

## From the Guest Editors – Challenging Vulnerability and Integrity

This special issue of “De Ethica” is the second of two volumes, which both contain papers presented at Societas Ethica’s annual conference in 2022 in Zurich on the topic “Vulnerability & Integrity.”

In recent academic discourse, the concepts of vulnerability and integrity have emerged as pivotal frameworks for understanding human experiences, social dynamics, and ethical considerations. However, the interplay between these two concepts has sparked considerable debate and critique within scholarly circles. To delve into the tensions and criticisms surrounding the notion of vulnerability, particularly in relation to the concept of integrity, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of these complex constructs – this was the aim of 2022’s conference and the papers presented in the two volumes.

Even though there is a varied and wide-ranging discussion on the understanding of vulnerability, in its essence, it pertains to the susceptibility of individuals or groups to physical, emotional, social, or economic harm. It underscores the inherent fragility and interdependence of human existence, acknowledging that all individuals are subject to various forms of vulnerability throughout their lives. Scholars such as Judith Butler and Martha Fineman have significantly contributed to the conceptualization of vulnerability, emphasizing its intersectional nature and its embeddedness within broader power structures.<sup>1</sup> If vulnerability is used to describe a threat to personal integrity, then talk of resilience as a resource follows on seamlessly from this, particularly in scientific, psychological and medical discourse. However, if vulnerability is seen as a description of the subject’s openness to being “de-” or “reformed”, vulnerability can also be understood as a resource and a gift, as enabling empathy and the ability to transform. The term is more than ambivalent.

### Ambivalent concepts of vulnerability

Despite its significance, the vulnerability paradigm has faced notable critique from scholars across disciplines. One primary criticism revolves around its perceived essentialism, wherein vulnerability is often portrayed as a static and universal condition, overlooking the dynamic and context-specific nature of human experiences. Additionally, critics argue that the emphasis on vulnerability could inadvertently reinforce stigmatization and marginalization, as it may pathologize certain identities or experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Fineman’s research team website: <https://web.gs.emory.edu/vulnerability/>; cf. Judith Butler et al. (ed.), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); cf. Gunda Werner, ‘Relational und vulnerabel. Die Subjektphilosophie Judith Butlers im theologischen Diskurs’ (*Theologische Revue* 114:3 (2018)), pp. 179-202; for an overview cf. Florian Pistor, ‘Vulnerabilität: Erläuterungen zu einem Schlüsselbegriff im Denken Judith Butlers’ (*Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie*, 3:1 (2016)), pp. 233–272.

The problem with an universalistic understanding of vulnerability is that it can have negative implications and consequences for the perception of concrete human suffering as well as disadvantage, marginalization and injustice. For example, it has been argued against a universalization of vulnerability that, on the one hand, it could have the tendency to overlook, trivialize or level out the concrete injuries of certain people or groups against the background of an undifferentiated observation of the general human vulnerability of all people and thus weaken the socio-political struggle against concrete injustice. This problem also applies to criticism of care ethics: with the general talk of relationality, the special need for protection and dependency of individuals may not be taken into account. It is therefore questionable whether care ethics can capture moral vulnerability.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a universalistic understanding of vulnerability is criticized to the effect that the understanding of vulnerability as a general susceptibility and openness of people leads to a trivialization. The intensified negativity associated with specific experiences of injury in the form of violent damage or trauma to the subject may be ignored.

