

Theological and Ethical Perspectives on Rethinking the Co-existence of Flourishing and Vulnerability

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The aim of this article is to explore the evolving discussion surrounding vulnerability and flourishing. This conversation has gained significant relevance in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid global uncertainties, including the effects of violence and war-trauma. The central idea here is to reconsider vulnerability and flourishing not simply as universal experiences tied to one's own humanity and social context, but rather as co-existing, interdependent, and contingent aspects of human existence. Without proposing that human flourishing is conditioned by vulnerability, this perspective seeks to challenge the notion that vulnerability and flourishing are fundamentally separate. The following discussion will not only examine vulnerability and flourishing as theoretical concepts but will also address their practical significance as integral components of the human experience, and how they intersect in a real-life situation. It's important to note that both vulnerability and flourishing are influenced by specific contexts and circumstances, including personal, social, economic and cultural factors. In the course of this discussion, I will provide examples to illustrate these points. The first section will focus on vulnerability, while the second will delve into the concept of flourishing from a Christian perspective, drawing on Miroslav Volf's ideas about a flourishing life.

Introduction

In 2016 I interviewed two persons, one with and one without a disability, who have long been friends in a community support centre in England. When I asked them to characterize their relationship and name the key elements of their friendship, they responded:

“This friendship was a place where they could feel well, the place where they did not need to pretend. It helps them to discover that people can have something in common on the

level of their humanity and for such a reason can be friends for reasons other than mutual interests and mutual strengths.”¹

This friendship has brought them to accept each other as real and important persons, with their weaknesses, strengths, gifts, and incapacities. Thus, the recognition of each other’s vulnerability did not stop them from a possibility to flourish in a relationship of friendship.

To begin this discussion with this anecdote, I aim to look at vulnerability and flourishing as complex and interweaved among examples of daily life circumstances. This will address on one hand, that facing some degree of vulnerability is necessary for a flourishing life. On the other hand, it is possible to flourish despite situational and contextual vulnerabilities and limitations. However, vulnerability is not always a cause or indicator of flourishing, nor does flourishing always result from negotiated vulnerability. Yet, being open to our vulnerabilities can help us recognize our human limitations, which in turn can open us up to more possibilities or simply help us embrace our uncertain and not-knowing selves.

The situations of people with disabilities are typical relevant examples since society at large holds ableist stereotypes and misinterprets the differently abled functioning and related vulnerability of people with disability as incapable of friendship relationships. Due to being labelled as dependent and vulnerable, atypical functioning, and of lower intellectual capacities, disabled people were historically –and even today –considered vulnerable² and isolated groups of individuals, which deprived them of the possibility of social contact.³ However, several studies on social acceptance have demonstrated that people with disabilities do have the capacity and potential to develop and perform meaningful friendly relationships⁴ with others and that the very same people whom society often limits relationally and marks as vulnerable address, as in our example, friendships as a possibility for growth due to the value of mutual dependency.⁵

In addition to individuals with disabilities, this also applies to many other life situations where flourishing is achieved through accepting vulnerability or where vulnerability, in a broader sense, does not hinder one’s flourishing but rather actualized it. For example, providing care for others in challenging situations, despite the potential risks involved, typically enhances one’s ability to practice empathy, compassion, and respect for individuals’ dignity.⁶ When faced with economic social and political instability, individuals

¹Martina Vuk, *Reconsidering Disability, Friendship and Otherness – Theological and Ethical Perspectives*, (Fribourg: University of Fribourg Press, 2020), pp. 195-229.

²Deborah Marks, *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychological Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999).

³Jacques H. Stiker, *A History of Disability*, transl. W. Sayers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

⁴Angela N. Amado, ed., *Friendships and Community Connections Between People with and without Developmental Disabilities*, Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 299-326. See also Anne L. Chappell. “A Question of Friendship: Community Care and the Relationships of People with Learning Difficulties.” *Disability & Society* 9 (4): 419-434.

⁵Robert Bogdan. – Steven. Taylor. “Toward a Sociology of Acceptance: The Other Side of the Study of Deviance.” *Social Policy* 1987, 18 (2):34-39. See also Kevin Reimer, *Living L’Arche. Stories of compassion, Love, and Disability*, New York: Continuum, 2009.

