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Vulnerability, Perfection and Christian Education

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ABSTRACT

The reflections in this article answer two related questions. First, is perfection compatible with the “imperfection” of being vulnerable? Second, what role does vulnerability play in the Christian educational paradigm?

To address these questions, the concept of vulnerability will be discussed. Then the concept of perfection will be discussed, from the perspective of Christian theology. Lastly, brush strokes of a Christian educational proposal will be offered, that incorporates vulnerability into the classical educational paradigm (*paideia*) of virtue education.



If we consider perfection as communion, then vulnerability does not represent an obstacle to perfection but the condition for flourishing. Vulnerability as an expression of affectivity is not deprivation but perfection. The Christian educational model supposes a correction and improvement of the Greek educational model.

KEYWORDS

Christian education;
communion; human
perfection; virtue
education; vulnerability

Education has traditionally been considered as human improvement, as a learning process to achieve a fuller human existence (Barrio, 1998). According to the Greek concept of education (*paideia*) excellence (*areté*) is the goal of this learning process (Jaeger, 2001). The Greek *paideia* assumed vulnerability as a problem (even an obstacle) to fullness or human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). In this perspective, the well-lived life is vulnerable to factors outside a person’s control (Nussbaum, 2001). The spiritual and educational Greek exercises sought to moderate and control any damage to the soul (Hadot, 2000). The Stoa tried to educate in the self-control of irascible and concupiscible appetites and gave an boost to education in the virtues that had already been proposed by Plato or Aristotle (1985) in their Ethics.

An interesting discussion has emerged recently about understanding vulnerability as a positive character trait. We can find a precedent in the discussion about this topic in the discourse about suffering and impassibility of God in Christian but also Jewish theology. This discourse has tried to reconcile perfection and suffering in God. Vulnerability and

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dependence have also been highlighted in the field of moral philosophy as a relevant aspect of the human condition that explains why human beings need virtues (MacIntyre, 1999). In any case, the concepts of perfection and vulnerability are key elements of all educational models.

The reflections in this article answer two related questions. First, is perfection compatible with the “imperfection” of being vulnerable? Second, what role does vulnerability play in the Christian educational paradigm?

To address these questions, first the concept of vulnerability related with the human condition will be discussed. Then the concept of perfection will be discussed, from the perspective of Christian theology. Lastly, brush strokes of a Christian educational proposal will be offered, that incorporates vulnerability into the classical educational paradigm of virtue education.

Vulnerability and human condition

Originally, vulnerability was a subject of marginal academic interest, but now it is relevant for many disciplines (Vuk, 2021). The discourse on vulnerability has evolved, and today it is assumed that vulnerability is an element of the human condition, an expression of our creaturely limitations (Reynolds, 2008). Vulnerability is universal but has different contingent sources and expressions or states (Rogers et al., 2012; Scully, 2014). Like many concepts, vulnerability admits various interrelated definitions. All of them are grounded in the etymology of the term: *vulnus*, Latin for wound. Simply put, a vulnerable person is one exposed to being injured or benefited. Today, in the theological and philosophical discourse, vulnerability is conceived not in an essentially negative aspect but a more ambivalent one (Culp, 2010; Gilson, 2011, p. 310).

The foundation of human rights rests on the condition of personhood or human condition, shared by all persons regardless of their circumstances. Every person is vulnerable, although some people -or everybody in certain periods of life- are especially vulnerable and dependent, twchich demands the help, the justice, and the mercy of others (MacIntyre, 1999). Existential vulnerability is the source of striving for perfection, improvement. “Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us, but one that can enable us, to be open, to learn new things, to love, to find comfort in the presence of others.” (Gilson, 2011, p. 310). Vulnerability entails an acknowledgment of interdependence and an active openness toward human differences (Reynolds, 2008, p. 20).

Vulnerability reveals our need for others but also gives us the possibility to complement them. Paradoxically, we need the people who need us. It’s a mutual need. We need to live in communion to develop fully as persons. This universal experience should help us to revise our concept of

eudaimonia that is currently being studied in the field of positive psychology and education (Kristjánsson, 2019). The true *eudaimonia* is communion, not so much well-being. Human flourishing is a fruit of communion. From this perspective, vulnerability and human flourishing are not exclusive to one another, but collaborative (Vuk, 2021).

Vulnerability reveals indirectly the dignity of the person, since it demands that those who are most vulnerable and limited be protected because of their intrinsic dignity (De Koninck, 2009). Human dignity is not a merit that is achieved or lost according to one's behavior but is inherent to the human condition. If we protect vulnerable people, it is because we consider them worthy of such protection for two reasons: because of who they are (that is, persons) and because of what they are called to be. The first reason is ontological and the second is teleological (Koopman, 2007). Human dignity, in Latin *dignitas*, lies in who we are and what we are called to be: these two aspects, nature and purpose, are intrinsically united.

