

Chapter 3

Humanity of the Human and the Politics of Vulnerability



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There is in each human being something sacred. But it is not his person, which is not anything more than his personality. It is him, this man, wholly and simply. There is a passerby in the street who has long arms, blue eyes, a mind where thoughts are swirling that I know nothing about, but that may well be nothing special. It is neither his person nor his personality that is sacred to me. It is him. Him as a whole. Arms, eyes, thoughts, everything. I would not violate any of this without infinite scruples
Simone Weil, *Human Personality*, 1943

Abstract What I propose is to explicit the relationship between two dimensions, which, in my opinion, are inseparable from any discourse about vulnerability. On the one hand, the horizon of politics and institutions, the horizon of practice; on the other, that relative to the definition of the ‘humanity of the human’, the theoretical horizon. To talk about the ‘politics of vulnerability’, we need to understand what is meant by vulnerability and the dimensions it implies. In this particular case, I want to discuss two philosophers who found a way to keep these two dimensions together, namely, Judith Butler and Simone Weil. The thesis I would like to arrive at could be articulated in the following points: (1) vulnerability is ‘constitutive’ of the humanity of the human; (2) vulnerability also stems from certain discourses of power; (3) to accept vulnerability as the common trait of humanity can be the basis upon which to construct a nonviolent or least violent possible coexistence; (4) in order to arrive at this, the philosophical and political problems to be addressed are ‘attention for’ and ‘recognition’ of vulnerability, and this implies circumstances where vulnerability is not obvious or is not recognised as such.

Keywords Politics · Vulnerability · Humanity · Bare life · Simone Weil · Judith Butler

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1 Introduction

What I propose is to explicit the relationship between two dimensions, which, in my opinion, are inseparable from any discourse about vulnerability. These two dimensions demand closer attention, in particular in the wake of the pandemic. On the one hand, the horizon of politics and institutions, that is, the horizon of practice; on the other, that relative to the definition of the “humanity of the human”, the theoretical horizon. In order to talk about the “politics of vulnerability”, we need to understand what is meant by vulnerability and the dimensions it implies. *In primis*, I would say those of identity, subjective or social.

In this particular case, I want to discuss two philosophers who found a way to keep these two dimensions together, namely, Simone Weil and Judith Butler. For both, the concept of vulnerability is related to the understanding of the humanity of human being.

2 Affliction and “Life Without Form”

I am convinced that we need to profoundly rethink the relationship between the humanity of the human and vulnerability to understand whether and how a certain conception of vulnerability can help us transform the juridico-political dimension that we find ourselves confronted with today. For Simone Weil, the human being is *intrinsically* vulnerable, and this vulnerability is the expression of what Levinas defined as “the humanity of the human”. Both ethics and politics should be reconsidered starting from this premise. Although a constitutive trait of the human, for Judith Butler perhaps above all, vulnerability is a condition determined, in a Foucauldian manner, by a certain order of discourses. These initial points already allow one to understand that theoretically and politically, both Weil and Butler’s philosophical proposition is situated in contrast to Hobbes’ *homo homini lupus est* or Thucydides “one commands where one has power”—theses in turn fundamental, for example, for the philosophico-political reflection of a philosopher and jurist such as Carl Schmitt.

To fully understand the thoughts of Simone Weil on these issues, it is useful to recall the spatiotemporal horizon in which she lived and wrote. To recall that she died in 1943 is to underline that all of her works are situated in the period prior to the end of the Second World War and thus that her works are separated from postwar reflections on power, sovereignty, governmentality and biopolitics. This fact helps us better understand (and appreciate) her originality.

