

Chapter 1

Vulnerability is Said in Many Ways



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*As the other of violence, vulnerability may itself
constitute or be constituted by violence*
Eleine P. Miller, *Bodies and the Power of Vulnerability*, 2002

Abstract The pandemic has demonstrated, in an amplified way, that vulnerability is common to all human beings. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift proposed by the ethics and discourses built around vulnerability did not take hold. The call for a more just and less competitive society, which became widespread during the pandemic, did not immediately seem to be as urgent afterwards. In fact, since the pandemic, attitudes seem to reflect a desire to erase this experience and restore the *status quo ante*. Can this operational limit of the concept of vulnerability be a sufficient reason to abandon this interpretive paradigm and return to the old Promethean idea of man which shaped modern society? In the light of the pandemic, is it not worthwhile instead to question vulnerability more deeply? Is it not important to continue reflecting on the anthropological approach underlying vulnerability in order to understand how it can provide an ethical and political perspective for building a better future? Starting from these questions, this essay explores vulnerability from a philosophical perspective, analysing its strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords Vulnerable turn · Normativity · Critical theory · Forms of life

1 Introduction

Human beings have been confronting their own vulnerability since ancient times. A vivid embodiment of it in the Western imagination is Achilles, the invincible, generous warrior, without uncertainties, but also the hapless hero, secretly vulnerable. He moves through the world literally walking on his own weaknesses and is

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Fig. 1 Houpersis (the fall of Troy), detail. Side A from an Attic red-figure kylix, ca. 490 BC. From Vulci (Louvre Museum), photo of Marie-Lan Nguyen (public domain)



finally killed, treacherously, precisely because of that heel, which deeply marked his humanity and therefore his vulnerability (Fig. 1).

Achilles is the symbol of that humanity in relation to which he was stronger, but to which, despite his mother's efforts, he could never cease to belong.

Even more peculiar is the figure of Antaeus. The son of Gea and Poseidon, like the other Giants he had extraordinary strength, although unlike his brothers, this strength had the characteristic of increasing the moment he fell to the ground wounded, and re-established contact with his mother, Gea. Antaeus represents both vulnerability and resilience. After being injured, the giant literally gets up again—in the same sense we find in the Latin expression *resilire*.¹ Each time he falls, Antaeus becomes stronger: his strength is nourished precisely by his weakness. As these two examples show us, in contrast to the later tradition, the male who embodies fragility in the Greek tradition often encounters an attitude of acceptance or even an embracing of vulnerability in order to achieve virtue. In classical Greece, vulnerability refers not only to the possibility of being wounded but also to the “self-awareness and acceptance of being subject to harm” [2, p. 205]. Moreover, the staging of this vulnerability in a tragedy, an epic or in philosophy invites the political community to witness fragility and thus to include the vulnerable more fully.

It is no different in religions. Think of Christianity, where even God experiences vulnerability by incarnating himself in human form and suffering the wounds of crucifixion; or Buddhism, where the human experience of physical vulnerability becomes a path to wisdom—as the story of the young prince Siddhartha and his decision to embark on the path to enlightenment after experiencing human suffering (*Duhkha*) in the form of ageing, illness and death attests.²

¹ The Latin expression is formed by adding the prefix *re* to the verb *salire* ‘to leap, to bound, to bounce’, and thus means ‘to spring back, to rebound’. On the bound of resilience and vulnerability [1].

² As Zhang states: “The word ‘suffering’ is a translation of the word *dukkha* (Pali) or *dukkha* (Sanskrit), which literally means dis-ease or unsatisfactoriness. There is a well-known Buddhist

The attitude in modern Western culture has changed. It tries to remove from human nature the humble aspect, everything that relates to deficiency, exposure, lack, disease, and even death. Those who embody vulnerability become the object of passions such as disgust, contempt, and even fear. It was the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes who inaugurated a long tradition in the political field. He showed that political theory is uncomfortable with vulnerability, and indeed does everything it can to expel it from this domain. The pact of delegation to the sovereign, of submission to the politician, is made in the name of the extradition from everyday life of every form of vulnerability to which living with others exposes us (violence, traps, ambushes, etc.). Hereafter, when politics confronts vulnerability, “it is to virilely place it at a distance, somewhere ‘prior to’ or ‘alongside’ the political game, or to bury it among its silent drudgery by hastening to label it with names less stamped with powerlessness” [3, p. 7].

