research of Lévinas remains essential for the characterization of both the ethics of the concern for the other, as well as ethics in general, one that Lévinas (2004a) attempts to "merely find essence" for (p. 85). Derrida (1979) reminds of the fact that Lévinas does not propose moral theory with its own laws and regulations, but rather engages in defining the conditions which make possible an ethics that can be interpreted as "The ethics of ethic" (p. 164), within a quasi-transcendental model, according to Derrida.

Although in *Totalité et infini* the term of vulnerability is used more rarely than in Lévinas' previous works, the expression of suffering (Lévinas, 1998a, p. 155) is frequently appealed to in order to describe the despair of the human being to be rooted and the impossibility to leave the game of life, thus revealing all the vulnerability of "a poor, empty, starving body" (Lévinas, 1998a, p. 135). In order to accomplish the ethical relation, the face of the other is characterised in his later works as being one of the expressions of "vulnerability per se" (Lévinas, 1998b, p. 95). The desire to highlight the notion of vulnerability in *Totalité et infini*, leads to the analysis of the key notions of the ethics of the other's face. As Derrida (1979, p. 149) insists, the other is not identified through their own face, but they themselves are that face, when quoting Lévinas: "in an entirely present manner, in their own face, the Other - all metaphors aside - is confronted with myself" (Lévinas, 2006, p. 259).

Ever since *Totalité et infini*, Lévinas (1998) used the lexicon of vulnerability in order to describe the plea of a face who is asking for an ethical relationship, a plea of commitment. Gradually, the very expression of vulnerability is introduced and is the object of consistent development. In a striking statement Lévinas (2004b) remembers the importance that the notion of vulnerability takes as a theme of his meditation on ethics as first

philosophy: “only a vulnerable self can love their neighbour” (p. 145). To the imperialist ego which perseveres in his being, to this “conatus essendi” borrowed from Spinoza (1981, p. 75), Lévinas juxtaposes the responsibility for the other in an uninterested manner.

Incriminating western philosophies, which to a great extent have tried to hide human vulnerability in favour of will power autonomy and perseverance of existence, Lévinas (1987) is placed at the opposing pole. To an entirely rational individual who meditates imagining that they are capable of escaping the self in order to escape any responsibility for the other, Lévinas juxtaposes a “being for the other - responsibility or charity or peace” (Lévinas, 1987, p. 29). This obedience of the other, in a way, no longer places ethics in a normative registry, but to this invincible care for the other human, in all its bareness. This obsession for the responsibility for the other, based in the vulnerability of a subject, lays on the basis of an ethics which owes nothing to values, but which always means for Lévinas (1987) “the fact of meeting someone, the relation between the self and the other: the schism of the being in a meeting! transcendence and proximity” (p. 28).

Because for Lévinas (1998a) ethics is the questioning of one’s spontaneity in the presence of the other (p. 33), it results that in their own face, the other contests “one’s power of power” and not “the weakness of one’s powers” (p. 215). The expression of the other’s vulnerability appears on their face “in their own bareness, deprived of means, deprived of anything to protect it” (Lévinas, 1986, p. 118). With Lévinas (2004b), vulnerability becomes similar to an obsession for the other, a complete responsibility which leads to such a formula: “only a vulnerable self can love their neighbour” (p. 145).

With the price of a certain instinctual denial, by conciliating collective aspirations and constraints, human beings reach a certain form of culture (Freud, 2010, pp. 114-115). To accept living in society means to accept constraining one’s aspiration to dominate the other. In order to reduce the state of borderless freedom, which would condemn people to self-destruction, outside laws were imposed: “the replacement of an individual’s power with that of a community constitutes the decisive cultural step” (Freud, 2010, p. 114). Here, Freud agrees with Kant (1990), who considers the constraint to live in society as “the most horrible suffering”. Self-esteem determines people to compare their own condition with that of the other members of society: “we consider ourselves happy just in comparison to others” (Kant, 1980, p. 38). This unjust desire to rise above the others determines the vulnerability of human beings, subject in this way to jealousy and rivalry; vulnerability in people who live in society results

therefore “in these secret and obvious hostilities which we direct against the ones we consider foreign to us” (Kant, 1980, p. 38).

In what comes next this theme of vulnerability in relation with sociability will be discussed in relation to the work of Habermas. To counter the extreme vulnerability of living beings, involved in their socialisation, remains for Habermas the primordial objective of morals.

4. Sociability and vulnerability in Habermas

In accordance with Kant, Habermas (1992) approaches the “unsociable sociability” of people, who have become vulnerable because of the constraint of living in society, which Kant (1990) qualifies as “the most horrible suffering: namely that which people inflict on each other” (pp. 76-77). Habermas (1992) pleads for the protection of the vulnerability of individuals as source of morality from an anthropological point of view from the very pages of his work *Discourse Ethics*, one of his most important works dedicated to the introduction and development of the concept of the discourse ethics: “I would like to name as moral all those institutions that inform on the problem of knowing how to behave in order to counter the *extreme vulnerability* of people by protecting and sparing them. From an anthropological point of view, morals can be understood as a protecting disposition which compensates vulnerability structurally inscribed within the forms of sociocultural life. In this sense, living creatures are vulnerable and require moral protection, being individualised in an only way, the one of socialisation” (p. 19).

