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Contemporary Humanism /
Quaderno 2019

cittadella editrice

«Questa è la sfida di Munera: leggere i fenomeni e le creazioni del diritto, dell'economia, dell'arte, della letteratura, della filosofia, della religione nella loro unità, ovvero come creazioni profondamente umane: come scambi di "munera" e, dunque, come luoghi di umanizzazione. Come tentativi, messi in campo da un essere umano sempre alla ricerca di sé stesso, di appropriarsi in pienezza di una umanità che certamente gli appartiene, ma della quale è anche sempre debitore (e creditore) nei confronti dell'altro: nel tempo e nello spazio. Un compito che Munera intende assumersi con serietà e rigore, ma volendo anche essere una rivista fruibile da tutti: chiara, stimolante, essenziale, mai banale» (dall'editoriale del n. 1/2012).

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JEYVER RODRÍGUEZ*

Fragility, Vulnerability and Flourishing of All Beings

1. *Human vulnerability: finitude, embodiment and interdependence*

Humans are fragile and vulnerable beings. This feature is not a property of other empirical data, but it is an essential aspect of the human condition. Modern Scientific culture reinforces the tendency for humanity to control nature and puts our autonomy, self-sufficiency and freedom in the foreground. Nevertheless, despite the tendency mentioned above, the main distinctive characteristic of all human beings is our vulnerability. Human beings, and this is an important difference with respect to objects and artefacts, have several kinds of vulnerability from the very beginning of their life. Vulnerability is not a transient feature but is, in a fundamental and primary sense, a condition that crosses our existence from birth to death. Although the media and public discourse reinforce an anthropology that shows the human being as someone who holds unlimited power and has cutting-edge technologies to improve their capacities and to deal with the decisive fact of death, the truth is that we are dependents and vulnerable beings. As moral agents who live a shared existence, our fragility and mutual dependence are not something that can *to be eliminated* by its root. At an ontological level, human vulnerability connects with our embodiment as agents. The consciousness of our living body is what gives us a practical identity. It is only because we are bodily beings that we can engage in deep social and emotional relationships with others who have themselves their own. Paradoxically, our living body allows us to be attentive to two aspects of our clearly connected existence: first, on the one hand, our embodiment enables us to have a wide variety of relationships with other agents and with the world as a whole of which we are part. Secondly, our embodiment highlights the frustration, loss and impotence.

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The general sense of competency, independence and self-reliance are reinforced in contemporary culture with the appearance of phenomena that put into perspective our humanity like disease, disabilities and the malfunction of our body. In addition, and «like many nonhuman animals [...] we are dependent, social creatures who like to play, who are sensate and emotional, who are capable of suffering not only adverse conditions (e.g., of temperature, pollution, malnutrition, disease, ravaging storm) but also internal states of fear, confusion, and stress».¹ In a similar way to many mammals, we are susceptible to corporal assaults, anger and the selfish, violent attack of others. From the very beginning, our existence has been in a complex web of social relationships. Due to that, the *openness* to the other individuals is permanent. This *openness* and *interdependence* with respect to others constitute existence grounding. In *Rational Dependent Animals*, Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

We human beings are vulnerable to many kinds of affliction and most of us are at some time afflicted by severe ills. How we cope is only in small part up to us. It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing, as we encounter bodily illness and injury, inadequate nutrition, mental defect and disturbance, and human aggression and neglect. This dependence on particular others for protection and sustenance is most evident in early childhood and old age.²

Firstly, it is crucial to recognize that mutual dependency, vulnerability and affliction are relevant aspects of the human condition. The attitude of denial toward the “facts of disability and dependence presuppose either a failure or a refusal to acknowledge the bodily dimensions of our existence adequately. [...] This failure or refusal is perhaps rooted in and is certainly reinforced by the extent to which we conceive of ourselves and imagine ourselves as other than animal, as exempt from the hazardous conditions of “mere animality”.³ Such defective modes of self-understanding do not recognize the profound interdependence between our *animal condition* and our vulnerabilities. The self-understanding of the human being as a being isolated with respect to all others and disconnected from the world is clearly inadequate not only at the present moment of mankind but also in the long-term. As is well known, a great part of the philosophy history has thought of the human being as a being disconnected from the natural environment, as a superior being and sovereign from nature, as if isolated from another entity with which we share the environment. In thinking about human be-

¹ A. CARSE, *Vulnerability, Agency, and Human Flourishing*, in *Health and Human Flourishing*, ed. by C. Taylor and R. Dell’Oro, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C. 2007, p. 33.