Neither does contemporary politics seem to escape this discourse in which power is maintained by containing or eradicating vulnerability through the biological metaphor of immunisation. This term, introduced into philosophical-political language by the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, indicates the process of increasing defence of the community against infiltration and contagion of foreign elements.³

Borrowing an expression taken from the Lacanian lexicon, Judith Butler also denounced the ethical implications of Western secular culture as a process of ‘foreclosure’ of the elements of vulnerability. In other words, it is the exclusion which the subject chooses to put in place in order to gain an acceptable, intelligible identity that is worthy of recognition. It is not simply a mechanism of repression of something that would remain ‘inside’, or the removal of something that is destined to return, but rather a process of structural exclusion which is simultaneously vital, yet also pathogenic, for the subject.

The *heuristics of vulnerability*, developed at the end of the last century, therefore opposes the pale image of a subject that would only be built on strength and security and seeks instead to bring to the fore the ontological, and as such ineradicable and universal dimension of vulnerability. Rather than nurturing the essentialisation of an intact, healthy subject, it asserts the need to promote the interrelational aspect, the

claim, “All this is dukkha.” Suffering is, then, shown as a kind of dis-ease caused by human finitude. However, suffering is more complicated than a subjective, psychological description or an intentionalist view that the phenomenal character of any experience is entirely constituted by its representational content; instead, it has a wide range of meaning from that experienced and reality itself, although Buddhism does not seem to focus on reality as it is without human experience” [46, p. 43].

³ This aspect is further developed in the light of the recent pandemic. In his most recent books, written during and after the pandemic, the philosopher tries to imagine a different kind of immunisation, which seems to lose its constrictive connotations and requires a new interpretation, both biological and political. He shows different immunising reactions which can take different account of vulnerabilities. For example, the model of *herd immunity* proposed at the beginning of the pandemic by the United Kingdom, Sweden, the United States and Brazil is based on tanatopolitical principles that envisage, if not the elimination, at least the marginalisation of the “less fit” in favour of the more productive segments of the population [see 47].

mutual dependence by virtue of the vulnerability into which we are all already thrown. The ‘vulnerable subject’ seems to offer a powerful alternative to the mythical liberal autonomous subject of neo-liberal rhetoric [4, p. 504]. To the dominant political and legal subject in the modern age, which describes the human being as a competent, capable, self-sufficient and self-fulfilling agent “who seeks liberty or autonomy as a primary value” [5, p. 108], a relational subjectivity was opposed. In contrast to liberal constructions of the subject, this [6, 7] *heuristic* has insisted on the embodied nature of the vulnerable subject and it is a priori belonging to sociomaterial contexts. These contexts not only produce vulnerability but also determine its degree of resilience: recognising vulnerability means both setting in motion precisely different qualities of relationship and a more inclusive, embodied and interactive social model [see 6, 7].

The pervasiveness of vulnerability as a heuristic model can also be seen in the numerous official acts of major supranational organisations⁴ which have sought to reorient institutional interventions in order to concretise the commitment to protect individuals—in their autonomy, dignity and integrity—from threats to personal fulfillment. By promoting a model of citizenship based on interdependence, empathy and the foregrounding of social-ethical obligations to others [see 8], vulnerability has seemed able to circumvent many of the shortcomings of previous efforts to show the political roots of harm and suffering [see 9]. The pandemic provided irrefutable evidence of the reasons for the ethics and heuristics of vulnerability, namely, the impossibility of overcoming our fragile condition alone. Many studies comparing the reactions in the months of the pandemic and in the first months after the emergency have confirmed this perception and manifested the need for a change in values in a postmaterialist direction. For example, Lampert’s analysis showed that:

the pandemic and the economic crisis it brought have led to an increased focus on individual free choice and the non-material aspects of life. At the same time, the support for [...] law and order have decreased. People are increasingly calling for inclusive growth and for reducing the gap between rich and the poor. [10, p. 3]⁵

However, the signals coming from post-pandemic society seem to indicate that it does not intend to move in that direction. The shift from *homo oeconomicus* to *homo*

⁴ See: UNESCO’s “The Principle of Respect for Human Vulnerability and Personal Integrity,” Report of the International Bioethics Committee of UNESCO (IBC), (2013); the University of South Carolina’s Hazards and Vulnerability Research Institute “Social Vulnerability Index for the United States” (2013); the Council for International Organisations of Medical Sciences’ “International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects,” prepared in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, (2002); and going further back, the “Barcelona Declaration on Policy Proposals to the European Commission on Basic Ethical Principles in Bioethics and Biolaw”, adopted in November 1998, and the NIH’s “The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research” (1979).

