THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Narrative Autonomy as Means of Vulnerability Management

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that has spread rapidly and affected the world at large represents a shock, from which society can either recover by radically changing its presumptions or slowly fade away. The pandemic has highlighted the weaknesses of particular conceptual constellations that seemed to have been definitely acquired in our social, ethical, and relational environments. This shock calls for a brand-new reframing of certain moral categories, as they have been recently connected together.

This contribution focuses on two concepts that have gained increased attention in ethics and moral philosophy in the last few decades, namely autonomy and vulnerability. It tries to refigure them in light of the pandemic experience, since the COVID-19 emergency as well as the policies of containment and lockdown have let other ways of being autonomous and vulnerable emerge, and have hastened the affirmation of new meanings for both concepts, which could have barely been imagined before. The two concepts are often understood as problematically linked, if not opposed to each other. This relationship needs to be articulated and explained, as it can be useful not only from a theoretical perspective, but also from practical and political ones.

Keywords: autonomy, vulnerability, relationality, solidarity, pandemic imaginary.

Narativna avtonomija kot sredstvo obvladovanja ranljivosti

Povzetek

Pandemija COVID-19, ki se je hitro razširila in prizadela svet nasploh, predstavlja šok, od katerega si družba lahko bodisi opomore z radikalno spremembo svojih predpostavk bodisi se zaradi njega počasi razblini. Pandemija je poudarila šibkosti posamičnih konceptualnih konstelacij, za katere se je zdelo, da smo jih dokončno sprejeli v naša družbena, etična in odnosna okolja. Tovrsten šok terja popolnoma novo uokvirjenje določenih moralnih kategorij, kakršne so donedavnega bile medsebojno povezane. Prispevek se osredotoča na dva pojma, ki sta v zadnjih desetletjih bila deležna posebne pozornosti znotraj etike in moralne filozofije, namreč na pojma avtonomije in ranljivosti. Poskuša ju nanovo premisliti v luči pandemičnega izkustva, kajti nevarnost COVID-19 ter politike obvladovanja širjenja okužbe in zapiranja so omogočile pojavljanje drugačnih načinov avtonomnosti ter ranljivosti in so obenem pospešile pripoznavanje novih pomenov za oba pojma, kakršne si je predhodno komajda bilo mogoče zamišljati. Razumevanje obeh pojmov navadno izpostavlja njuno problematično povezavo, če ne celo medsebojno nasprotstvo. Razmerje med njima je potrebno opredeliti in pojasniti, saj je lahko uporabno ne samo iz teoretske perspektive, temveč tudi z vidikov prakse in politike.

Ključne besede: avtonomija, ranljivost, odnosnost, solidarnost, pandemični imaginarij.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that has spread rapidly and affected the world at large represents a shock, from which society can either recover by radically changing its presumptions or slowly fade away. The pandemic has highlighted the weaknesses of particular conceptual constellations that seemed to have been definitely acquired in our social and relational environments. This shock calls for a brand-new reframing of certain moral categories, as they have been recently connected together.

This contribution focuses on two concepts that have gained increased attention in ethics and moral philosophy in the last few decades, namely autonomy and vulnerability. It tries to refigure them in light of the pandemic experience. The two concepts are often understood as problematically linked, if not opposed to each other. I assume that the COVID-19 emergency as well as the policies of containment and lockdown have let other ways of being autonomous and vulnerable emerge, and have hastened the affirmation of new meanings for both concepts that could have barely been imagined before. The pandemic has unveiled, though implicitly, their strict connection and has made it clear that there is a strong interdependence between the two, rather than an opposition. This relationship needs to be articulated and explained, as it can be useful not only from a theoretical perspective, but also from practical and political ones.

In order to provide a different conceptualization of their relationship, I proceed in two steps and present some concluding remarks. Firstly, I present a minimal definition of autonomy that circulated before the pandemic and prove that it needs to be reexamined in light of the new issues that have emerged. I highlight that, even though the necessity of refiguring autonomy was already present in literature, the pandemic has reinforced this need and made it urgent. In doing so, I come up with some, at least partly, new insights on autonomy. Secondly, I focus on vulnerability and trace its main meanings by referring to some studies that existed before the pandemic and have proved proper to the context of the pandemic.