² A. MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Carus Publishing, Chicago 1999, p. 1.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

ings in this way, we are reducing the complexity of life. Bearing in mind the interdependence, unity and complexity of life we must restructure our relationship with humans and nonhuman animals and the natural environment as a whole. This *openness* and *dependence* with respect to others should lead us to rethink our institutions and our response to the problems we are currently experiencing. In *The Vulnerable Subject* Fineman writes:

What should be the political and legal implications of the fact that we are born, live, and die within a fragile materiality that renders all of us constantly susceptible to destructive external forces and internal disintegration? [...] Surely the reality of our universal fragility has played some role in our construction of societal institutions. Contemplating our shared vulnerability it becomes apparent that human beings need each other, and that we must structure our institutions in response to this fundamental human reality.⁴

From the beginning, we human beings have been developing our lives 'within a fragile materiality' so we continually need the *care*, *solidarity* and *attention* of others. In other words, we can only achieve a flourishing life in a common world. An isolated human being easily succumbs to injuries, illness, inadequate nutrition, and a decrease in their physical and mental health. Nevertheless, our institutions frequently forget this 'universal fragility' of all human beings. According to Fineman: «Vulnerability initially should be understood as arising from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune from mildly adverse to catastrophically devastating events, whether accidental, intentional or otherwise. Individuals can attempt to lessen the risk or mitigate the impact of such events, but they cannot eliminate their possibility. Understanding vulnerability begins with the realization that many such events are ultimately beyond control».⁵ Human beings are linked to a fragile materiality in which appear things that escape our control: political persecution, food uncertainty, loss of access to drinking water sources, illnesses produced by air contamination or poisoning caused by consuming unhealthy water or food are just some uncertainties that we must face.

At a moral level, in every day life we can be mocked, subjected to cruel treatment, public humiliation and several forms of abuse that can hurt our sense of self-respect and self-worth very deeply: «It is clear, then, that our flourishing is subject to vicissitudes of fortune, to disease and disability, to the powers of nature, and to the choices and conducts of others – in short, to a world that is, in many ways, outside our control».⁶ In the fragile materi-

⁴ M. FINEMAN, *The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition*, «Yale Journal of Law and Feminism», 20, 2008, p. 12.

⁵ M. FINEMAN, *The Vulnerable Subject*, cit., p. 9.

⁶ A. CARSE, *Vulnerability, Agency, and Human Flourishing*, cit., pp. 36-52: 35.

ality in which our existence unfolds, we are always crossed by «the constant possibility that we can be injured and undone by errant weather systems, such as those that produce flood, drought, famine, and fire. There are “natural” disasters beyond our control to prevent. Our vulnerability is enhanced by the realization that should we succumb to illness or injury there may be accompanying economic and institutional harm as a result of the disruption of existing relationships».⁷

I am going to finish this part by briefly outlining *vulnerability in illness*. In this context, vulnerability is related to the living experience of the body. When we suffer from a severe illness we have the experience of a radical transformation of our world around us. The familiar world can become strange and threatening: «At its most fundamental level, the experience of vulnerability is the perception of bodily threat. Illness breaks through our everyday complacency to remind us that we are radically dependent on and interdependent with our bodies».⁸ It is inadequate to say that we “have” a body in the same sense as we say, for example, that we “have a hat or a dress”. Illness makes us conscious, in a radical sense, that we are one with our body and that we “exist” in our bodies, and it is due to this that we are able to build a relationship with others and with the world around us.