⁵ Ibo van de Poel, Tristan de Wildt, and Dyami van Kooten Pássaro, in their study [48, p. 47] used the computational tool of topic modelling - which allows one to track the changing frequency of specific topics in a corpus of text. The results showed that while the values of safety and health increased significantly in the first months of the pandemic, the values of democracy, privacy and socio-economic equality decreased.

vulnerabilis, which seemed inexorable until a few months ago, no longer seems to be on the agenda. What has gone wrong, why has this trend come to a halt? Let us consider the main questions raised by the discourse on vulnerability.

2 Different Meanings of Vulnerability

In their important study, Catriona Mackenzie, Susan Dodds, and Wendy Rogers identified three types of vulnerability: *inherent*, *situational* and *pathogenetic* [11, p. 24]. The first type has to do with our bodies, [13]⁶ the second with the historical, geographical and environmental context, and finally the third with the political and social politics that can create injustice.⁷ Just as the body has pressing material needs that expose us to illness, disability and death, so as social and affective beings, we experience loss, bereavement, abuse, lack of care, rejection and humiliation. Politically, we are vulnerable because we are subject to exploitation and manipulation, rights violations and political violence. All of these forms of vulnerability are manifested to a greater or lesser extent depending on what Castel called “supports”.⁸ Regardless of the type of vulnerability that may affect us, we are all subject to a “social property” that includes rights, resources and protections that cannot be disregarded [see 13].⁹

There are different perspectives from which to view vulnerability, emphasising the biological or psychological aspect or the ethical, social or political aspect. For the purposes of our analysis, however, we shall distinguish between two categories: on the one hand, that which interprets vulnerability in its *broadest* sense. It concerns human beings in general and is linked to the biological fragility of the body, the existential perception of one’s own finiteness [16, 17] and the constant exposure to others, both emotionally and materially (Fig. 2).

⁶ This may include what Fineman calls “the human being’s embodied vulnerability”, which varies according to the quality and quantity of resources we possess or can use in order to also be resilient to those elements that make us vulnerable [37, p. 21].

⁷ To quote Catherine Malabou’s expression, “Ontology of the Accident” [12].

⁸ “Crucially, notes Clough, this is not to say that this shared vulnerability is experienced in the same way. The importance of focusing on the particular experience is a vital aspect of vulnerability theory and recognises, perhaps more clearly than the social model, that it is the particular individual’s interaction with society which is significant. This raises further questions of how we can make law and policy responsive to particular individuals and how interventions or shifts in broader structures or institutions would impact on users of services” [49, p. 479].

⁹ It should be noted, however, that the view that the risks of the virus could affect anyone, regardless of their location, has been widely criticised as the pandemic is exacerbating existing health inequalities [14]. Furthermore, intersectional studies have shown that when the workforce is racialised and feminised, safety standards decline along with wages. [15]. Even if, as Sandra Laugier notes, the pandemic has “highlighted the vulnerability of everyone, including the privileged, who have found themselves lost without their many ‘services’ [...] the better-off have the capacity to conceal or deny their acuteness by delegating care” [50, p. 52].

Fig. 2 Salvator Rosa, *Humana Fragilitas*, 1656
Fitzwilliam Museum,
Cambridge (particular)



On the other hand, we have a *narrower* meaning that concerns certain individuals or persons who are particularly disadvantaged or fragile under certain conditions, which Anderson defines as “surplus vulnerability” [18, pp. 155–156]. In the first case, vulnerability is synonymous with humanity; it is not a contingent susceptibility that affects specific individuals or categories of people. It is about humanity: as Erving Goffman suggests, it is the whole of ordinary experience that is structurally vulnerable [19]. It has therefore been referred to as “universal vulnerability” or the “vulnerability thesis” [16, p. 1]. In the second case, vulnerability is materially relational: one is vulnerable to particular agents with respect to particular kinds of threats [20, p. 112]. This form of vulnerability is opposed to the idea of autonomy: the more vulnerable a person is, the less autonomy he or she has in terms of being able to realise his or her life goals without necessarily depending on others (people, institutions, tools, etc.). Affiliations are also crucial here, as they can be either a corrosive disadvantage or a substantial help in overcoming vulnerability. The first meaning makes the concept too broad and therefore, according to some, not always useful for ethical normativity. Nonetheless, it helps us to overcome what has been defined as a top-down approach