To address the issue of vulnerability in Weil, we could pursue several different paths: that of following her first works dealing with oppression in factories, through her reflections on Nazi Germany, to works spanning the years following her exile from France after the Nazi occupation. My aim here is to follow the trace of one concept that unites these different periods, as it names the human condition to which Weil paid the greatest attention: that of ‘affliction’. The latter indicates a profound

state of psychological and social despondency due to adverse conditions in which any human being can find itself. Simone Weil understood that important philosophical and political questions gravitate around the *affliction* [*malheur*] and grasped its theoretical potential: “*Malheur*, admirable word, without its equivalent in other languages. We haven’t got all we could out of it”¹ [1, p. 3]. Affliction [*malheur*] in fact could be identified precisely as ‘pure exposure to power’: such an exposure is the most evident and scandalous manifestation of the ‘ontological exposure’ of the human being, of its inability to find exclusively ‘in itself’ the resources necessary for its own existence, and hence of its originary dependence on an ‘outside’, whether nature or society, which determines its position as an ‘ex-position’: “Human misery is not created by the extreme affliction that falls upon some human beings, it is only revealed by it” [1, p. 262]. Weil affirms that extreme misery *afflicts* human beings. She uses a transitive verb that seems to indicate a clear separation between the complete existence in itself of a human being and the affliction that can come from the outside and ‘afflict’ it, wound it. However, in the second part of the sentence, she adds that affliction [*malheur*] doesn’t ‘create’ but rather ‘reveals’ human misery. In reality, however, human misery consists precisely of being ontologically exposed to affliction. Being exposed to affliction ‘is’ vulnerability, which, as the etymology of the word teaches us, means being exposed to *vulnus*, to ‘wounding’. Such an exposure is not contingent but ‘internal’ to the human being. However, one is rarely entirely conscious of it, except in cases when the intensification of the *malheur* renders our being vulnerable evident, as in the case of a disease or an accident.

In the absence of the specific manifestation of affliction, only a certain degree of ‘attention’ may result in a ‘continuous’ awareness of affliction as a condition internal to the human being. It is towards this degree of attention that we must strive, according to Weil: “the soul must be vulnerable to the wounds of all flesh, without any exception, as it is to those of one’s own flesh, neither more nor less so; to every death as it is to one’s own death” [1, p. 281].² In addition, yet, many things lead one to ‘evade’ such an awareness. This evasion is not always or necessarily the result of contingencies such as the greater or lesser spiritual power of each person individually. The reason this happens is more fundamental, namely, the fact that affliction confronts us with ‘life laid bare’: “Affliction, under this aspect, is hideous, as life in its nakedness always is; like an amputated limb, or the swarming of insects.

¹ One of the reasons why this issue has not been adequately explored is because confronted with the *malheur*, as Simone Weil says, recoiling is the spontaneous response: “Thought revolts from contemplating affliction, to the same degree that living flesh recoils from death. A stag advancing voluntarily step by step to offer itself to the teeth of a pack of hounds is about as probable as an act of attention directed towards a real affliction, which is close at hand, on the part of a mind which is free to avoid it” [2, p. 85].

² However, in the *malheur* there is something ‘inassumable’, as Levinas argued about suffering: “Suffering is, of course, a datum in consciousness, a certain ‘psychological content,’ similar to the lived experience of color, sound, contact, or any other sensation. However, in this very ‘content’ it is an in-spite-of consciousness, the unassumable. The unassumable and ‘unassumability’” [3, p. 91]. About Levinas’ philosophy see [4].

Life without form. Survival is then the one and only attachment [...], without any other object than itself. Hell"³ [1, p. 223].

Affliction, therefore, can reduce a human being to 'life without form', compelled to look only after its 'persistence'. In this sense, Weil can indeed be considered perhaps the first philosopher to have taken the question of 'bare life' as the specific object of her reflection before Levinas, Arendt or Foucault. The only thinker to have written about it in those same years was Walter Benjamin. "Life without form", "life laid bare": this is the 'supreme vulnerability', the 'zero degree' of the human being, the 'body exposed to wounding and death', ontologically as well as at the hands of others. Although Simone Weil barely knew anything about life and death in camps, her description in her text on the Iliad of the effects of violence on human beings reduced to "cadavers without being dead yet" more than resembles the descriptions we find in the memoirs of Nazi camp survivors:

this indefinable influence that the presence of another human being has on us is not exercised by men whom a moment of impatience can deprive of life, who can die before even thought has a chance to pass sentence on them. In their presence, people move about as if they were not there; they, on their side, running the risk of being reduced to nothing in a single instant, imitate nothingness in their own persons. Pushed, they fall. Fallen, they lie where they are [...] It is not that their life is harder than other men's nor that they occupy a lower place in the social hierarchy; no, they are another human species, a compromise between a man and a corps. [6, pp. 7-8]⁴

To devote attention to human beings reduced to 'bare life' is not only a difficult but almost impossible task, as such attention both confronts and connects us to an *extreme* possibility of the human being, which is still a human possibility to which we are all exposed. This is why Weil takes education to recognise such vulnerability and assume responsibility for it to be among the highest tasks of politics.