By analysing the theses of a certain morality of Arnold Gehlen, Habermas (1987, pp. 259-283) introduces the basis for discourse ethics. First and foremost, Habermas (1987) reminds his readers of the fact that Immanuel Kant replaced a morals, whose laws had external origin (Habermas suggests here that the German philosopher brought Protestant ethics to the level of rational intelligibility), with practical reason which sets its own laws, whose purpose is universal. While admitting his indebtedness to Kant, Habermas (1987) later shows that he is inspired by Kantian morals, criticising at the same time its limitations, because it does not succeed in producing the individualization of moral subjects through the reconciliation of the general with the particular, as an effect of its foundation on an intelligible ego who manages to dominate the entire intersubjective communication (p. 270). While searching for the principles of a universalist morals of Kantian inspiration, Habermas (1987) presents the thesis which reconciles individual singularity to universal norms by mediating a “rational

discourse” (*Diskurs*), in other words, through a “public process of forming the will tied to the principle of communication which cannot be limited, and to harmony without the interference of domination” (p. 270).

Habermas (1987) analyses the elements of morals proposed by Gehlen in order to find there the notions which might be imported into what was to become *Discourse Ethics*; in search of a procedure and the structure for universal dialogue Habermas highlights the condition of possibility of a “mutual moral” (p. 272) which he identifies in Gehlen. From this perspective, the social foundation of morals is affirmed by Habermas (1987), who rejects any naturalism, more precisely any “biological root” of ethics. In his view, ethics, and its corresponding norms, derive from a practical discussion accessible through a process of socialisation by which the individual’s identity is constructed, and not by “their organic system, but rather through symbolic relationships of individuals who enter in relations of interaction within communication community” (Habermas, 1987, p. 273).

Unlike Gehlen, who proposes the preoccupation of the individual’s survival as one of the determining factors of ethics, Habermas (1987) excludes any reference to human frailty inherent to his biological nature, attempting nevertheless to characterise the “profound human frailty” (p. 273). According to Habermas (1987), human vulnerability becomes visible through “the cultural system constructed as compensation” (p. 273). Here Habermas’ proposals must be interpreted in light of his later texts, especially *Discourse Ethics*. Habermas (1992) thus nominates social and symbolical systems established in order to ensure an intersubjective communication, capable of mediating the solidarity which, within a community, is meant to overcome the individual’s weaknesses: “the identity of the individual and that of the community is formed and maintained *co-originary*” (p. 20). The protection of the people, whom socio-cultural systems might prejudice, requires the counterbalance of ethical regulation.

The research of guaranteed consideration and mutual respect in the real behaviour of individuals was proposed as “mercy ethics”. This mercy (or compassion), Habermas (1987) admits, can constitute a base motivation of ethics, limited to the one corresponding to the sensibility to the vulnerability of the other, threatened in the integrity of their person; the person under discussion is the one characterised through the ipseity of the individual socially, whose integrity is marked by “the chronic frailty, so to say, constitutively threatened”. For Habermas (1987), the relation between “interiority and exteriority” is not an organic one. Therefore, ipseity – or “the exteriority” of the individual – is expressed in a mediatic manner at a symbolic level, and the vulnerability of the body’s integrity, correspondent to

the *idem* (as Ricoeur understands it) or “interiority”, is materialised in the dimension of the sensitive and frail corporality of the subject. In this context, Habermas (1987) defines the objective that the moral system on which a society is based should reach, that of creating the conditions of communicative inter-subjectivity which will favour the individualization of subjects, guarding them at the same time against threats to their identity. This identity, like that of an organism from the physical environment, is the developed in the sociocultural environment at a symbolic level, specific to the linguistic community to which the individual belongs. Through the confrontation with the constraints of the social environment, the subject gradually individualises and manifests a moral conscience which “corresponds in this way to an identity which becomes more and more vulnerable as the individualization grows” (Habermas, 1987, p. 274). Because of the exigency to research the universal character of morals, Habermas (1987) rejects the qualification of “humanitarianism” which Gehlen applies to any universalist form of morals, as well as to the biological origin which he deems it with” (p. 275).

The social behaviourism of G.H. Mead was one of the major sources of thought for Habermas while deciding the bases of the discourse ethics: Habermas (1987) keeps with those theses by G.H. Mead which refer to the universality of human behaviour individualised through socialising. In the context of this study on human vulnerability, mostly the theses which tend to demonstrate that societies are based on communication through language between its members are kept. For Habermas (2000), G.H. Mead’s theses, although remaining falsifiable, they continue to be solid because of the exigency of universality which they are directed at: “language is both the basis and the form of sociability and, pragmatically, beyond any human society, a vector of individualization and socialisation through communicative actions” (p. 137).