As Richard Zaner argues: «I experience myself as implicated by my body [...] I am exposed to whatever can influence, threaten, inhibit, alter, or benefit my biological organism».⁹ Despite this fact, that “I am my body”, many times the experience of illness can make us feel like a “foreigner” or “alien” with respect to one’s own living body: «The relation between self and its embodying organism seems as much a matter of “otherness” as of “mineness.” However intimate and profound the relation between the person and the person’s body, it is equally true that a person experiences his or her body as strange and alien, in ways that can be understood».¹⁰ To illustrate this last vulnerability aspect, I want to refer briefly to the life experience of Michele Angelo Petrone, diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease at the age of 30:

I need to know that this body is my body. And I need to know everything that is happening to my body. But most of all I need to know that you know that within my body there is me. [...] But part of that pain and difficulty came out of fear and ignorance. My fear and the fear of everybody around me. [...] My journey

⁷ M. FINEMAN, *The Vulnerable Subject*, cit., pp. 9-10.

⁸ S. TOOMBS, *Vulnerability and the Meaning of Illness. Reflections on Lived Experience*, «Health and Human Flourishing», ed. by C. Taylor and R. Dell’Oro, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C. 2007, pp. 119-40.

⁹ R. ZANER, *Embodiment in the Phenomenological Tradition*, in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics. Revised edition*, ed. by Warren T. Reich, Simon & Schuster Macmillan, New York 1995. pp. 293-299.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 440.

has two intertwined threads: one is the physical injury, the illness, the happening, the unavoidable. The parallel thread is my emotional response.¹¹

Petrone emphasizes vulnerability like a *relational experience* and needs ‘to know that *you* know that within [of his] body there is *me*’. This might be understanding as a simple fact of experience but perhaps precisely for that reason, it is often overlooked in health care and the relationship of the person with their relatives: That in the ill body, ‘there is me’. «In others words, the illness of the physical body is inescapably experienced as a threat to the “self”». ¹² The vulnerability experience in illness, as Petrone has noted, “has two intertwined threads”: on the one hand, is the illness experience that in fact, is happening in the time, the unavoidable and that puts us before our finitude. On the other hand, the emotional response that can express itself in the effective inner struggle: in this struggle, emotions can help us understand and accept our emergent existence.

This understanding of the human being emphasizes our interdependence with other individuals who, in one way or another, help to set up and give meaning to our experience of both health as well as illness. Vulnerability is not an exclusive concept of a person who copes with an illness and end-of-life experiences but a phenomenon and process that also embraces others, family friends and healthcare professionals. At the same time, it is not a static but a dynamic and coextensive phenomenon inextricably linked to health institutions and the moral community as a whole.

2. *Environmental justice and the flourishing of all beings*

Human dependence on the environment is strongly rooted in the fact that all human beings need natural goods (e.g. fresh water, breathable air, fertile land, forests, and uncontaminated food) that the planet provides in order to survive. *Humans* are bringing about the sixth *mass extinction* in a fragile planet. In *the technological Odyssey of unlimited growth*, the animals, the forests and oceans of the planet have been seriously affected. Due to this, human life has also been seriously damaged. The suffering caused to animals is a mirror of the injustice that prevails in the human world and the lack of solidarity toward life as a whole. Human dependence on the environment is related to issues of distributive justice on different levels since it is recognized that the environmental impact of diverse human activities causes *disproportionate harm* not only to human health but also to nonhuman animals. As is sadly known, «roughly one-quarter of the diseases facing

¹¹ C. BUCHAN, *Michele Angelo Petrone*, «The Lancet», 369, 2007, p. 2154.