In the concluding remarks, I articulate a proposal, according to which the refiguration of autonomy and vulnerability is only possible by reading these

concepts together and presenting their interconnectedness. Is it true that autonomy is inversely proportional to vulnerability? Or is, rather, autonomy about being capable of managing one's own vulnerability that cannot be eradicated permanently? Through this contribution, I expect to provide enough arguments to speak of "autonomy in vulnerability" instead of "autonomy against vulnerability." The structure of the contribution aims to reflect on a conceptual difficulty, namely the impossibility of coming up with a complete and exhaustive definition of autonomy without referring to vulnerability. Thus, the first section is a sort of interrupted discourse on autonomy that will be accomplished only after making a *detour* into vulnerability.

2. Upheavals of autonomy

Autonomy has become an increasingly contested concept over the last few decades. It has alternatively been seen as the triumph of a monological subject that exerts control over the external and the internal world, or as an absolute value that protects free choice and resizes or relativizes the content of the choices itself. Notwithstanding the hyperbolic trait of these critiques, it is true that the original Kantian idea of an agent being capable of self-legislation has progressively lost moral import and has increasingly become an expression of a white, male, abstract, and falsely universal subject. The necessity to argue for a defense of autonomy as a value, though not the only one, seems irrefutable to me, because of its proximity to freedom. I wish to set up a definition of autonomy that corresponds to a quality of actions and practical life, rather than to an essence. Thus, being autonomous should mean becoming capable of preserving the space of articulation and projectuality. I hypothesize that the experience of pandemics has contributed significantly to this definition.

The "ground zero" of the argument is as precise a delimitation of the meaning of autonomy as possible. Here, I mostly refer to autonomy in the four senses codified by Joel Feinberg (1989).[1] Autonomy is the capacity "to govern oneself," "the actual condition of self-government," or "an ideal of character," and "the sovereign authority to govern oneself" (Feinberg 1989, 28). All these

1 Even if he does not explicitly relate these meanings to morality, I assume that they apply to moral life as well.

meanings are based on the idea of mastery with respect to one's own choices and imply a static, transparent, and unchangeable self. There is no need to remember the contentiousness of these assumptions.

It would be impossible and misleading to provide a complete account of the most recent debates concerning autonomy. An issue that works as a background assumption here is that it deals with the paradigm of relational autonomy that has been outlined by Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000). Their pivotal research aims to restore autonomy and safeguard its value by rethinking it as a relational concept. According to the authors, recognizing the socio-relational trait of autonomy helps face critiques that this concept has undergone since the "fall of the subject." The background, against which this discourse is made, comprises a consideration of the subject as porous, embedded, and always already connected with others. From the publication of their major collective volume on this theme, a large amount of work on this topic has been circulated, and relational autonomy has been used in many fields of applied ethics.

One of the most debated issues during the COVID-19 pandemic concerns the fairness of the limitation of personal liberties to lower the contagion index and to reduce the extent of damage caused by the pandemic. These critiques have implied a consideration of freedom as opposed to any kind of law and to any kind of responsibility toward others, and have tended to hide a concern around the paternalism implied in such measures. Upon a closer look, the standpoint of these criticisms is a consideration of a lonely subject that is always already autonomous and capable of self-determining, self-legislating, and self-governing. In turn, the discussion concerning autonomy has systematically ignored the following questions: How do pandemics affect autonomy and agency? What does "to be autonomous" mean during a pandemic? Who can afford autonomy during a pandemic and who can afford to legislate on their own?

During the pandemic, on more than an occasion, the impression has been that autonomy as the capacity of self-determining and self-legislating in order to preserve oneself and others was a luxury good that progressively lost its status as a relational good, a particular good that expands, rather than

diminishes, when benefited from.[2] The emphasis on the relational dimension of autonomy has enabled increasing attention to the internal, social, and economic conditions that make personal and moral autonomy accessible. This relational quality of autonomy is crucial, but it is far more important to highlight that being relational also means that it is relative to a context, a situation, or a particular emergency. Along this path, relational autonomy means more than the fact that the self is a social one, but also allows for an interpretation of autonomy as relative to a context and position. In other words, it depends on the position that is temporarily or definitely occupied by the subject in a particular context.[3]