[21] which would consider vulnerability as a derivative aspect, a reflection of the failure to realise a predetermined positive model. According to the top-down model, one would first define what makes a life good, just and satisfying in order to derive the values that serve to promote its development and ability to flourish. In this case, vulnerability is defined *ex negativo* or *per derivationem*. This last perspective intends vulnerability as a lack, a deficiency of those elements that are fundamental to the attainment of a full life. Such a full life is the point that ethics seeks to reach when it uses the concept of vulnerability in a narrow sense [22]. The *broadest* sense of vulnerability can help us to understand vulnerability not as a problem to be solved but as an inescapable aspect in the definition of life. In doing so, it becomes an opportunity to reassess our view of ourselves and the world rather than a negative obstacle to be overcome or managed. The constant exposure of our lives to rupture, floundering and lack of expression can actually lead to the revelation of new realms of possibility. “In this perspective,” as Piergiorgio Donatelli says, “human life is not described through an exhaustive list of criteria that are available beforehand and can be fixed for determinate goals. Human life is rather what we find after a loss, a crisis, a condition of discomfort or uneasiness” [23, p. 1033].

If understood as a defining characteristic of the human being, vulnerability seems to be linked not only to our biological or socio-political weaknesses but also to the inexorable destiny that confronts us with failures, with the impossibility of realising all our perspectives and projects in the course of our lives, but which also allows us to develop active responses to these experiences [24, p. 19].

3 Some Aporias

These two conceptions of vulnerability have had an important *explanatory* function, providing a sufficiently broad framework for the perception of a range of phenomena concerning fields of experience and forms of criticality. However, they have also had a *propositional-constructive*, dynamic function in terms of institutional arrangements, bringing to the fore certain needs that had been denied for centuries. As Estelle Ferrarese has rightly pointed out, if it is true that vulnerability is a perceptible fact, it is equally true that it only comes to light when one is willing to acknowledge it and to act in some way to deal with it. From that moment on, it promotes ethical obligations. Vulnerability, in fact,

only appears insofar as it entails a horizon of obligations (fulfilled or not, but perceived by some and, in any case, by whoever uses the terms) *and of normative reasoning*. It may be a matter of obligations that you attribute to yourself, or that you impute to others [...]. In the latter variation of imputing it to others, the notion of vulnerability may carry with it an injunction for the State to act, an imperative addressed to institutions to protect or palliate. [3, p. 25]

However, by sharpening the focus of the meanings both of vulnerability in a narrow sense (highlighting the plight of the so-called ‘vulnerable’) and the idea that we are all vulnerable, fragile and powerless in the face of certain life events [25], the

pandemic has shown with great clarity the limits and pitfalls of both the *heuristic* and the *normative* uses of this concept. The pitfalls relate to the inability of this appeal to vulnerability to ensure an adequate response or to exclude violence from that response.

Now let us take a closer look at the aporias involved in the use of this concept. The first concerns a project that we could define more broadly as *cultural* and *anthropological*: the development of a culture of fear and of a subject that is considered anthropologically incapable of responding to offence of any kind. The second, which concerns the *sociopolitical* level, refers to the stigmatisation of the most vulnerable categories. To be labelled ‘vulnerable’ is not to be on an equal footing with other ‘nonvulnerable’ people. A further aspect could be called *epistemic*, namely, the presence of an epistemological opacity underlying the identification of vulnerable groups to the detriment of others—on this point, think about the difference in status between an economic migrant and a refugee.

The question of the *anthropological* perspective is interesting because it contains an element of ambiguity. In a 2004 paper, Furedi argued that society’s emphasis on the recognition of human vulnerability leads to a sense of powerlessness and diminished responsibility, which corresponds to a decrease in autonomy. As Furedi wrote, “contemporary culture answers these questions [about illness and trauma] by stating that everyone needs help and everyone needs support. That is why ideals of independence and self-sufficiency have given way to a culturally sanctioned state of dependency” [26, p. 103]. He continued, “If we renounce the possibility of having some choice over the direction of our life then we risk diminishing the meaning of our humanity” [26, p. 194].¹⁰ Alain Badiou’s criticism was along the same lines. He saw in the contemporary discourse on the defence of human rights a process of victimisation that reduces human beings to victim animals rather than active subjects. In other words, the rhetoric of vulnerability has led to thinking about human beings in terms of suffering and death, with the result that all constructive potential is lost [28, pp. 10–13]. According to this interpretation, in the gradual shift from a dimension that emphasised elements such as resilience and rationality to a narrative that emphasises vulnerability instead, there has been a reconfiguration of existential, social and political expectations: “The widespread acceptance of a vulnerability model of the