Attention has to be educated to identify the *needs* of the body and spirit of each human being to which we are beholden to respond, to be responsible for, before claiming any rights for ourselves. The obligation towards another human being is neither recognised nor acknowledged when the human being is reduced to "bare life". Precisely because of this, Weil recalls that, even if unrecognised, the obligation *exists*, persists and resists: "the object of any obligation, in the realm of human affairs, is always the human being as such. There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned" [8, p. 4]⁵ (Fig. 1).

³ It is no coincidence that Levinas strongly proclaims the uselessness of all suffering: "Thus, the least one can say about suffering is that, in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless: 'for nothing.' Doubtless this depth of meaninglessness that the analysis seems to suggest is confirmed by empirical situations of pain, in which pain remains undiluted, so to speak, and isolates itself in consciousness, or absorbs the rest of consciousness" [3, p. 93]. I focused on this issue in [5].

⁴ The question of the relationship between subjectivity, power and vulnerability is the core of [7].

⁵ We have seen during the Covid 19 pandemic, how the concept of 'obligation to the other' has been used by all governments that have decided to practice policies of restricting freedom and lock



Fig. 1 Early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. Military trucks carrying coffins that the Italian city of Bergamo can no longer bury, that it can no longer even cremate. The military will escort them to Modena and Bologna, then the ashes will return to their loved ‘ones’. Bergamo (Italy)—March 2020

One cannot but begin with this ‘ontological’ given in order to constitute an ethical discourse and a political project. As important as this invitation of Weil may be, it suffers from one important limitation: namely, it places excessive weight on the subjective disposition in recognising and assuming the vulnerability of others. This is why Weil’s philosophical approach can be complemented with that of Judith Butler, helping us rethink the “politics of vulnerability” in a much more systematic way.

3 Differential Vulnerability and Interdependence

What I am particularly interested in here is one aspect of Judith Butler’s thought: her attention to all types of vulnerability and all types of ‘precarious’ life. Like Weil, Butler is famous for not separating subjective questions from broader political reflection. Her philosophy is inserted in the specific line of feminism that insists on the necessary relationship between the personal and political. As noted, “life worth mourning” is one of the modalities Butler uses in trying to give political and philosophical dignity to “precarious life”. A play on Levinas, who in his text *Peace*

down. The issue of obligation, in that case, is intertwined with that of community and immunity. To clarify these issues, the work of Roberto Esposito is indispensable: see [9, 10].



Fig. 2 Migrant shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea in the waters in front of the village of Steccato di Cutro, Crotone province, Italy. More than 72 victims. Crotone (Italy)—March 2023

and Proximity speaks of “the face as the extreme precarity of the other”. Butler thinks the precariousness of life in degrees of ‘gravity’ so to speak, and in ways not dissimilar to Weil, while dedicating specific attention to the multiple forms of contemporary precariousness. Precariousness as the uncertainty of work in the future; as extreme poverty; as lack of primary resources (water, food); as lack of security in war zones; as exposure to gender-based violence, to take only a few heterogenous examples; all the way to “unreal” lives, to the *invisible* lives of those who die of hunger, wars, wreckage, those whose faces and names remain unfamiliar (Fig. 2).

The essential question, then, ought to be: who or what renders such lives precarious or even “unreal”? The unequal distribution of the precarity *differential*, globally as well as within nation-states, is always the outcome of certain orders of discourses and dispositives of power. The latter prevent precariousness from being recognised as such to the point of “normalising” it, presenting it as governed by norms.