Without downplaying the ontological argument, the teleological argument should be highlighted. In every human being - whatever his physical, mental, or moral condition - we must recognize what he is called to be, his vocation to live in communion with God and with others. This end implies a particular dignity even if the person is not aware of it, even if his actions spoil and contradict his end. No other being has such a high end, so worthy. To achieve this end, which is his most fundamental vocation, he needs to receive from God and from others. Paradoxically, this vocation to communion also implies a need to give and share. Likewise, according to Thomas Aquinas, the teleological perspective allows us to understand that dignity can grow as the end is reached.

Perfection and vulnerability from a Christian perspective

According to the Catholic Church, “perfection” is not identified with a state of life but with reaching our goal of fulfillment and communion with God and others through charity (Gaudium et Spes, 1965, n° 19; Lumen Gentium, 1964, n° 40). “Only charity has the power to draw us closer and unite with God as our ultimate goal” (Martínez, 2006, p. 4). From the Christian perspective, perfection and excellence must be understood as communion, as an expression of charity. Christian perfection is the fruit of an interpersonal gift rather than an individual achievement. It is communion received and developed as the fruit of the encounter with God and with other people. The action of the Holy Spirit who, according to the Father's loving plan and in collaboration with human freedom, configures his children with the Son (Rm 8:30); a configuration that aims at communion (or friendship) with God and with men (Arthur, 2021, p. 43).

Human improvement is a human-divine process, a synergy and communion between God's free action and human freedom. Communion is, therefore, an end but also a means to achieve it.

This communion is the goal or purpose of life (Comisión Teológica Internacional, 2004). Christ's invitation (Mt 5:48): "be perfect, as my Father is perfect" (perfect in Greek is *teleios*, which has the same root as *telos* or goal), must be understood as invitation to engage in *Imitatio Dei* but also as an invitation to live in communion with God and others according to the model of the Trinity and thus reach the goal of life or *telos*. Christ, the perfect(*teleios*) Man, as presented by Saint Paul, is the Man of communion in whom we find our fullness and maturity (*teleiotos*). There is a close etymological and meaningful relationship between communion and perfection or human fullness.

Using Saint Paul's metaphor of the body, all human beings are dependent and interconnected, as members of Christ, with his/her abilities and disabilities. Every member of the body has deficits and limitations, and has a "revelatory capacity" (Brock, 2019, p. 53) to reveal something of God's character to others (Gosbell, 2021). Our redeemed bodies – whatever their final form – are bodies that will finally be brought to completion in Christ, in a redeemed communion (Brock, 2019, p. 186). "All humans are wholly dependent on God and designed to live in community as both providers and recipients of each others' gifts" (Gosbell, 2021, p. 11). We are called to a "vulnerable communion" that results from sharing with God and with others (Reynolds, 2008, p. 18). Communion and human fullness will only be completed in the future (*eschaton*) life but is already partially achieved in this life.

Rabbis also speak of the world to come, *olam habah*, as a continuation of existence. Jesus (Lk 14:15–24) compares the Kingdom of God to a great banquet to which we are summoned, regardless of our disabilities. The characteristic of a banquet is the communion and joy of those who participate. Rejoice because God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28) and "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more" (Rev 21:4). There will be no suffering but there will be affection. In that communion banquet, as we know from the encounters of the Risen Jesus with his disciples, the wounds or marks on our body do not disappear but are testimony to a new joyous existence in continuity with the previous one. Wounds are not erased even though the body has been transformed.

The life of Christ, the servant of Yahweh, reveals the importance of vulnerability and wounds to communion: by his stripes we have been healed and renewed (Is 53:5–11). Christ reveals to man what man is and what his vocation is (Gaudium et Spes, 1965, n° 12). The mystery of

Christ reveals the mystery of man and the mystery of God. He reveals it with his gestures and words, with his life. Jesus Christ offers us the key to interpret all aspects of our life, including our vulnerability (Swinton, 2004). The gospels and the testimony that the Church has defended since its incarnation is that Jesus, the Man-God, suffered as one of us. The *Logos* became man, assuming our human condition, and being vulnerable to the extreme. The life of Christ, his words, and his deeds, and in particular his Passion - the scandal of the Cross - offers a light to understand the paradox or mystery of vulnerability.