¹⁰ As one can read in another text of Furedi of 2003: “The model of human vulnerability and powerlessness transmitted through therapeutics coincides with a far wider tendency to dismiss the potential for people exercising control over their lives. The narrative of emotional vulnerability coexists with powerful ideas that call into question people’s capacity to assume a measure of control over their affairs. Social commentators regularly declare that we live in the era of the ‘death of the subject’, ‘the death of the author’ or the decline of agency. Such pessimistic accounts of the human potential inform both intellectual and cultural life in the west. The survivalist outlook alluded to by Lasch is not simply fueled by a preoccupation with the vulnerability of the self but also by the conviction that the world has become an intensely dangerous place beyond the control of humanity. Western society is continually haunted by the expectation of crisis and catastrophe. Environmental disasters, weapons of mass destruction, ‘technology gone mad’ are just some of the concerns that have helped to fashion a permanent sense of crisis” [51, p. 130]. See also [52, p. 57]. More recently, also [27]. This discourse was also at the centre of Giorgio Agamben’s reflections on the proposed restrictions during the COVID 19 pandemic [see 53].

human being and a focus on victims are a corollary of the decline of beliefs about the perfectibility of society and the rise of an ethos of ‘no alternative’” [29, p. 11]. This analysis therefore highlights the risk of using the universalist conception of vulnerability:

By emphasising its universality and amplifying its generative capacity [...the idea of a universal vulnerability, SA] might unwittingly dilute perceptions of inequality and muddle important distinctions among particular vulnerabilities, as well as differences between those who are injurable and those who are already injured. [9, p. 262]

In response to these concerns, we can evoke what was underlined by the feminist tradition. It has encouraged the abandonment of the concept of autonomy as a central value in ethical discourse. In contrast to the ideal of autonomy that animates most contemporary moral theories, Marlène Jouan and Sandra Laugier remind us that we need others as well as ourselves to satisfy our basic needs and that dependence is therefore an essential element of the human condition [30].

Other aporias are related to the insistence on the specific vulnerability of certain categories of subjects. If, in fact, the identification of a specific vulnerability is important in order to provide more adequate assistance to people in difficulty, such identification has contributed to fuelling new and dangerous categorisations by emphasising the exercise of social control and paternalistic intervention in the lives of those classified as vulnerable. Moreover, pathogenic forms of vulnerability can also be the result of a response initially designed to resolve a vulnerability, which instead paradoxically exacerbates it or produces new forms of vulnerability [11, p. 9], leading to the idea of an erosion of the role of collective movements and an expansion of social control by the state [cf. 31–33]:

Characterising a population as ‘vulnerable’ can have the effect of stigmatising it, thereby justifying forms of segregation, discrimination or tutelage. In this way, the scientific gesture amounts to constructing a paradigmatic subject and endeavouring to identify groups that do not correspond to this paradigm as vulnerable; to the extent that they are frequently declared such owing to a compromised or dubious capacity to consent, it is easy to make out an effect of subjugation. [3, p. 16]

Finally, there is the epistemological question. At the end of the last century, Judith Butler pointed out that the exposure of the concept of vulnerability to the normative contexts in which it develops could represent another problematic element. It is no coincidence that the American philosopher drew attention to the difference between vulnerability and mourning for the lives destroyed in the bombing of the Twin Towers and for the millions killed in the war in Afghanistan. Butler invited us to pay attention to the epistemic framework, cultural in the strong sense, understood as the structuring totality within which the dynamics unfold that lead to the identification of subjects as ‘vulnerable’ and therefore worthy of help, support and mourning. This is an idea of vulnerability the semantic sphere of which seems to be related to the concepts of authenticity and/or individual integrity. This use of the concept of vulnerability presupposes an idea of the subject that is placed within pre-existing frameworks of intelligibility that decide on the visible and the invisible, the sayable and the unsayable, the representable and the unrepresentable, on what is worthy and what

is not worthy of being recognised, both in its qualities and in its fragilities. From this perspective, it is clear that vulnerability is placed inside or outside the processes of recognition, processes that will become increasingly evident, integrating in more or less time the demands and needs of some subjects and negating those of others. Here, the risk highlighted by Butler is that of a re-essentialisation of vulnerability in terms of a homogeneous and unified identity. In this regard, Butler critically argues that the institutional recognition of a social subject's vulnerability depends on the hegemonic frames of recognition and dominant patterns of intelligibility that authoritatively define, in every sociocultural contextualisation, who counts as human and who does not.