A particularized understanding of vulnerability, on the other hand, has the advantage of representing the interests and needs of individuals or minorities over (self-proclaimed) majorities – but only if the attribution of vulnerability is also equated with their right to protection. In this respect, vulnerability has a socio-critical potential for addressing injuries and vulnerable subjects and should not lead to general acceptance and indifference towards the injuries of others through generalization. However, the fact that the social discourse on victimization has contributed to a moral polarization and division of society since the 1980s, as recent social history studies have shown, speaks against a one-sided, particularistic view. Political scientists have observed that an understanding of vulnerability that sees it as a mere state of a subject and equates this state with suffering, passivity, powerlessness, helplessness, need for protection or weakness can be used to justify prophylactic protective measures or even “preventive detention” of injured or vulnerable people.<sup>3</sup> However, adopting an anthropologically broad perspective proves to be advantageous when the focus is directed towards the consequences that can result from narrowing down a subject's condition or status as vulnerable. The particular concept of vulnerability is therefore suspected of supporting paternalistic logics. In this context, Hille Haker points out that the supposed personal integrity of invulnerable groups implied by particular vulnerability attributions can also imply the exercise of power where there is none.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Pamela Sue Anderson, ‘Arguing for “ethical” vulnerability. Towards a politics of care?’, in *Exploring Vulnerability*, edited by Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 147-162.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rebekka A Klein, ‘Der ethische Sinn der Verletzlichkeit. Moralische Dimensionen der Verletzlichkeit des Menschen’, in *Moralische Dimensionen der Verletzlichkeit des Menschen. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf einen anthropologischen Grundbegriff und seine Relevanz für die Medizinethik*, edited by Michael Coors (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 57-84.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hille Haker, ‘Vom Umgang mit der Verletzlichkeit des Menschen’, in *Zwischen Parteilichkeit und Gerechtigkeit. Schnittstellen von Klinikseelsorge und Medizinethik* (Ethik in der Klinikseelsorge 3), edited by Monika Bobbert (Münster, Berlin: LIT, 2015), pp. 195-22; Hille Haker, ‘Verletzliche Freiheit. Zu einem neuen Prinzip der Bioethik’, in *Theologische Vulnerabilitätsforschung. Gesellschaftsrelevant und interdisziplinär*, edited by Hildegund Keul (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021), pp. 99-118.

These considerations on the pros and cons of an universal or particularized understanding of vulnerability can be summarized under the term "ambivalent potentiality" proposed by Butler and Kristine Culp.<sup>5</sup> Vulnerability is then understood in the sense of an openness that is to be regarded as ambivalent and potential. Vulnerability as openness to affliction need not only include painful and disruptive experiences, but also means the opening up of life possibilities. Some even go so far as to describe vulnerability as openness and thus as the basis for passions and for sensitivity to the passions of others. Hildegud Keul states that it is not possible to love one another without being vulnerable.<sup>6</sup> For Christian charity, this understanding of vulnerability is a starting point for theological research. Is research on vulnerability merely an analysis of weak points or can vulnerability represent an opportunity for humanity, empathy and solidarity?<sup>7</sup> Is shared, universal vulnerability the reason for social and human cohesion, even solidarity?

### Dynamic vulnerability

This leads to the perspective that vulnerability cannot be seen as a disempowering *conditio humana*, but rather as a *conditio humana* that empowers the subject. Vulnerability is then not a static state in which the subject would be trapped, but vulnerability can rather be understood as a dynamic, enabling and empowering starting position that could constitute not only suffering, but also resistance, not only despair, but also a subject's power to act. In short, vulnerability is the "constitution of self-becoming", according to Heike Springhardt.<sup>8</sup> Vulnerability would not be passive exposure, but an opportunity to shape one's own life. Perhaps that sounds too positively euphemistic and possibly romanticizing. It certainly does for me. "Do it yourself?" and if not, is it your own fault? That sounds a lot like resilience against and the elimination of suffering. But the precariousness of openness and vulnerability threatens to disappear. There is a threat of overcoming instead of enduring and suffering.