An attentive reading of the processes that have affected agency during the lockdown and the pandemics shows that being autonomous cannot enjoy a limitless freedom of choice and the concrete conditions to carry out these choices. Autonomy seems linked to the capacity to manage risks and balance desires, wishes, and responsibilities in the long run. This prospect is completely lacking in normal times, but emerges as a radically different imaginary during pandemics: the feeling that we are at the mercy of nature has been compounded by the perception that the worldwide interconnectedness can significantly increase the risks of contagion. Human extinction has been related to the massive intervention of humans in the environment and in the lives of others. The pandemic has highlighted how short-term thinking is proper for humans and should be normatively substituted with an effort to think prospectively. Autonomy in this context appears impossible to pursue, but remains fundamental. So, it is necessary to rethink it as an in-between quality rather than as an essence, as the capacity of thinking prospectively even in extreme uncertainty. How can humans act autonomously if they lose control over their bodies, both because of the pandemic and the policies adopted to

2 For a complete and exhaustive definition of relational goods, a reference should be made to the Italian tradition of Civil Economy, spokespersons of which are Luigino Bruni, Leonardo Becchetti, and Stefano Zamagni (see Becchetti, Bruni, and Zamagni 2019).

3 The fact that autonomy is relational in the sense that it is positional has been recently pointed out from a political perspective by Gerard Rosich: "[…] the nature of autonomy is relational and the entities within this relation are conceived of as polities. It is a political concept that is used to characterize a different kind of relation between polities that does not start out from relations of domination and violence." (Rosich 2019, 94)

contain the spread of the disease? The tragic events recently experienced have become a magnifying lens for finding a response. A paradigm shift is needed from autonomy as mastery and control to autonomy as articulation of the problematic relationship between the self and the environment.[4]

When considered from a practical standpoint, autonomy has to do with the context, and agency models itself based on policies and social environments. It aims to strike a balance between those forces, while having others in view and caring about them. At first glance, the pandemic has emphasized the internal dimension of autonomy and its external conditions of exercise. The internal space of deliberation has been increasingly considered a necessary capacity to behave responsibly and to avoid social contact as far as possible. Nevertheless, the rhetorical discourse concerning responsibility has avoided considering that autonomy—that is, the capacity of giving oneself the law—should be meant as a problematic relationship with a norm that each individual articulates in their own conscience and that this capacity can be owned by the subject only at certain relational conditions. Paul Ricoeur has emblematically thematized this meaning of autonomy in the following words:

> […] for us as human beings, this idea is inseparable from that of a subject who is capable of affirming himself, of positing himself. This is one of the two components of the key idea of autonomy: oneself in relation to a norm. (Changeux and Ricoeur 2002, 202)

4 Immediately before the spread of COVID-19, an insightful book by Christos Lynteris (2019) outlined the question of autonomy related to an imaginary pandemic in terms of the "end of mastery." In his view, "humankind is thus seen as deprived of its foundational, autopoetic capacity, insofar as it is unable to self-create itself anew through its relation to the world following the latter's end as a world to which humans relate through a project for mastery. […] the pandemic imaginary should be considered not simply as a form of anthropological closure but as a field of signification that is always already part of the creation of new kinds of institutions and ways of instituting humanity." (Lynteris 2019, 17) According to Lynteris, just before the spread of the imaginary pandemic, it had significantly presented another mode of self-interpretation that emerged from mankind, and indicated that this latter aspect is always capable of instituting and creating new imaginaries and new social signifiers.

This meaning is far from the more ambitious and unrealistic claim to be the creator and the "copyright owner" of the self-imposed rules. Moreover, this meaning implies that autonomy is inevitably dependent on the context and that respecting the rules imposed by the governments was not up on the individual alone. In many cases, the failure of respecting rules should not have been considered a fault or a sin, but rather as something ascribable to a socioeconomic condition that compelled one to violate the quarantine.