4 Ethical Models of Vulnerability

How can these aporias be overcome? Recently developed ethical models have attempted to overcome some of these limitations [for this distinction, see 3].

The first model, theorised by Butler [34] and Cavarero [35], consists of proposing an ethics based on noninjury. That is, an *ethics of nonviolence* is derived from the anthropology of vulnerability. Such an ethics develops a different meaning of responsibility, also nourished by the common condition of vulnerability, from which a minimum imperative of solidarity should be developed. Starting from the suffering that our bodies endure at the behest of another body, which leads us to an experience of pain—understood as that which makes us aware of our interdependence and inescapable shared vulnerability—Butler configures an ontology of vulnerability in opposition to the individualist ontology of modernity and to the individualist claim to a self that is untouchable by the other. Our exposure to the other, to outrage and violence, allows us to respond to the other who challenges us and invites us to take responsibility. Responsibility, in fact, does not depend on will but is the result of the inevitable vulnerability that allows us to respond to the other. Violence reveals our structural physical vulnerability in a private and public exposure to the action of the other from which we cannot escape and which makes us aware that we are not isolated individuals. This model seems to answer the questions raised by Furedi about the idea of a weakened and fearful humanity. In this case, vulnerability is understood as a sense of strength. The often-cited limitations of this approach are that it reduces vulnerability to an ethical and non-political issue (see [4]).

The second model is related to the ethics of *care*. It is not about refraining from harming the other but about the active, positive duty to perform an act of care towards the other. Care, as Joan Tronto [36] has well pointed out, refers to a whole field of social interventions aimed at alleviating the suffering of the vulnerable and ensuring the best possible quality of life. However, according to Tronto, it also includes all kinds of everyday gestures that contribute to one's own well-being and that of the community in which one lives. This attitude challenges the classical doctrines of moral philosophy, which largely ignore this type of practice or at least subsume it under a set of theoretical concerns that they consider higher, relegating it to feminist

thought and women's practice. In contrast, we can say that the long process of maturation and evolution, combined with the properly human capacities of moral perception and attachment, make caring for people who are dependent on others the mark of our humanity. Caring, then, concerns not only interpersonal relations and social justice but also the level of political intervention: caring, giving and receiving care complete the circle that unites the individual and the collective, at the centre of which is the subject as vulnerable and potentially dependent, i.e., all human beings. One of the limitations of this perspective has been to consider care as primarily a moral paradigm.

Finally, there is a third model. It is related to the interpretation of vulnerability as an *impropriety of the self*. Fineman's model [37], which is linked to Nussbaum's idea of vulnerability [38] related to fate, accidents and violence, considers the intervention of institutions necessary but places the greatest responsibility on the vulnerable subject, who has the obligation to react (to be resilient), thus favouring social adaptation over criticism or transformation of existing structures and social relations. These models, which give a good account of the constant intertwining of the psychological and moral levels with the bodily level, encounter a limitation: 'a distancing of the political, either through its forgetting or its strict limitation' [3, p. 38] or, to use Shulman's words, "they do not ask how injury can be transformed into action" [39, p. 235].

The limit of these proposals, as Ferrarese [3] has pointed out, would therefore be the marginal role of the political dimension, which leaves the solution to vulnerability to the individual or to interpersonal relationships. Is it possible to identify a different trajectory to at least partially overcome some of the limitations of this proposal?

5 Vulnerability as a "Critic to Forms of Life"?

One way in which critical theory [3, 41] responds to these limitations is by proposing a critical analysis of vulnerability.

Suffering was already used in this sense by the early Frankfurt School theorists: from its epistemological status, suffering derives its political status because it pushes for social transformation: "The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering should not be, that things should be different" [40, p. 203; on the capacity of suffering to be a form of emancipation, see 41].

Perhaps a further step in this direction can be taken by combining the concept of vulnerability with that of forms of life and, more specifically, by considering vulnerability as a *critique of forms of life* [see 42].