⁶F. A. McGilloway. “Dependency and Vulnerability in the Nurse/Patient Situation.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 1976 1 (3): 229–236. Angel S, Vatne S. “Vulnerability in patients and nurses and the mutual vulnerability in the patient-nurse relationship.” *J Clin Nurs*. 2017 5 (26) :1428-1437. doi: 10.1111/jocn.13583. Epub 2017 Feb 16. PMID: 27626897.

and communities often feel compelled to take action and voice their concerns through various means such as protests, strikes, resistance movements, or by exerting influence on social and economic change. These forms of social activism can be powerful tools for expressing discontent, demanding justice, and advocating for positive transformations in society.⁷ The periods of isolation and lack of social contacts, such as those experienced in a recent global pandemic, can be challenging. However, such periods also provide individuals with the opportunity for self-reflection and introspection. The tension involved in these experiences often leads to negative emotions due to isolation, loneliness, and a lack of social contact. However, simultaneously to some, it resulted in more positive outcomes, such as appreciating the significance of relationships, friendship, love, and caring for others. This recognition has the potential to reshape our perspectives and foster a greater sense of community, interdependence and togetherness.⁸

The argument I want to make is that although vulnerability can threaten our agency, it is not simply an obstacle to human flourishing. A life of flourishing cannot be completely free of encountering and developing vulnerability. Rather, life's situations and complexities entail not only the coexistence of vulnerability and flourishing, but sometimes, in seeking to flourish in terms of being more authentic, honest, and self-aware, we need to let go of our rigid agenda of control and allow ourselves to be open to embrace our human limitations, not-knowing and our uncertainty.⁹

The discussion's definition of vulnerability perceives it as a natural condition that is specific to living beings and an situational circumstance to be at risk of harm or exposure, but also a possibility towards change and growth in life's circumstances. The notion of flourishing is seen as an inclination to live a true, good and fulfilled life and as the ability to act rightly towards one self and others. From such a perspective, I will argue for a concept of flourishing life as true life, inclusive of life's complexities. Life complexities, in my view, include not only the perspective of a person's inner attitudes and outer life circumstances, but within life circumstances, the search for a proper meaning, purpose and life interdependence constitute one's reasons for flourishing. Understood that way, the question that arises is how the acceptance of one's weakness or vulnerability can be a contributing factor to experience a measure of true flourishing? What inner dispositions or practices, as well as what outward circumstances, make one flourish despite awareness of one's embodied or heightened vulnerability? To show this correlation, I will support my argument by first outlining current thinking on vulnerability. In the second part, I will utilize Miroslav Volf's and Matthew Croasmun's threefold aspects of a flourishing life – life going well (circumstantial), life led well

⁷ Petkovšek R. and Žalec B. eds. *Ethics of Resilience: Vulnerability and Survival in Times of Pandemics and Global Uncertainty*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2022

⁸ Andrew Sommerlad, at all. "Social relationships and depression during the COVID-19 lockdown: longitudinal analysis of the COVID-19 Social Study." *Psychological medicine* 2022 52 (15): 3381-3390; Wong, P. T. P., Mayer, C.-H., & Arslan, G. (Eds.). (2021b). "COVID-19 and Existential Positive Psychology (PP 2.0): The new science of self-transcendence [Special Issue]." *Frontiers*. [https:// www. frontiersin. Org/ research- topics/ 14988/ covid- 19- and- existential-positive-psychology-pp20- the- new-science- of- self-transcendence](https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/14988/covid-19-and-existential-positive-psychology-pp20-the-new-science-of-self-transcendence)

⁹Carse, L. Alisa. "Vulnerability, Agency, and Human Flourishing," in *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology*, eds. Carol Taylor and Roberto Dell'Oro, Georgetown: Georgetown University Press 2006: 35

(agential), and life feeling good (affective) to perceive flourishing as circumstantial and beyond our control. In the conclusion, I will propose integration between the concepts emphasizing that the entangled correlation between the two is possible when a flourishing life is, on the one hand, understood as one that cannot be divorced from life-threatening situations such as occurrences of vulnerability, and, on the other hand, where vulnerability is understood beyond its negative connotations such as being a threat or impediment to one's flourishing.

Vulnerability – a brief exposé and assessment of the idea

The use of vulnerability in recent years has increased. According to a Google Scholar search, the frequency of the term *human vulnerability* from 2020 until 2023 was about 82,800 and the searched term *life-related vulnerabilities* have appeared around 108,000 times in review articles including those in Social Sciences, Medicine, and Health; Business, Economics, and Management; as well as Humanities and Arts. The conventional meaning of vulnerability (lat. *vulnus*) conveys being weak, fragile, or physically or emotionally damaged or attacked.¹⁰ However, the use and application of vulnerability in different contexts and disciplines such as in the contexts of healthcare and healthcare ethics, human rights, psychology, popular spiritual literature, ecology, and economics employ slightly different meanings. Moreover, it is applied as a topic of feminist debates, a characteristic of low-class people's social or cognitive status such for example, people with Alzheimer's disease, persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, migrants, etc. There is a distinction between those who think vulnerability is a universal category for all humans¹¹ and those who think vulnerability is only a characteristic of members of groups that need protection.¹² Major contemporary dictionaries such as *Merriam-Webster* and the *Cambridge Online Dictionary* describe vulnerability alongside terms such as weakness, defencelessness, fragility, helplessness, dependency; open to risk or as an ability to be wounded or to wound others.¹³

Despite such thinking, vulnerability is not merely a synonym for fragility or weakness or even a human capacity to be wounded and dependent.¹⁴ Neither is it a *terminus technicus* for an explanation of situations, conditions, or concepts that do not even pertain to the concept of vulnerability or are etymologically different from the very concept of vulnerability (such as disability or suffering). Instead, vulnerability is a concept, a manifestation, and a human experience. Grounded in life experiences, vulnerability is a complex and ambivalent condition. It is an experience, and therefore discourses on vulnerability are often perplexing and challenging. Not only do they apply differently in particular contexts, but continuous

¹⁰Nathalie Maillard, *La vulnérabilité, une nouvelle catégorie morale?* Genève: Labor et Fides 2011.