¹² S. TOOMBS, *Vulnerability and the Meaning of Illness*, cit., pp. 119-140.

humankind today occur because of prolonged exposure to environmental pollution. Many of these diseases, however, are not easily detected and may be acquired during childhood only to manifest themselves in serious health problems later in adulthood».¹³

Currently, a great number of ecoharms including plastic waste, air pollution and unsafe water are distributed just as unevenly around the world. The *Air Quality Index* correlates the heaviest air pollution areas with those with low socioeconomic status. As Plumwood has noted, «for a range of environmental ills resulting from the institutions of accumulation, then, some considerable degree of redistribution and remoteness from consequences is possible along lines of social privilege. This is the basis of the ecojustice phenomenon known as ‘environmental racism’».¹⁴ The main concern is that the persons and groups with low socioeconomic status have fewer tools to deal with environmental degradation and to prevent the destruction of vital environmental goods. By contrast, socially privileged groups can perceive, locate and characterize forms of environmental degradation quickly: «When local resources become depleted, they will be best placed to make themselves remote from local scarcities by taking advantage of wider supply sources and markets that continue to deplete distant communities in ways that elude knowledge and responsibility [...] can make themselves relatively spatially, consequentially and epistemically remote from redistributing ecoharms. [...] In terms of their own experience, privileged groups are also likely to be more epistemically remote and distanced from awareness of both their own and nature’s vulnerability and limits».¹⁵

The above once again emphasizes the movement of denial of our human condition and our vulnerabilities. Socially privileged groups prefer to redistribute ecoharms instead of recognizing the profound interdependence between our common humanity and our vulnerabilities. Since it is possible to redistribute ecoharms spatially, consequentially and epistemically, it is equally plausible to avoid responsibility. In addition, due to the bioaccumulation process it is difficult to assess the ecoharms in the long-term. All this is inescapably linked to environmental justice. The concept of environmental justice should be embracing the idea that not only humankind but all beings have a right to one planetary health that is supportive of their flourishing life.

This vulnerability approach emphasizes that human and animal health are two interrelated and mutually dependent concepts. From this relational

¹³ B. RAUSA, *Environmental Exposure*, in *Encyclopedia of Immigrant Health*, ed. by Sana Loue and Martha Sajatovic Dordrecht, Springer, New York 2012, pp. 613-617.

¹⁴ V. PLUMWOOD, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Routledge, London-New York 2002, p. 85.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

perspective, acknowledge that the environment (both the natural and the artificial one), as well as “non-human life on Earth, has intrinsic value”, and this value is independent of the usefulness these may have for strictly human purposes. Human beings have the duty to contribute so that other species can continue to flourish and we must also protect the integrity of planetary health. Human beings are ontologically interdependent beings with respect to other individuals and we require several forms of care within a moral community. Simultaneously, and because of our embodiment, as human animals we are biologically linked to other forms of life on earth with which we share the diversity of goods. Thus, interdependence demands a new approach of ecological justice rooted in new forms of mutuality, conviviality, responsibility and reciprocity with other forms of life and the unity of life.

3. Conclusion

Rethinking our relationship with particular others (humans), and with nonhuman life (animals, plants and other entities) in an interdependence view we will be able to realize that justice/injustice is not only an issue restricted to the human sphere but perhaps justice and injustice can be something that embraces nonhuman life too. In other words, if we see ourselves not as isolated parts but as beings that are interconnected to and interdependent on the fragile web of life, then the pain of animals, the depletion of the environment and the dramatic massive extinction of species around the world should be regarded and felt in a completely different way. The dramatic deforestation of Amazonia, for instance, should be understood not as something isolated but as an ecoharm capable of affecting the fragile web of life as a whole. Consequently, it is not that just some animals or plants are in danger but all the beings that share the same planet are in danger. In addition, the issue is not that the present generation of human beings is in danger but that the existential situation is that future generations of humans, animals, plants and other entities are in danger. In short: we are together all in danger owing to the very fact that we share the same fragile and still wonderful home planet. In order for us to achieve human flourishing, it must be acknowledged that other species need our care and attention. The exploitative attitude and mastery of nature and the technical dominion of the environment that reigns today all over the world is not only unethical but is also a clear testimony of our stupidity and self-sufficiency. The fragile web of life calls us as never before to recognize the vulnerability of life as a whole. Every being is at risk because every being is interdependent upon every other one. Therefore, we can only achieve our flourishing when recognizing the good of the biotic community as a whole.

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