From a socio-ethical perspective, vulnerability is closely related to recognition theories of the social sphere, as found in Axel Honneth and Emmanuel Levinas, among others. Vulnerability presents itself as a deep dimension of human existence, in which people are addressed at the core of their individuality and uniqueness, i.e. are called by name, and are ultimately vulnerable. The human being is exposed to the gaze of the Other, who can reify it, i.e. negate and ultimately destroy it or keep it in existence. This is where humans reach the extreme limit of their existence and where vulnerability presents itself. However, despite all exposure, this is also the place to understand vulnerability not only as an existential threat, but also as a gift. Because it enables people to be "touched by others". According to Lisa Achathaler, vulnerability thus becomes the basis for empathy. Christian theology "is characterized by the fact that it does not assign a purely negative meaning to the vulnerable existence of human beings, but rather understands it as

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hildegund Keul, 'Verwundbarkeit, Sicherheit und Resilienz. Der Vulnerabilitätsdiskurs als Chance für eine gesellschaftsrelevante Theologie', *Stimmen der Zeit* 09 (2017), pp. 589-598.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Keul, *Verwundbarkeit, Sicherheit und Resilienz*, pp. 589-598.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Heike Springhardt, 'Exploring life's vulnerability. Vulnerability in vitality', in *Exploring Vulnerability*, edited by Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 13-34.

necessary and necessary for people to live together in a way that is open to others.”<sup>9</sup> Its constructive contribution is that it has developed forms of life and practices in which a bodily self can experience and shape its life by including and not ignoring its vulnerability (cf. Bieler; Keul).<sup>10</sup> Insofar vulnerability is not a subjective and isolated condition, but a characteristic of shared life.

### Challenging integrity

In juxtaposition to vulnerability, the concept of integrity underscores notions of wholeness, coherence, and moral soundness – as often is assumed. Integrity is often associated with autonomy, agency, and the capacity to act in accordance with one's values and principles: integrity serves as a guiding principle for ethical action and moral responsibility. However, the pursuit of integrity can sometimes clash with the recognition of vulnerability. For instance, the valorization of individual autonomy may downplay or dismiss the inherent vulnerabilities that shape human existence, leading to an oversimplified understanding of ethical responsibility. But is it also possible to think of vulnerability and integrity in an intertwined and interdependent relation? No integrity without vulnerability and vice versa – this experience somehow arises in many daily experiences. Integrity is far away from being a state beyond and conquered vulnerability.

At the same time, Rebekka Klein identifies a “spiral of violence” in the concept of vulnerability that stands in contrast to people's striving for integrity. Klein points out that the phenomenon of violence is based on the openness to injury shared by all people.<sup>11</sup> Seen in this light, vulnerability becomes a curse and pushes into a spiral of violence that entangles us in lifelong relationships of violation, as we cannot escape the violating power of others, according to Butler. The “wounding power” as a willingness to wound others out of fear of one's own wounding clearly points to the tensions inherent in the concept of vulnerability.<sup>12</sup>

Navigating the tensions between vulnerability and integrity necessitates a nuanced approach that acknowledges the complexities of human experiences and social realities. Rather than treating vulnerability and integrity as diametrically opposed concepts, one can make up an integrated framework that recognizes the dialectical relationship between them. While one can embrace vulnerability as a fundamental aspect of human existence simultaneously it is an ethical question to uphold the importance of integrity. By critically engaging with these concepts and their intersections, scholars can contribute to a more holistic understanding of human life and social justice in contemporary society.

With regard to the question of the relationship between vulnerability and integrity, it should be noted that, following Alasdair MacIntyre, it is precisely the pursuit of autonomy and self-empowerment that can make people particularly vulnerable and

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<sup>9</sup> Klein, *Der ethische Sinn der Verletzlichkeit*, p. 76 (translation L.C.).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hildegund Keul (ed.), *Theologische Vulnerabilitätsforschung: gesellschaftsrelevant und interdisziplinär* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021); Andrea Bieler, *Verletzliches Leben. Horizonte einer Theologie der Seelsorge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Klein, *Der ethische Sinn der Verletzlichkeit*, p. 74 (translation L.C.).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Judith Butler, *Die Macht der Gewaltlosigkeit: Über das Ethische im Politischen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2020, pp. 41-87; Werner, *Relational und vulnerabel*, pp. 179-202.

endanger them.<sup>13</sup> This leads to fundamental reflections on the sovereignty of the subject: if the subject were completely sovereign, then being vulnerable would only be an option that could be accepted or rejected. But this is not the case. Rather, the subject can only “live out of vulnerability and not away from it”.<sup>14</sup> This leads to fundamental questions of subject theory, but also to the challenge of developing an ethics that is sensitive to vulnerability and integrity.