¹¹Barry Hoffmaster. What Does Vulnerability Mean? *The Hastings Center Report* 2006 36 (2): 38–45. See also Henk ten Have. Respect for Human Vulnerability. The Emergence of a New Principle in Bioethics. *Bioethical Inquiry* 2015 17 (2): 395-408; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-015-9641-9>.

¹²Mary C. Ruof. "Vulnerability, Vulnerable Populations and Policy." *Journal of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics* 2004 (14): 411–425; See also Doris Schroeder and Eugenijus Gefenas. Vulnerability: too vague and too broad? *Camb Q Healthc Ethics* 2009 18(2):113-21. doi: 10.1017/S0963180109090203. PMID: 19250564.

¹³Laurent Lemoine, Eric Gaziaux, Denis Muller (eds.) *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique D'Éthique Chrétienne*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf 2013.

¹⁴ Brown, Brene. "The power of vulnerability.," *Teds Talk: June 2010*. Online at https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability (accessed 25. June 2023).

conceptual division in opinion between positive and negative sides continues. Recently, there has been an initiative for recognizing vulnerability not merely as negative and undesired but as an inhabited and shared element of humanity, essential to human embodiment and living existence and often essential for initiating the development of resilience or flourishing.¹⁵

Vulnerability as a concept, manifestation, and experience

The context of scholarly discourses concerning the use of the term vulnerability is multifaceted and varied. Until 1970, the term “vulnerability” appeared within biomedical discourses referring to human corporeality, including bodily and psychological conditions,¹⁶ susceptibility to illness, and the physical condition of the patient. The larger biomedical discourses gave attention to vulnerability concerning the principle of autonomy.¹⁷ After 1976, the implication of the meaning of vulnerability moved from a marginal academic interest to the centre stage of bioethics,¹⁸ sociology,¹⁹ feminist and care ethics,²⁰ nursing ethics,²¹ philosophy,²² as well as religion and theology.²³ Since each of these disciplines operates

¹⁵ Margrit Shildrick and Price, Janet., “Uncertain thoughts on the dis/abled body.” In M. Shildrick and J. Price (Eds). *Vital signs: feminist reconfigurations of the bio/logical body*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.), pp. 224–249. See also Margrit, Shildrick and Price, Janet., “Bodies Together: Touch, Ethics and Disability.” In R. Corker, T. Shakespeare (Eds). *Disability/Postmodernity*, (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), pp. 62–75. Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, “Welcoming the unexpected.” In Parens, E. and Johnston, J. (Eds). *Human flourishing in an age of gene editing*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.), pp. 15–28.

¹⁶ Steve Matthews and Bernardette Tobin. “Human vulnerability in medical contexts.” *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 2016 (37): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11017-016-9357-9>

¹⁷ Daniel Callahan. “Autonomy: A Moral Good Not a Moral Obsession.” *The Hastings Centre Report* 1984 (14) 5: 40–42. Soren Holm. “Not just autonomy – the principles of American biomedical ethics.” *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 1995 (21)6: 332-338.

¹⁸ Henk ten Have. “Respect for Human Vulnerability: The Emergence of a New Principle in Bioethics.” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 2015 (12) 3:395-408; Jacob D. Rendtorff, “Basic ethical principles in European bioethics and biolaw: Autonomy, dignity, integrity and vulnerability—towards a foundation of bioethics and biolaw.” *Medicine, Healthcare and Philosophy* 2002 (5)3: 235–244.

¹⁹ Mary.C. Ruof. “Vulnerability, Vulnerable Populations and Policy.” *Journal of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics* 2004 (14): 411–425; See also Deborah S.K. Thomas at all. (eds.). *Social Vulnerability to Disasters*, Boca Raton: CRC Press 2009. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781420078572>

²⁰ Wendy Rogers, Catriona Mackenzie and Susan Dodds. “Why bioethics needs a concept of vulnerability.” *International Journal Of Feminist Approaches To Bioethics* 2012 5 (2):11-38; See also Florencia Luna. Elucidating the Concept of Vulnerability: Layers Not Labels. *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 2009 2 (1):121–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40339200>; Margrit Shildrick. Becoming Vulnerable: Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 2000 21 (4): 215–227.

²¹ Chris Gastmans. “Dignity-enhancing nursing care: a foundational ethical framework.” *Nursing Ethics* 2013 20(2):142-9. doi: 10.1177/0969733012473772. PMID: 23466947.

²² Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985; Barry Hoffmaster. “What does vulnerability mean?” *Hastings Center Report* 2006 36 (2): 38–45.

²³ Elisabeth Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*. Augsburg: Fortress Publisher 2015; Kristine Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation 2010; Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2008. Heike Springhart and Gunter Thomas (eds). *Exploring Vulnerability*, Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2017.

differently, scholars have conceptualized notions of vulnerability in various ways and from various approaches. Though the majority of scholarly discourses show inclinations towards valuing vulnerability either as an existential condition, context-related term, or a characteristic of individuals or groups who need protection, the broad discourses on vulnerability, as mentioned above, remain rather divided between those who consider it to be something positive and those who take vulnerability to be negative or even a threat. The typical negative impact of vulnerability implies unavoidable circumstances or voluntary or accidental causes as well as existential struggles that can deeply challenge our welfare, dignity, behaviour, and moral agency. Such circumstances can cause deprivation, degradation, and disrespect which is the reason vulnerability is perceived in a negative sense as susceptibility to something such as illness, injury, or harm. Additionally, in my view, the negative perception of the term also implies situations where vulnerability is either perceived as a label or stigma of vulnerable individuals who require special protection (e.g. persons with disabilities, people with addiction, children, the elderly) or where vulnerability is romanticized or used as a sign of manipulation²⁴, projection, rejection, or is reduced to a sentiment of merely pity and suffering.²⁵ Contrarily, a positive perception of vulnerability accounts for situations where acceptance and recognition of vulnerability was a source of building a relationship, or its outcomes and exposures became an opportunity for growth, increasing a person's strength, a factor positively impacting resilience and endurance or a sign of spiritual and mental transformation.²⁶

Because of this, the meaning of vulnerability fails to be attributed univocally with either positive or negative connotations which is the reason why continuous conceptual inconsistency in opinion continues. Being recognized as an existential human condition and part of a person's social environment, vulnerability, as already mentioned, manifests and increases through economic and environmental factors such as poverty, exclusion, harm,

²⁴ There are cases of spiritual and psychological manipulation with the notion of vulnerability and vulnerability of other persons that resulted in spiritual or sexual abuse of power. For more see in Céline Hoyeau, *La trahison des pères. Emprise et abus des fondateurs de communautés nouvelles*. (Montrouge, Bayard, 2021.). See also Conley, J. John, *My conversations with Jean Vanier raised many questions. I have no answers*. America Magazine (New York March 2020). Online at [https:// www.americamagazine.org / faiht /2020/03/13/my-conversations-jean-vanier-raised-many-questions-i-have-no-answers](https://www.americamagazine.org/faiht/2020/03/13/my-conversations-jean-vanier-raised-many-questions-i-have-no-answers). (accessed 20-12-2023); Nepryakhin, Nikita. 'Classification of vulnerability factors in the process of psychological manipulation.' *Proceedings of The International Conference on Advanced Research in Social Sciences*: Diamond Scientific Publishing (London 2019). Online at [https:// www.dpublication.com/proceeding/icarss/](https://www.dpublication.com/proceeding/icarss/) (accessed 21-12-2023).

²⁵ The history of disability demonstrated the misuse of disabled people's conditions as the source of charity, pity and projection of vulnerable-izing attitudes towards people with disability from non-disabled people. See Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963.); Henri – Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, transl. Williams Sayers, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999.), pp. 65-91.

²⁶ Richter, C. (Hg.). *An den Grenzen des Messbaren. Die Kraft von Religion und Spiritualität in Lebenskrisen*. Religion und Gesundheit 3, Stuttgart 2021. Petkovšek R. and Žalec B. eds. *Ethics of Resilience: Vulnerability and Survival in Times of Pandemics and Global Uncertainty*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2022. Ho, S.M.Y. 2011 "Resilience, growth, and distress after a traumatic experience", in *Healing trauma: a professional guide*, eds. by K.K. Wu, C.S. Tang, and E.Y. Leung. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. Michael Hryniuk, *Theology, Disability, and Spiritual Transformation: Learning from the Communities of L'Arche*, Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010.

oppressive behaviours, human relationships, or war trauma. The manifestations of vulnerability occur due to interactions between persons or a person with their social environment and, for this reason, vulnerability requires a pragmatic approach—one that not only counterbalances its manifestations and its impact on persons and their social environment but where manifestations of vulnerabilities and its interactions in the context of life experience are regarded to each other and the totality of the experience.

This entails that the pragmatic or practical relevance of vulnerability has a twofold application. First, it is an indispensable part of human experience – it is an intrinsic property of being a person; secondly, it interacts with life circumstances through different types of ruptures and manifestations. In this perspective, vulnerability, besides being a pragmatic notion, is also context-specific and circumstantial. Additionally, vulnerability within the context of life experience sometimes implies complexity and controversy but the coincidence of contradictions. First of all, there are ruptures of vulnerabilities that cannot be prevented such as accidental or treatment injuries, natural hazards, social injustices, or non-intentional attacks. Second, the manifestations of vulnerability that occur in the interaction of an individual with someone or something are reciprocal in the context of life experience each person can be the one who hurts others or is hurt by others. In such cases, we can talk about the active (natural, embedded) and passive (accidental or advanced) aspects of vulnerability as well as about the positive or negative experiences of vulnerability. Nevertheless, such experiences and understandings also depend on a type of personal response and moral agency as well as the particular cultural context of inflicted persons.