Butler develops the concept of *grievable life* reflecting on the events preceding and following *September 11th*: the Americans, after the great *vulnus* inflicted on the nation held to be invulnerable, produce a very precise discourse of power: one has to identify with the victims, recognise their lives as grievable lives, lives worthy of national mourning. Ground Zero, the place where the genuine politics of mourning inseparable from the question of identity was put into place and enacted, demonstrates it clearly. Starting from these premises, Butler asks why some lives are considered worthy of mourning, while others are not. What is at play in this recognition of the life of the other as a grievable life? Such a question, according to Butler, includes

or presupposes a certain kind of relationship between the *vulnerability* of the other and one's own. Faced with the attacks, the reaction of the US was that of the total *rejection* of its own vulnerability and, in return, the will to affirm its own power. There was even no 'tension' between invulnerability and vulnerability: vulnerability was externalised, placed outside of itself, celebrating the dead and demonstrating its own power through the killings of others held to be responsible for the *vulnus*. This refusal of one's own vulnerability prevents seeing the vulnerability of others, as accepting one's own vulnerability amounted to *questioning one's own identity*. Admittedly, vulnerability brings into question a *certain* conception of identity, that of a closed, defined, self-centred, self-sufficient subject, confined to both the individual and political level: the sovereign and autonomous subject corresponds to a sovereign state of closed and precisely determined and delimited borders.

Levinas was the first to masterfully *deconstruct* this type of subjectivity, a project continued later in philosophy by Derrida and by Freud and Lacan in psychoanalyses. The latter two revealed that there were multiple elements working within and outside of the I, thus putting an end to any unitary and noncontradictory image of identity. Butler keeps these different lines of thought present, complementing them with feminist psychoanalysis, from Melanie Klein to Julia Kristeva. This is what led Butler to question, for example, *obligatory heterosexuality and the gender binary*. Levinas, however, is certainly the one whose role is most important: the I is always already 'exposed' to the other, not only in the sense that the other is before oneself but that one is lacerated by the other from within, by the Face of the other which commands one not to kill her. Nonetheless, to be vulnerable for Butler—the "thou shall not kill" which, on Levinas' account, the Face of the other commands—isn't a commandment endowed with an intrinsic ethical power capable of modifying relations. Because of this, it can remain ineffectual at the level of both ethics and politics. Vulnerability, for its part, is neither good nor bad per se. It becomes an ethico-political problem once the dispositives of power and dominant order of discourses turn it into a state of precariousness or even "life laid bare":

So when we say that every infant is surely vulnerable, that is clearly true; but it is true, in part, precisely because our utterance enacts the very recognition of vulnerability and so shows the importance of recognition itself for sustaining vulnerability. We perform the recognition by making the claim, and that is surely a very good ethical reason to make the claim. We make the claim, however, precisely because it is not taken for granted, precisely because it is not, in every instance, honoured. [11, p. 43]

Culture and its norms lead us to agree that an infant is vulnerable. Foucault would say that it is by virtue of the 'discourses' that a certain culture has constructed around infancy that we become capable of recognising the new-born as a vulnerable being in need of care. If, however, we turn our attention to adults, Butler underlines, recognising their vulnerability is not as simple as it might seem. We can give several concrete examples: think of a person with Alzheimer or a person with psychiatric problems. When confronted with these problems, our attention tires and shifts away, not only because of the personal impact but also because of the social "shame" such problems cause due to ingrained prejudices.

However, according to Butler, precise situations such as these can be helpful in illuminating a more fundamental dimension: the vulnerability of such subjects reveals the dimension of the inescapable dependency on others. These adults and their families cannot live a dignified life if not surrounded by networks of assistance and support. In a certain sense, the vulnerability of one is conclusive evidence of the *interdependence* of all, of the fact that being in the world, as children teach us since their birth, is to arrive in this world fundamentally lacking: each and every one of us, even if not ill, depends on the life of others. Interdependence is a constitutive condition of the human, and our vulnerability reveals it as such. Considering all of these elements together, Butler aims to offer an even more precise synthesis:

The first is that vulnerability cannot be associated exclusively with injurability. All responsiveness to what happens is a function and effect of vulnerability—being open to a history, registering an impression, or having something impressed upon one’s understanding. Vulnerability may be a function of openness, that is, of being open to a world that is not fully known or predictable. Part of what a body does (to use the phrase of Deleuze, derived from his reading of Spinoza) is to open onto the body of another, or a set of others, and for this reason bodies are not self-enclosed kinds of entities. [12, p. 149]