Following Mead, Habermas (2000) considers the access to the resource that language represents, as being essential for the constitution of the self and of the intersubjective relation of socialised individuals. Hence, Habermas (2000) resumes this thesis according to which the members of a society individualise and socialise through the mediation of language and of an inevitable network of reciprocity. It is, thus, observed that the alienation induced by the social medium in which the identity of the individuals is constructed, creates the conditions of their vulnerability. This vulnerability is characterised by the wounds caused to the individuals by interpersonal relations. In these relations the intersubjective structure support this preeminent resource, represented by language. The difficulty to access

language, for Habermas as well as for Axel Honneth, is a source of discrimination and vulnerability for the social actors. Habermas (1992) insists in this manner that the socialised subjects owe their vulnerability to “the medium of interactions mediated by language” (p. 21).

Just like in the critic addressed to Gehlen, Habermas (1992) gives this vulnerability of the individual, induced by socialisation, pre-eminence in comparison with concrete vulnerability specific to the body and life; in fact, this reflects the difficult conditions in which the fragile identity of a being that becomes more and more socially dependent is constructed, while also being in a mutual protection network. Habermas (1992) admits that the main motivation of mercy ethics consists in the attempt to guarantee a mutual protection meant to reduce this vulnerability. This ethics attempted to solve the dilemma of protecting a single person and of keeping this “way of life”, the social weave where mutual recognition relationships are situated. Countering the extreme vulnerability of living beings, caused by their socialisation, remains for Habermas (1992) the objective which morals must regard, through the prescription of two complementary moral principles (p. 21). On the one hand, a principle of justice which regulates the equal respect principle for the dignity and equality of the rights of every individual, and on the other hand a principle of solidarity which postulates the necessity of protecting intersubjective relationships of recognition between individuals who are members of a community, imposing empathy and assistance for the welfare of the other.

Inspired by the “ideal community of communication” as proposed by K.O. Apel (1994, p. 39), Habermas (1992) intends to extend the Kantian deontological ethics to the structural aspects of life (by taking into consideration, equally, the interests of every individual within the general interest) due to “the universal point of view of communicative socialisation” of discourse ethics (p. 23). Despite all this, the proposal of a principle of solidarity complementary to an ethics of justice offers an answer which still remains formal and abstract, answering only partially the problem of taking into consideration the human vulnerability caused by socialisation.

5. The limitations of research and future directions of research

By examining the facets of human vulnerability from the perspective of moral and social ethics and philosophy, this endeavour sought to find possible answers to human vulnerability, by taking on the care of the other, the more vulnerable one, through unlimited responsibility towards them. One of the limitations of this study is the fact that the kantian formulation

of moral from the perspective of care ethics towards the other has not been re-examined. Many have struggled to bring forward the formalism and rigorousness of this moral of abiding by the law which a human rational, autonomous subject takes on of their own free will. A certain tradition of moral philosophy supports the prejudice according to which kantian ethics, evaluated essentially through its rigorousness and abstraction, would be foreign to any perspective regarding the application of morals in the field of caring for the other and a good nature toward other human beings. Even Habermas (1992) resorts in the beginning of his work *Discourse Ethics* to his objections towards Hegel and Kant (pp. 15-16), in this way offering a summary of the arguments which have been used ever since then against the kantian moral.

It can be considered that this study can be furthered with the kantian moral perspective regarding the good will towards the other, associated with self-love, present in all Kant's works in which problems of ethics are approached. This preoccupation for the other appears concretely in Kant (1997) in the consideration of human vulnerability, which he names *fragilitas* and *infirmitas humana*. In judging the other one must take into consideration their frailties and infirmities, a reminder that they are merely human, without dodging our own actions taking advantage of our own vulnerability (p. 161).

Death and suffering are a testimony to the problematic character of any empirical reality and might represent, for the purpose of this study, a relevant approach regarding human vulnerability, taken under consideration from the perspective of extreme situations.

6. Conclusions

Throughout this short journey into the domains specific to human existence, vulnerability which manifests permanently as being attached to human reality in all its dimensions was encountered. Subject to the weight of the tyranny of normality and perfection, contemporary societies, glorifying the individual who is useful and performant, struggle to hide, or more often than not deny the vulnerability of human beings. The notion of vulnerability appeared not only as a mutual sign of any person who is in a dependent situation, but also as one of the constitutive dimensions of the essence of living beings and of their life environment. Vulnerability in human beings corresponds to the intrinsic frailty of their faculties, which is specific to them, and which will not reveal itself to them, temporarily or permanently, unless one of these faculties is diminished or gravely affected.

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