In her book *Power and Vulnerability of Love*, Elisabeth Gandolfo addresses women's diverse experiences of maternity and natality, providing particularly powerful examples of painful ambiguities of motherhood experiences as a reality of unconditional love and vulnerability but also as proof of the concurrence between power and vulnerability in human life and love.²⁷ As she says, “*Their resilience in the wake of harm and their resistance to the violation of themselves and vulnerable others is a powerful testament to the possibility of passing beyond the wall of paradise and embodying the power and vulnerability of love*” (Gandolfo, p.314). In the context of patient–nurse relationships, the confrontation between patients' limitations and vulnerability can nurture a sense of empathy and compassion in nurses or remind them of their vulnerability and limitations. It can also impact their view that the concern for the pain and suffering of the patient is caring for a real person, not merely an abstract object of cure.²⁸ Friendship without the involvement of recognition of vulnerability and solidarity can become a contractual and utilitarian relationship of false representations.²⁹

The excessive vulnerability of a person to environmental stimuli or vulnerabilities caused by others or socio-political injustices can threaten personal integrity or increase the inherent vulnerability of the impacted person. This can result either in the realization of personal limits, repression, or in a person's motivation to fight against injustices, increase a person's potential for survival capacities, or contribute to the development of resistance and

²⁷ Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*, p.313

²⁸ Olderbak, Sally and Oliver Wilhelm. “Emotion Perception and Empathy: An Individual Differences Test of Relations”. *Emotion* 17 (2017):1092–1106. See also Mok, Esther, and Pui Chi Chiu. “Nurse-patient relationships in Palliative care”. *J Adv Nurs* 48 (2004):475–83.

²⁹ Vuk, *Reconsidering Disability, Friendship and Otherness – Theological and Ethical Perspectives*, p. 344.

resilience. Such can be, for instance, exemplified in the non-violent protest of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the well-known activist against racism, discrimination, and violence. Imposed vulnerability increased by social injustices and psychological disturbances did not stop his strivings for peace and non-violence which instead resulted in resilience composed of non-violent social and political responses. The testimony of Nobel Prize for Peace Laureate 2011, Leymah Gbowee - who led a non-violent fight for peace in Liberia - demonstrated that the coexistence of vulnerability and love among the impossible became a source for bearing resistance and resilience.³⁰

As Alisa L. Carse has indicated, a life worth living requires us to be vulnerable.³¹ Yet vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us but rather one that enables us to be open, to learn, to love, or to find comfort in the presence of the other.³² The abovementioned examples demonstrate that truth. The particular social environment could indeed impact and reveal vulnerabilities of the persons involved, but when applied to life circumstances, it can also stimulate resilience and resistance or could at times potentially increase a person's experience of endurance and strength.

Thus, the outcomes of vulnerability as circumstantial, accidental, or embedded conditions reveal a process of life circumstances that interchangeably intertwine risk and openness as well as exposures to and recognitions of vulnerability. In other words, the meaning of vulnerability here presented is not a utopian liberation from its negative side (e.g., suffering and oppression), but it rather points to a person's earthly existence lamenting salvation and the reality of the vulnerability of life circumstances which is a reality of striving for peace, well-being, love and relationship in unlikely settings.

Flourishing life in its theological and ethical relevance

The question of happiness, the good life, or how to live well preoccupied the ancient Greeks (e.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*) and has often been associated with the theme of flourishing. Central to much ancient philosophy (*eudaimonia*) and early Christian theology (the beatitudes; common good; spiritual transformation), the theme of flourishing has continued to draw the attention of modern scholars in fields such as economics,³³ psychology,³⁴ medical ethics,³⁵

³⁰ The Nobel Peace Prize 2011. Leymah Gbowee. *For their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and women's rights to full participation in peace-building work*: December 2011. Online at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2011/gbowee/biographical/> (accessed 2023-9-8). A similar can be also found in a recent 2023 Nobel Prize for Peace Laureate Narges Mohammadi, an Iranian woman, who fought for the life of Iranian women against systematic discrimination and oppression of their dignity and freedom. See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2023/press-release/>

³¹Carse, 'Vulnerability, Agency, and Human Flourishing', p. 33-52.

³² Erinn Gilson. "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression." *Hypatia*,26:2 (2011): 308–332.

³³Paul H. Dembinski, *The Logic of the Planned Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991.

³⁴Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G.Tedeschi (eds.), *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice*. New York: Routledge 2014. Chan E. Y. Diener. "Happy people live longer: Subjective well-being contributions to health and longevity." *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being* 2011 (3):1–43.