Jesus reveals to us the extent to which God is compassionate and merciful (Ps 102) and our suffering is relevant to Him. He is vulnerable, without ceasing to be a transcendent and perfect God. He could not be compassionate without being vulnerable, without being affected by us. Vulnerability, as an expression of affective love, is one of God's attributes. From his loving and free kenosis, *tzimtzum*, emptying, or self-limitation comes creation (von Balthasar, 2000, p. 32). From his passion -along with his action- springs our renewal as a melody of communion. God is vulnerable love to the point that he cannot not love, he can only love. God is the greatest and at the same time the most vulnerable, the "last and servant of all" (Mk 9:35-37). This is the ultimate perfection that we discover in God: God is extremely vulnerable and free love of communion. If God is that vulnerable, as well as worthy, we can conclude that the most perfect and excellent beings are the most vulnerable, with a vulnerability ordered to communion.

The question about the suffering of God, of the Trinity, has a long history. Since the beginning, the question about passion in God has been raised; strongly rooted in Christian theology is the claim that there can be no suffering in God because of his transcendence and perfection. For many theologians, to say that God suffers and is vulnerable is to use an improper metaphor and attribute an anthropomorphic characteristic to him (Weinandy, 2000). However, 20th century theology seeks to reconcile vulnerability and God (Forte, 1988; Galot, 1975; Moltmann, 1972). How to reconcile vulnerability and perfection in God? Our answer consists in considering that vulnerable affectivity is not a deprivation but perfection, constitutive of God's love (Brotherton, 2020 pp.142 and 169). God suffers in a divine way, but He suffers. If we reconsider perfection as communion, then suffering and vulnerability are not an imperfection but a condition for communion. God is vulnerable and suffers because of the human sins that break fellowship with Him. The evil that God suffers does not defeat him, rather his compassionate love is stronger than evil, "do not allow itself to be conquered by evil, but overcomes evil with Good" (Rm 12, 21) (John Paul, 1980, n°. 6).

The suffering of God is free and does not destroy but confirms His other divine attributes (Cantalamessa, 1993, p. 125). God suffers with the sins of men without this being mere anthropomorphism; His compassion is a perfection reconcilable with His transcendence and with the tradition of the Church (Comisión Teológica Internacional, 1981). The suffering of God is not the result of an ontological deficiency, nor of an external imposition: it is a “divine” suffering, surpassing the human categories of love and freedom (Del Cura, 1991, p. 351). It is from the love of communion that vulnerability and perfection are reconciled. Trinitarian communion is a model of communion between humans (to give, receive, and share with others).

Rabbinic theology and tradition also hold to the reconciliation between transcendence and vulnerability in God. The Scriptures show that God is transcendent (Jer 7, 16–19) and at the same time compassionate. God suffers because of the destruction of the Temple and goes into exile with his People, God is afflicted when one individual is suffering. No injustice in this world is suffered alone. God is affected, is wounded by their suffering (Heschel, 2005, p. 35). “God claps His hands over His heart and weeps for the tragedies that have befallen Israel” (Seder Eliyahu Rabba, quoted by Wolpe, 1991, p. 147). Even, God is comforted by human actions as can be seen in many passages of Sacred Scripture. On the other hand, if human suffering were not relevant to God, He would be, in practice, irrelevant to us.

Assuming this Judeo-Christian perspective, the Greek educational paradigm of human improvement and perfection is enriched. For Aristotle, perfection supposes a movement of the being by which it realizes its capacities or potentialities, it passes from potency to act according to its nature. The term perfection -from Latin *perfectus*, participle of the verb *perficere*- refers to something being completely done or finished, that it has reached its goal, that it lacks nothing of what is proper to its nature or art (Aristotle, 1994, 1013b). In common parlance, that which has no defects is considered perfect. The most excellent is the most perfect.

Through vulnerability (not without it) perfection -that is communion, as we have seen before- is reached. Vulnerability and limitations are not alien to the most excellent people; in fact, it is a path of excellence (Corona & López, 2021). The excellence resides not in the absence of suffering but in the presence of communion that can be achieved in this life. Excellence is not only compatible with vulnerability but demands it.

Education, human flourishing, and vulnerability

Western culture inherited a Greek proposal of education in virtues, recognizing its value, but also its insufficiencies (Melina et al., 2007, p. 458). For instance, Christian treatises on the virtues not only differed in terms

of the list of virtues to be lived (virtues of Christ versus the typical virtues of the Greek hero) but also in terms of the way to achieve them, with the collaboration of grace. In any case, throughout the centuries education in virtue has remained at the heart of education. Today virtue education continues to be a topic of interest in education and psychology (Snow, 2017).