### **Vulnerability and integrity in theological and philosophical research**

A few years ago it was still the case that theology was largely absent from the emerging vulnerability discourse, despite the many opportunities to connect to the existing discourse in the various sciences;<sup>15</sup> the only early exception is Dorothee Sölle’s “Die Fenster der Verwundbarkeit” published in 1987. This has since changed somewhat<sup>16</sup> and we are happy to start this second volume with an article that dares the undertaking to search for linking points in Butler’s and Thomas Aquinas’ work, to connect philosophical and theological approaches on vulnerability:

Keenan takes up Butler’s elaboration of the concept of vulnerability and draws a comparison with the concept of conscience found in Thomas Aquinas. He thus undertakes a search between philosophical and theological ethics. The fact that vulnerability is also excellently suited to Christian ethical discourse is illustrated by the question of turning to one’s neighbor. In this way, vulnerability offers an opportunity to bring philosophical and theological discourses into conversation with one another. The ethical scope clearly emerges in the form of the actions of the individual in social coexistence and its recognition of the other.

Martina Vuk pursues considerations beyond that when she addresses the relationship between vulnerability and flourishing in her article. Using the practical example of friendship between unequals, she examines how these two concepts are intertwined and which understanding of flourishing incorporates the circumstances of vulnerability.

Margrit Shildrick discusses the exploration of vulnerability in the field of bioethics from a phenomenological view, emphasizing embodiment as the defining element of the self and taking into account feminist approaches. Shildrick argues that human beings are inherently open to changes in their physical experiences due to their embodiment, which is crucial for ongoing development across their lifespan. Conditions such as disability, pain, aging, and dying are seen not as rare instances of vulnerability in an otherwise secure existence, but rather as core experiences that challenge the limits of Western ideologies,

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Klein, *Der ethische Sinn der Verletzlichkeit*, p.66 (translation L.C.).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hildegund Keul, ‘Resilienz der Verwundbarkeit. Der Vulnerabilitätsdiskurs als Chance für eine gesellschaftsrelevante Theologie’, *Hermeneutische Blätter* 1 (2017), pp. 105-120, at p. 109; Marie-Theres Igréc, ‘Vulnerabilität. Die Verwundbarkeit des Humanen im Spiegel der Theologie’, *Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift* 23:1 (2020), pp. 1-10; Hildegund Keul, ‘Diskursgeschichtliche Einleitung zur theologischen Vulnerabilitätsforschung’, in: Keul, *Theologische Vulnerabilitätsforschung*, pp. 7-18.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Issue ‘Verwundbarkeit’, *Hermeneutische Blätter*, 23:1 (2017); issue ‘Vulnerabilität’, *Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift* 23:1 (2019); Keul, *Theologische Vulnerabilitätsforschung*; Coors, *Moralische Dimensionen der Verletzlichkeit des Menschen*.

especially in the realms of modern Western biomedicine and conventional healthcare. The critique of the positivist model of biomedicine leads to a proposed rethinking of embodiment, taking into account Gilles Deleuze's work that carries profound implications for the field of bioethics.

Another article on vulnerability in the field of medicine is by Michael Braunschweig. His paper integrates vulnerability ethics into the debate on human germline genome editing, which has been largely overlooked in ethics discussions. He argues for a nuanced classification beyond the basic therapeutic vs. enhancement dichotomy, warning that labeling applications as 'therapeutic' might increase existing vulnerabilities. The author also refutes claims that germline editing inherently harms intergenerational relations and emphasizes the need for careful ethical scrutiny from a vulnerability perspective before making irreversible decisions.

Lea Chilian & Michael Coors, *guest editors*

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