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Rarita MIHAIL

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The Faces of Human Vulnerability¹

Rarita MIHAIL²

Abstract

*The notion of vulnerability is one of the beliefs of a recent current of moral and political philosophy, namely care ethics. Stemming, especially, from the North American feminist movement, this care ethics, based on the rejection of a universal and abstract morals, privileges the relational dimension based on the orientation towards human vulnerability. Subject to the weight of the tyranny of normality and perfection, contemporary societies, glorifying the individual who is useful and performant, struggle to hide, or more often than not deny the vulnerability of human beings. The notion of vulnerability appeared not only as a mutual sign of any person who is in a dependent situation, but also as one of the constitutive dimensions of the essence of living beings and of their life environment. In this article, the notion of vulnerability will be studied by identifying the representative themes of human vulnerability particular to their life and its conditions of being. Firstly, the hypothesis proposed by Freud in *Le malaise dans la culture* (2010) represents the underlying basis of this study on human vulnerability. Next, two important concepts guide the study proposed: the vulnerability inherent to human subjectivity, from the perspective of Lévinas, and the one akin the process of socialising of human beings, from the perspective of Habermas.*

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

1. Introduction

Since times immemorial, fear of dying, escaping suffering, the extreme situations of human existence, have been at the root of philosophical and religious systems. Starting from the analysis of human reactions while facing these extreme situations, Martha Nussbaum (1986), in *The fragility of Goodness*, states that the Greek form an ethical theory. In a text which pays homage to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the “founding father of human sciences”, Claude Lévi-Strauss (2009) reminds of the fact that Rousseau strongly supported the idea of an “innate reluctance to seeing others suffer” in human beings; if society moved on from nature to culture, from emotional to rational, from animal to human, the human being remains “a living, suffering creature alike all other creatures, before distinguishing itself from these through subordinate criteria” (Lévi-Strauss, 2009, p. 25).

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² Associate Professor, „Dunărea de Jos” University of Galati, Romania, rarita.mihail@ugal.ro.

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

2. Three sources of suffering in Freud

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

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

The trust in the scientific progress, thus accompanies the objectives that our civilization sets, which will do whatever it is able in order to reduce or even attempt to eliminate the first two sources of suffering: the ones which originate in the body and the ones of the outside world. Nevertheless, the third source, the one which originates in “social suffering” (Freud, 2010, p. 103), is all the more unbearable as it starts from within the institutions which are created in order to regulate relations to other people, and it uncovers “an unsociable sociability”, according to Kant (1990, p. 74).

3. Subjectivity and vulnerability in Lévinas

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

The philosophical research of Lévinas remains essential for the characterization of both the ethics of the concern for the other, as well as ethics in

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

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

Ever since *Totalité et infini*, Lévinas (1998a) used the lexicon of vulnerability in order to describe the plea of a face who is asking for an ethical relationship, a plea of commitment. Gradually, the very expression of vulnerability is introduced and is the object of consistent development. In a striking statement Lévinas remembers the importance that the notion of vulnerability takes as a theme of his meditation on ethics as first philosophy: “only a vulnerable self can love their neighbour” (Lévinas, 2004b, p. 145). To the imperialist ego which perseveres in his being, to this “conatus essendi” borrowed from Spinoza (1981, p. 75), Lévinas juxtaposes the responsibility for the other in an uninterested manner.

4. Sociability and vulnerability in Habermas

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

By analysing the theses of a certain morality of Arnold Gehlen, Habermas

(1987, pp. 259-283) introduces the basis for discourse ethics. Unlike Gehlen, who proposes the preoccupation of the individual's survival as one of the determining factors of ethics, Habermas (1987) excludes any reference to human frailty inherent to his biological nature, attempting nevertheless to characterise the "profound human frailty" (p. 273). According to Habermas (1987), human vulnerability becomes visible through "the cultural system constructed as compensation" (p. 273). Here Habermas' proposals must be interpreted in light of his later texts, especially *Discourse Ethics*. Habermas thus nominates social and symbolical systems established in order to ensure an intersubjective communication, capable of mediating the solidarity which, within a community, is meant to overcome the individual's weaknesses: "the identity of the individual and that of the community is formed and maintained *co-originary*" (1992, p. 20). The protection of the people, whom socio-cultural systems might prejudice, requires the counterbalance of ethical regulation.

Countering the extreme vulnerability of living beings, caused by their socialisation, remains for Habermas the objective which morals must regard, through the prescription of two complementary moral principles (1992, p. 21). On the one hand, a principle of justice which regulates the equal respect principle for the dignity and equality of the rights of every individual, and on the other hand a principle of solidarity which postulates the necessity of protecting intersubjective relationships of recognition between individuals who are members of a community, imposing empathy and assistance for the welfare of the other.

5. Conclusions

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

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