Now, what role do vulnerability and communion play in the educational process? The Aristotelian *paideia* assumed vulnerability as a problem (even an obstacle) to achieve *eudaimonia*. Having previously answered that being vulnerable does not diminish our dignity and, further, that it is a condition for achieving communion, we must say that educating in communion requires educating in and through vulnerability, and that vulnerability is not a deprivation but condition for excellence and human flourishing. It requires educating in virtues such as patience, resilience, humility, generosity, justice, and forgiveness. All these virtues entail the recognition of one's and others' vulnerability. Recognizing our vulnerability allows us to open ourselves to interdependence and communion (Cooreman-Guittin, 2021). "The features of human life that expose us to misfortune are precisely those dimensions of our condition that make possible our experience of love and joy, beauty and truth." (Gandolfo, 2015, p. 96). Human flourishing is made possible through embracing vulnerability, rather than fearing or denying it (Carse, 2006, p. 40). Human flourishing can be understood as the "capacity to sustain a felt sense of dignity and effective agency in the face of life's challenges and tragic turns" (Dell'Oro, 2006, p. 5). Vulnerability offers us the possibilities involved in human flourishing.

Education in vulnerability also implies education in affectivity. It is a universal experience that emotional wounds sometimes make interpersonal relationships more difficult. Suffering alone does not make us better. But the solution is not to avoid all suffering and affection, because without affection there is no love and therefore no communion. Likewise, affective deficiency implies that the person may not be able to feel the consequences of her actions in the lives of others which leads to a serious ethical deficiency (Lickona, 1997). In this sense, vulnerability is a trait of psychological maturity. An adequate affective education enables healthy interpersonal relationships. Certainly, affective education is essential in the educational process, but it must be integrated with the education of the intelligence and the will.

A Christian paradigm helps us by revealing that affection, like vulnerability, is ordered toward communion, communion understood as giving, receiving, and sharing. The desire for something good (and ultimately for communion) is an affective movement and arouses the interior motive and action in the person to achieve it (De Finance, 1966, pp. 111–125). Separated from this *telos*, affections (as well as intelligence and will) are

lost and confuse the person, leading to the tyranny of emotivism. Affective vulnerability, well integrated, is therefore a principle of virtuous action.

Educating in virtues requires educating in desire: not desiring little but desiring much and well (Bosch, 2020). Desiring good, is important, but without falling into perfectionism, which is a psychological and moral disorder (Macedo et al., 2014; Stoeber & Yang, 2016). Young people (and in fact, people at every stage of life) need to find a suitable object for their desire that moves them to act, something beautiful that awakens them. Meaningful learning connects not only with prior knowledge or with the immediate needs of students but with their profound needs. Using innovative resources is not enough to arouse interest in the subject. It is necessary to educate in desire, connecting the students with purpose and meaning.

This theoretical reflection is confirmed by empirical research. The experience and ethical reflection of vulnerability allows a better understanding of one's and others' dignity and virtues (Stikholmen et al., 2021). Moments of special vulnerability are also opportunities to receive the most important lessons in virtues or freedom. When the student and teacher have an interpersonal encounter, grounded in communion, students and teachers flourish. Therefore, the educator must be an expert in communion who knows how to inspire, to bring harmony to the community and accompany his students toward communion (López & Ortiz de Montellano, 2021).

To educate and guide others to be experts in communion, the educator must first have learned through his own vulnerability and know how to allow himself to be guided by another. This is how the Scriptural reference to Christ as the guide (*archegos* in Greek) of his brothers must be understood, as the one who, having suffered and passed through the trial, now goes ahead showing them the way (Heb 2:10 and Heb 12:2).

Final reflections

Today our educational system is beginning to recognize the importance of vulnerability, but the new policies may have negative effects (Brunila et al., 2016). It is a time to reconsider vulnerability from a new perspective: from human flourishing and perfection understood as communion. This offers the opportunity to educate persons towards with greater emotional wealth and maturity. In any case, it requires an educational model that integrates intelligence, will and affectivity. Here lies the value of the personalistic and virtuous Christian educational model.

Education in virtues and vulnerability must be a central element of this model updated with the findings of psychology (Kaczor, 2015; Seligman,

2011). In this model, the four cardinal virtues coined by the Greco-Latin ethical paradigm continue to be of great value if they are integrated into a Christian paradigm (Vitz et al., 2020). I hope my proposal on understanding perfection as communion helps in this direction. If we consider perfection as communion, then vulnerability is not an imperfection but a condition for communion. Educating in virtues is not an individualistic education but a social one. The end (telos) of this education is communion.

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