What then, is to be done politically? Above all, prioritising and promoting discourses that favour recognition of vulnerability not so much as an ‘ontological’ element relative to the humanity of the human being—something presupposed, lacking direct ethico-political effects— but as the contingency subject to change in relation to time, place and culture, taking into account its differential distribution as the outcome of certain order of discourses and concrete contingencies. Butler is wary of an ‘essentialist’ recognition of vulnerability, which, as she underlines, can lead to the emergence of aberrant discourses, such as paternalistic discourses about women or those at the basis of ‘humanitarian’ wars. Essentialist recognition can ultimately function as an instrument to be used against the discriminated subjects, inverting positions, such as when the ‘traditional family’ recognises itself as vulnerable in relation to gay families, which then become the enemies to be defended from and fought against.

Instead, Butler is convinced that the relationship between vulnerability and dependency can be politically used in a performative way within certain types of ‘nonviolent struggles’, which take advantage of being in common in such a way as to expose and bring into crisis oppressive governmental dispositives.

Therefore, to accept the fact that we depend on others is to accept our own vulnerability as cosubstantial with the humanity of the human being. This reveals and points to a more general and complex dependency that has to be understood and grasped so that it can be translated into ethical and political discourse. Vulnerability becomes evident in more or less grave situations, in principle unpredictable and uncontrollable, to which every human being is exposed: from some unpleasant comment of a passer-by, through break-ups of friendships or love relationships, to the annihilation of the entire population by bombing.

This is why I believe it is useful to conclude with one last Butler’s quote that explicitly reveals the inextricable relationship between vulnerability, interdependency and political struggle: “To say that any of us are vulnerable beings is to mark our radical

dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining and sustainable world” [12, p. 150]. Concretely, this means that when those who are seen as “dispensable” or “not worthy of mourning” unite in public with particular demands, they are enacting a deliberate form of exposure and persistence, “the embodied demand for a liveable life that shows us the simultaneity of being precarious and acting” [12, p. 153].

Taking the thesis I began with, I would say that prior to anything else vulnerability is constitutive of the humanity of the human being; second, that it cannot be separated from a certain order of discourses governed by the powers that be; third, assuming vulnerability as a common trait of humanity is indispensable if we are to commit ourselves to nonviolent coexistence; and finally, envisioning such a coexistence demands extreme attention and public recognition of vulnerability, in particular in circumstances and conditions where vulnerability is not evident.

I think that the steps needed to turn vulnerability into a building block of ‘nonviolent’ ethics and politics imply that we refuse to consider identity as a self-enclosed monad, as protected and in need of protection. Acceptance, therefore, that identity is always already traversed by the other and open to the outside; moreover, that it is always already constituted by the relationship between the outside and the inside. Accepting this fact is a precondition for understanding vulnerability not as a threat but as the condition of being-together-in-one-place, as Levinas’ beautiful expression has it. Therefore, there is a demand to rediscover the positive and politically productive meaning and worth of vulnerability, understood as openness to the other and the cause of our mutual interdependency.

If this is a task to be undertaken, above all on a subjective and personal level, the supreme responsibility of a politics that takes vulnerability as its beginning and its end would be that of avoiding at all costs the reduction of any human being to the maximum degree of affliction [*malheur*], to “life without form”, exposing it to politically avoidable circumstances. Second, in cases where it is clear that some human beings live in grave conditions of affliction, the responsibility of politics is to remedy these by proposing a solution, having the courage to—radically if needed—question itself to assume responsibility for vulnerability. All institutions should assume this responsibility if they truly believe in justice, which alone is the basis for a nonviolent being-together-in-one-place. This should also be the aim of any instituting process capable of responding to the needs of the present [13, 14].

Core Messages

- Vulnerability is *constitutive* of the humanity of the human.
- Vulnerability also stems from certain discourses of power.
- To accept vulnerability as the common trait of humanity can be the basis upon which to construct a non-violent or least violent possible coexistence.
- In order to arrive at this, the philosophical and political problems to be addressed are *attention for* and *recognition* of vulnerability, and this implies circumstances where vulnerability is not obvious or is not recognised as such.

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