³⁵ Omar Sultan Haque at all, "From disability to human flourishing: how fourth wave psychotherapies can help to reimagine rehabilitation and medicine as a whole." *Disability and Rehabilitation* 2020 42 (11):1511-1517.

sociology,³⁶ as well as philosophy³⁷ and theology.³⁸ There are various and often contradictory meanings and conceptions of what flourishing is proliferated. From the idea associated with material prosperity, personal well-being, positive feelings, good mental functioning, quality of life, and good health, to the distribution of individual rights and freedoms, supportive social relationships, virtue, and the common good, as well as spiritual transformation, meaningful life, and the life of the Beatitudes. Despite such endeavours, contemporary society with its global challenges and standards—including its deliberate lifestyle of high speed and dependence on technology—affects the modern notion of morality and the idea of the other. The biggest influences in this framework, as Charles Taylor points out, are modern moral intuitions about the meaning of human life; a person's dignity and respect; and concerns about human welfare, power, and suffering.³⁹ Not only does this mean that the idea of the good life and the concept of flourishing have become highly materialized, but also that considerations of joy and happiness are often notionally detached from less desirable life situations such as vulnerability and suffering.

In the recent pandemic, many people lost their assumed protections, material security, privileges, and fundamental freedoms which exacerbated long-suppressed wounds and unresolved intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts.⁴⁰ However, according to research in psychology, not only was this a period of massive hysteria, stress, and anxiety, but also an opportunity for growth.⁴¹

The search for meaning and what makes a meaningful life, as well as well-being, became essential human needs despite life circumstances (especially those that threaten our well-being and life trajectory). The theological account of flourishing requires it to be different from mainstream cultural practices that often deny the inward and outward realities required for a person's complete functioning. In what sense, then, is the Christian vision of a flourishing life different from other approaches, and to what exactly does this perspective on the meaning of flourishing apply? To answer this question, I look at Miroslav Volf's notion of the flourishing

³⁶ Corey Lee Keyes M. "Social Well-Being." *Social Psychology*, 1998 61 (2): 121–140.

³⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: disability, nationality, species, membership*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006; See also Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, New York: Oxford University Press 1995.

³⁸ Robert Dell 'Oro and Carol Taylor (eds.), *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press. 2006; Mathias Nebel and Thierry Collaud (eds.), *Searching for the Common Good: Philosophical, Theological and Economic Approaches*. Munich: Nomos, 2018; See also John Reader et al., (eds.), *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing: Pastoral Practice and Public Theology*, London: SCM Press 2013. Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2015.

³⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ Ravi Philip Rajkumar. 'COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature.' *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 52 (2020.). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102066> (20. 4. 2021.). Daniel A. González-Padilla – Leonardo, Tortolero-Blanco. 'Social media influence in the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Int Braz J Urol* 46 (2020.) 1, 120-124. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1677-5538.IBJU.2020.S121> (26. 4. 2021.).

⁴¹ Steven M. Southwick – George A. Bonanno – Ann S. "Masten. Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: interdisciplinary perspectives," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5 (2014.) <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338> (23. 4. 2021.).

life in *For the Life of the World*⁴² which, in my reading, goes beyond often arbitrary ideas of flourishing (such as living well without valuing suffering and limitation) and defines the true flourishing life from the perspective of the Kingdom of God as a this-worldly reality.

The notion of flourishing according to Miroslav Volf's account of flourishing life

The central aspect of the world becoming the home of God is the message of the kingdom of God as a this-worldly reality within a person's life circumstances. This address, however, might sound unrealistic in today's culture with its violence and racism, hostile attitudes towards one's neighbours, utility-oriented personhoods, ecological crises, and greed for material pleasures. These have shaken people's belief that God cares for the world or that this world can be a place for a flourishing life. Yet as a long tradition of Christian theology interpreting the kingdom of God suggests, Christ came proclaiming the kingdom, doing good, and healing the sick *despite and within each person's earthly circumstances*.⁴³ He did not only proclaim such Good News. His sacrifice was for the sake, salvation, and redemption of many. This is the reason why his vision of flourishing life was not a single story but rather concerned every person and the whole world. The vision of a flourishing life set forward by Volf is specific. It implies its own twist of personal, political, economic, and environmental aspects. Instead of reducing the whole conception of flourishing to a single facet—such as leading a morally good life or feeling happy—this vision of a flourishing life concerns the whole world in all particularities. Such an aspect of the idea of flourishing life is particularly present when concerned with social justice, peacebuilding, or the protection of the environment. The previously mentioned examples of individuals who put their lives at risk and exposed for the greater sake and benefit of others (such as previously mentioned M. Gandhi and L. Gbowee) are typical realizations of such a vision of flourishing life. Their vision to achieve justice and peace as well as fight against discrimination compromises their social status and brings them into deprived or threatened situations. Yet it also brings about flourishing through liberation, justice, and freedom even in challenging circumstances.