As mentioned above, the use of vulnerability as a critical and normative category has been extensively developed by the critical theory approach. Similarly, the concept of "form of life", or rather of "forms of life" (used in the plural because it does not only refer to the biological dimension), has also found considerable elaboration within the more recent developments of this tradition (Fig. 3).

Forms of life have been understood as the way in which an individual or a group of individuals live their lives, either by virtue of their biological constitution or on the

Fig. 3 Louise Bourgeois, *The fragile*. Source Wikiart



basis of values, beliefs, and habits in which the subjects are already located (hence Butler's idea of subjectivation and domination). It may be useful here to return to the notion of forms of life as it has been reconsidered in recent thinking, insofar as it overcomes the distinction between the social and the biological dimension and allows greater attention to be paid precisely to their articulation. The forms of life of an individual or group are derived from their biological constitutions, but those forms also shape their experiences, thoughts and actions, which in turn are shaped by the culture and society in which they live. It has to do with the ethical and historical dimension, but it also shows the circular relationship, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, between the world and human life, which mutually shape each other. Finally, forms of life are also attempts to solve problems, crises and conflicts. However, they are not ways of life (*Lebenweisen*), they are not individual options, rather they are about both the context from which we come and that in which we are formed. It is precisely because of the comprehensiveness that the concept of forms of life, when combined with vulnerability, can offer a resource which is not only hermeneutic and normative but which is also a source of emancipation. Vulnerability thus becomes a way of showing what is wrong with our forms of life: existential crises, project failures, alienation but also, physical, economic, cultural hardships, the exercise of power, domination, etc.¹¹ In this sense, vulnerability becomes a critical category that

¹¹ In her work on forms of life as a critique of capitalism, Rahel Jaeggi underlines the primacy given to critical activity per se, which in turn is focused on crises and problems, and thus the relaunching

allows tensions and ambiguities to emerge, as well as the richness of relationships. On the other hand, the concept of vulnerability can also outline the positive tasks by which forms of life are measured, the success of which is understood precisely in terms of resolving crises and conflicts, thus avoiding any essentialism, paternalism or perfectionism.

Vulnerability as a critique of forms of life is thus revealed as a search for the conditions of possibility for the transformation and appropriation of conditions of life. Considering that forms of life are “materialised” in institutions, and even more in architectures, tools, bodies and material structures, we understand how they set the limits of what we can do while allowing us to do things in a certain way. Thus, if forms of life refer both to a constitution of their own and to the product of the elaboration of what happens in society, vulnerability as a form of critique can help us to work towards a structural transformation of individual and social practices and institutions. The novelty that it introduces in relation to previous forms of criticism is that it refers to an idea of the human being—as vulnerable—that is completely different from that one that has been dominant in the Western tradition and that has also permeated part of critical theory.

In this sense, vulnerability can respond to attempts at essentialisation by positioning itself as a non-essential, non-exclusive and non-constraining condition of lived, plurally stratified existence [44]. That is, even if the transition to *homo vulnerabilis* does not take place, the ability to look at the vulnerabilities [45] of all our forms of life from a critical perspective could still serve to denounce and act on multiple levels and in a differentiated way with respect to each individual vulnerability. In fact, to understand vulnerability as a critique of forms of life does not mean to give it a precise sphere of intervention, or of action, or a rigid form, but to make it an open, unconditioned and unconditional tool of analysis and of policy and practice. *Vulnerability as a critique of forms of life* can thus assume the ability to make the normative expectations associated with it explicit, to show new noncodified forms of vulnerability, to make them reflexive, and to make them the subject of debate. Additionally, it can be a way of representing the reasons for conflicts and struggles in society, thus fully recovering the claim of the new subjectivities in the public sphere to be recognised.

Core Messages

- The concept of human vulnerability has been revived in recent decades to overturn the classical anthropological vision of the Promethean human being.
- The revival of this concept in many fields and with many variations has made it too broad, depriving it of its effectiveness.
- Both the heuristic and the normative use of the concept of vulnerability have thus far proved inadequate.

of a “negativist” approach with regard to all those philosophical and anthropological attitudes that instead aim at researching and identifying the hypothetical essential or fundamental nuclei of human existence or its (self-)realisation. [43]

- Vulnerability as a critique of forms of life can help to build a socio-political model that is more respectful of justice and equality but also of the uniqueness and needs of each living being.

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