

## Human dignity, vulnerability and education

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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*) the excellence (*areté*) is the goal of this learning process (Jaeger, 2001). The Greek *paideia* assumed vulnerability or affectivity as a problem (even an obstacle) to fullness (*eudaimonia*) or human flourishing. The spiritual and educational Greek exercises sought to moderate and take control of the affections (Hadot, 2000). In particular the Stoa tried to educate in the self-control of irascible and concupiscible appetites and gave an impulse to education in the virtues that had already been proposed by Plato or Aristotle 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 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 paper answer two related questions: First, are the perfection compatible with the "imperfection" of being vulnerable? And Second, what role does vulnerability play in the Christian educational paradigm?

In order to address these questions, I will first discuss the concept of vulnerability related with human condition. Then I will discuss the concept of perfection, from the perspective of Christian theology. Lastly, I will offer brush strokes of a Christian educational proposal that incorporates vulnerability into the classical educational paradigm of virtue education.

### Vulnerability and human condition

Like many concepts, vulnerability admits various interrelated definitions. All of them are grounded in the etymology of the term: *vulnus*, Latin for wound. We could say that a vulnerable person is one exposed to being injured.

In general, educational legislation considers that there is a human right to education for vulnerable people that responds to the recognition of their inherent human dignity (Masferrer and García-Sánchez, 2016). Every human being is worthy, that is, it has an intrinsic value. Dignity "refers to something of value, a

value determined by the thing's essence" (Brady, 2021, p. 3; ST I, q. 42, a. 4, ad 2). Legislation offer protection against the danger of violence by the strongest over the most vulnerable or weak (Turner, 2006). It seems clear that the awareness of the danger of violence as well as the recognition of the intrinsic value of the person converges in their formulation.

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 period of life- are especially vulnerable and dependent, that demands the help, the justice and the mercy of others (MacIntyre, 1999). Existential vulnerability is the source of striving for perfection, improvement.

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 (give, receive and share with others) 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.

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: in reality 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 situation - 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. And to achieve this end, which is his most fundamental vocation, he needs to receive from God and from others. Paradoxically, this vocation to communion implies also a need to give and share. Likewise, the teleological perspective allows us to understand that dignity, according to saint Thomas, can grow as the end is reached (Brady, 2021, p. 5).

Perfection and vulnerability from a Christian perspective.

According to 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.

According to Catholic Church, "perfection" is not identified with a state of life but in reaching our ultimate goal and fulfillment, communion with God and others through charity (Gaudium et Spes, 1965, 19, Lumen Gentium, 40). "Only charity has the power to draw us closer and unite with God as our last goal" (Martínez, 2006, p. 4).

From the Christian perspective, perfection and excellence must be understood as communion, as an expression of charity, rather than as lack of defects. 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, with Christ (Rm 8:30); configuration that aims at communion (or friendship) with God and with men (Arthur, 2021, 43). Human improvement is a human-divine process, a synergy and communion, between God's free action and human freedom that cooperates with grace. Communion is, therefore, an end but also the way to achieve it.

This communion is the goal or purpose of life. Christ's invitation (Mt 5,48): "be perfect, as my Father is perfect" (perfect in Greek is said *teleios*, which has the same root as *telos* or goal), must be understood 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 Man (*teleios*), as presented by Saint Paul, is the Man of communion in whom we find our fullness and maturity (*teleiotas*). There is a close etymological and meaning relationship between communion and perfection or human fullness.

Communion and human fullness will only be complete in the future life but is already partially realized 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, 14). 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.

The life of Christ, the servant of Yahweh, reveals the importance of vulnerability and wounds: by his stripes we have been healed (Is 53,5). Christ reveals to man what man is and his vocation (Gaudium et Spes, 1965, 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 about 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 (Balthasar, 2000, 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. And 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. Vulnerable affectivity is not a deprivation but perfection, is constitutive of God's love (Brotherton, 2020 pp.142 y 169).

"Suffering or distress, in contradistinction to pain, is not a sensation but an experience, a spiritual reality known only to humans (the animal does not suffer)" (Soloveitchik, 1978, p. 67). But suffering is present not only in the human person but also in God, as the Scriptures and the Midrash testify. God suffers for the destruction of the Temple and go to 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, 1990, 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 perfections is enriched. 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 and López, 2021). The excellence resides not in the absence of defects or suffering but in the presence of communion that we can achieve in this life. Excellence is not only compatible with vulnerability but demands it.

Education and vulnerability

Western culture inherited a Greek proposal of education in virtues, recognizing its value, but also its insufficiencies (Melina, Noriega and Pérez-Soba, 2007, 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 does play vulnerability and communion 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 improvement. It requires educating in virtues 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, 2020).

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, finally, affections because without affections 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 understood as giving, receiving and sharing in a free way. The desire for a good (and ultimately for communion) is an affective movement and arouses the inner motive and the action in the person to achieve it (De Finance, 1966, 111-125). Separated from this *telos* the affections (as well as the intelligence and the 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. Desiring the good, the most perfect, without falling into perfectionism, which is a psychological and moral disorder. 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 (López and Sendra, 2021).

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). The moments of special vulnerability are also opportunities to receive the most important lessons in virtues or freedom (Fernández and López, 2020). 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 towards communion (López and Ortiz de Montellano, 2021).

In order 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 culture is beginning to recognize the importance of vulnerability in the educational process of the person. This offers the opportunity to form persons with greater emotional wealth, maturity and oriented towards communion. In any case, it requires an educational model that integrates intelligence, will and affectivity. Here lies the value of the personalistic Christian educational model.

Education in virtues must be a central element of this model updated with the findings of psychology (Kaczor, 2015). 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, Nordling and Titus, 2020). I hope my proposal on understanding perfection as communion -not as absence of defects- helps in this direction.

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