According to Volf, the unpacking of the three dimensions of a flourishing life includes life circumstances, human agency, and affections. He relates this to Romans 14:17, with its convictions of life going well, leading well and feeling good. In other words, the reality of life portrayed within a *this-worldly* perspective includes the social, natural, and personal life circumstances; the search for justice, peace, respect, tolerance, right acts, virtues and habits; and affections intertwined between positive and negative emotions, feelings, and sentiments.⁴⁴ In this perspective, a vision of a flourishing life that attends to circumstances, agency, and affect surpasses the search for basic needs (though without denying their necessity) and inclines

⁴²Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019. I will also use the correspondence of Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Public Faith in Action: How to Think Carefully, Engage Wisely and Vote with Integrity*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016.; Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (eds.), *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.

⁴³See for instance Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, transl. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1973; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, London: SCM Press 1974.

⁴⁴ Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference*, 16.

human life toward the search for righteousness, love, and truth. Moreover, this vision of a flourishing life is not a complete liberation from strivings, suffering, and oppressions (as we have noticed in previously mentioned examples) but includes a person's earthly existence and the reality of his/her circumstances which certainly are strivings for peace, love, and healing. Nevertheless, the horizontal axis of a flourishing life, according to Volf, cannot be separated from its vertical axis which includes the idea of the Kingdom of God as *this-worldly*, not separated from earthly life circumstances but neither completely identified with *this-worldly* realities. Theologically speaking, the flourishing life in such a perspective is a life that depends on the fulfilment of basic needs or the pursuit of happiness, but it is also the life of beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), the life of righteousness, love, and peace (Romans 14:17). In this perspective the idea of the Kingdom of God is, according to Volf, a necessary impetus to recall theology to reclaim it as God's home, the world with God and God with the world.⁴⁵

Flourishing life as the ethically relevant notion

In this further discussion, I will outline the perspective of flourishing life as an ethically relevant matter, in as much that it impacts one's personhood.

As a true flourishing life includes a person's agency, circumstances, and affect, it is a matter of both subjective and objective concern for one's circumstances, agency, and affect. Grounded within this premise of flourishing life as well as vulnerability about circumstances, agency, and affection is the notion that a flourishing life is also an ethically relevant term. But what does it mean from a concrete perspective? Let's unpack this assumption. The vision, as it touches a person, includes a person's character (what kind of a person one ought to be), a person's life circumstances (what processes and uncertainty of life situations determine current experience and future aspirations about flourishing), and a person's affections (what sort of emotions the previously mentioned agency and circumstances involve).⁴⁶ Neither within a context nor as a process of living experience can flourishing life be "released" from burdensome or challenging life situations. Instead, such life situations often demonstrate the actual entangledness of vulnerability and flourishing.

For instance, the process of reconciliation and forgiveness (the outcome of which is often greater freedom and inner peace) risks the openness towards facing the occurrence of suppressed negative memories and trauma or the encounter of painful emotions of hurt, anger, and anxiety whether voluntarily or involuntarily produced in us through interactions with others. The pursuit of inclusion by UPIAS⁴⁷ disability activists in the seventies; equal social standing for women or the struggles to combat social injustices, discrimination, and racism (as in previously mentioned examples) necessitates risk. To overcome the economic and socio-

⁴⁵ Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 71.

⁴⁶ This distinction congruences with the threefold vision of flourishing life that attends to circumstances, agency and affect in *Life of the World*. See Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, 16. Here it is portrayed in an ethical tone within the perspective of life circumstances.

⁴⁷ Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, 1976. Online at <https://disabledpeoplesarchive.com/fundamental-principles-of-disability-union-of-the-physically-impaired-against-segregation/?fbclid=IwAR1dWQY30-fvIPaJHHAE64GFuG9tk0qERJk8exCHyEfKAjCga6yLNxD-Tk> (accessed 11- 11 - 2023).

cultural pressures and injustices individuals faced various vulnerabilities, including social, economic, and political threats and risks. These challenges often tested their resilience and determination to bring about positive change. Despite the difficulties, there were notable outcomes that had a lasting impact on the socio-cultural structures of the era. One such outcome was the emergence of social movements that advocated for equality and justice. These movements, driven by passionate individuals, sought to address the systemic issues that perpetuated economic and socio-cultural disparities. Through protests, advocacy, and collective action, they were able to raise awareness and push for reforms that aimed to level the playing field for all members of society.

Therefore, a flourishing life as an ethically relevant concept is a context-sensitive process. It is a practical experience and therefore, in the thought of Volf and McAnnally-Linz, there is neither a formula informing a person how precisely to flourish well nor an univocally accepted way to flourish that is independent of particular life circumstances, traditions, and contexts.⁴⁸ This means that flourishing includes personal embodiment, his/her life experiences, and his/her life circumstances which are not exempt from suffering, life-threatening situations, inner attitudes and dispositions. Nor are they exempt from the encounter with one's vulnerability and the vulnerability of the other.

Based on the above-mentioned elements, flourishing as an ethically relevant term includes human agency, affection, and a person's life circumstances and choices.⁴⁹ Such entails that a flourishing life addresses aspects of mutual belonging understood as interdependency; it is not merely a conceptual exchange of life circumstances, agency, and affection, but it rather concerns how each person's life strivings intersect with such a vision. Put slightly differently, the interdependent character of flourishing life intersects with the circumstances, agency, and affections of every person's life yet each in his or her way experiences it differently depending on one's experience and the degree of personal or situational vulnerability. A flourishing life interchangeably employs the experience of rejoicing and suffering for both the so-called non-vulnerable and vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, the interdependent character of flourishing referring to life circumstances, agency, and affection is the indicator that flourishing cannot merely be reduced to autonomous individuals. Neither is it exclusive to those who are potentially more vulnerable and dependent. Reaching a more realistic vision of flourishing—within life circumstance and agency—neither releases an individual from suffering nor can complete suffering deprive an individual of the experience of joy. This is to say that the interplay of vulnerability and flourishing as constitutive of one's life circumstances are not separated but intertwined concepts. The vision of a flourishing life presented here is not insulated from the vulnerability that often involves sad feelings and anxiety regarding life circumstances. Such a vision of a flourishing life is neither insulated from joy nor the life of the Beatitudes. Each person within such a perspective, flourishes not because it is right but because this brings righteousness and truth to the overall character of interdependent belonging.

Exemplified within narratives of life circumstances of persons indicated in the context of this intertwinedness such as abovementioned stories of M. Gandhi and L. Gbowee, people with disability and mother – child relationship in Gandolfo's narrative, highlights various aspects of the individuals' life circumstances, and sheds light on their remarkable resilience

⁴⁸Volf and McAnnally-Linz, *Public Faith in Action*, 11-17.

⁴⁹Volf and McAnnally-Linz, *Public Faith in Action*, 13-17.

and determination. Despite facing challenging and risky circumstances, including openness to exposed weaknesses and limitation, the attitudes of these individuals can be interpreted as they would refuse to be defined and obscured by them. Instead, they used their experiences as fuel to drive their determination and resilience. Their stories serve as a reminder that even in the face of adversity and uncertainty, it is possible to overcome obstacles and bring about changes.

Conclusion

The undertaken discussion aims to indicate a complex, reciprocal and mutually generative relationship between vulnerability and flourishing within life circumstances. The examples taken from lived experience and stories picked up here demonstrated that despite challenging situations, and disturbing and inevitable failures – including the manifestation or recognition of vulnerability – it is possible to flourish amid impossible, frightening, unknown and painful circumstances. People who face economic and social challenges do not shy away from them but learn to develop positive strategies and responses to overcome them. Isolation and loneliness can threaten our agency, but they can also be catalysts for recognising our human need for others. They show that the fulfilment of human life is relational and depends on the quality of one's *agape* and *philia*, rather than on material possessions or socio-political influences.

Nevertheless, vulnerability does not only affect human flourishing, either positively or negatively; sometimes to flourish requires us to face our vulnerability or limitations, or even to *let go* our self-control. However, it is important to note that vulnerability is not always a cause for flourishing. Rather, the two conditions are partially interdependent and complex within life circumstances.

In this discussion, I have attempted to demonstrate that human flourishing in the context of life experiences and circumstances does not require the accumulation of wealth or remaining 'invulnerable' to suffering. Instead, flourishing is inclusive of all people, despite their level of vulnerability, social and economic status, religion and culture, depending on their agency and life circumstances. If vulnerability is a human condition, then there should be no anthropological gap or distinction between vulnerable and non-vulnerable individuals. Vulnerability is a constituent of our humanity, as is flourishing. In other words, a flourishing life is not an indication of a perfectly lived life or a life without encountering some form of suffering, obstacles, and uncertainty within life situations. Vulnerability is not merely the universal natural capacity with only a negative inclination that limits us, degrade and expose to the consequences of harm, but rather a complex and challenging condition that does not prevent one from flourishing. In other words, being open to facing our vulnerabilities can lead to something positive, such as openness to new possibilities, recognition of our ignorance and limitations, or simply finding strength in accepting the truth about ourselves.

The outcome of this discussion thus entails situations in which encountering one's vulnerability and the vulnerability of another did not stop a person from continuing to fight and live but resulted in developing more resilient attitudes or finding the sense of meaning in suffering and care for others; appreciation of life and freedom; or flourishing beyond and seemingly despite hardships.

Moving towards a more realistic vision of vulnerability and flourishing as mutually interdependent, a flourishing life is not presented as a utopian liberation of life from strivings, suffering and oppression, but rather points to a person's earthly existence and the reality of life circumstances. Given this premise, both the concepts of flourishing and vulnerability are not merely vital to human life, but also essential within a cycle of life circumstances, and for this reason are interdependent within the perplexities of not knowing and uncertainty of life circumstances and contexts.

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