As a result of curtailing the illusory dreams of instrumental control, autonomy turns out to be a relational quality of mankind's being-in-the-world, in the sense that it is a response to a state of affairs, and is not only related, but relative to a context and its way of shaping, forging, and transfiguring individuals and their connections. Against this background, the idea of control fades and leaves room for the idea of autonomy as a different kind of mastery. The latter looks rather like a constant exercise of balancing forces, a sort of reflective equilibrium, as an in-between resonance (see Rosa 2019). The signs and traces of this kind of autonomy are far from the idea of control, but, rather, appeal to a narrative capacity of synthetizing the heterogeneous and to manage the feeling—and the fact—of being at others' mercy, to use the expression that Ferrarese coined to define vulnerability. The way, in which human beings manage dispossession and seek a path to gain self-ownership, can be seen as a lifelong task carried out without the pretense of control, but with the commitment to articulation and experience of non-objectifying ways of self-recognition. If it is this way, self-ownership does not deal with the monolithic subject that does not change in time, but rather with a narrative to be written and rewritten every day. Autonomy is thus that path, and cannot be limited to the internal and individual dimensions as it is performed externally, and leaves traces to future generations in terms of legacies and ways of articulating that, to some extent, still demand a relevant work of imagination.

The public discourse on responsibility is affected, maybe even infected, by the neoliberal logic that shifts the exclusive responsibility of the contagion onto individuals and their behaviors instead of assuming the costs needed to trace contact and to ensure public health measures. Autonomy, meant as the reflective endorsement of rules aimed at increasing individual and common good, runs the risk of being rhetorically used for the same objective, as some authors,

taking the cue from Foucault (2007), note: nowadays, even if a consolidated tradition is followed, power does not exert its coercive force directly, but rather, rhetorically and indirectly "invites individuals voluntarily to conform to their objectives, to discipline themselves, to turn the gaze upon themselves in the interests of their health" (Lupton 1995, 11).[5] Autonomy should be rescued from this neoliberal drift outlining that it can be authentically experienced only when it corresponds to the capacity to distinguish between the rules that promote human dignity and that are aimed at corroborating anonymous structures of power. Second-order autonomy is needed. Giving oneself the law or subscribing to others' law is not enough, if those processes do not involve a lifelong critical stance.

On the one hand, an excessive emphasis on individual autonomy should be avoided in institutions that strive to unload their responsibilities. It comes as no surprise that these policies imply the picture of the (neo)liberal individual, detached from the context. On the other hand, autonomy should be valued, but reconsidered, in light of a biological, and not only social or relational embeddedness, according to which:

> Autonomy is not simply a matter of the choices of separate and separable agents who affect one another only contingently. It is a matter

5 A recent report by Remco van de Pas of the Clingendael Institute stated that: "What is required to contain the coronavirus (and infectious disease epidemics in general) is in essence well known. It includes public health principles of detecting, testing, isolation, treatment and tracing. However, this needs to be contextualised. It needs to be proportional and there needs to be absolute political scrutiny that state and/or medical powers are not abused. To give an example: an effective and well-proven way to trace the contacts of Covid-19 patients is by simply contacting them directly. One could map the contacts with the explicit consent of an infected person and call them. This provides for more autonomy and personal contact, and might establish trust in the authorities. This form of contact tracing is the standard practice of public health institutions. But it is time-intensive. It requires a large and skilled workforce. It requires financial investment to cover, for instance, decent salaries for all these public health workers." (Pas 2020, 19) The emphasis on moral responsibility and autonomy may sound like a disengagement by institutions that, instead of investing in practices of contact tracing and in the workforce in the short run, and in funding scientific research in the long run, appeal to the morality of individuals, as though being infected were a matter of moral goodness.

> of the choices of embedded agents, way-station selves, who must take into account the ever-present possibility of their unavoidable biological connection with each other. (Battin, Francis, Jacobson, and Smith 2009, 85)

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown that relational autonomy is not only a matter of a "romantic vision of relationality as constituted merely by friendship and familiar relations" (Kalbian 2013, 292), but rather invests the biological constitution of the human body. If this is true, while conceiving of public health policies, not only does the social environment matter, but "physical locatedness […] is critical as well" (Battin, Francis, Jacobson, and Smith 2009, 78).[6]

If it is true that one cannot be fully autonomous during a pandemic, it is true that a sort of autonomy has been experienced as well. This conundrum ensues from the circumstance that if autonomy is meant as a kind of control aimed at restoring mastery over the self and others, then experiencing it during a pandemic is impossible. In contrast, if autonomy is meant as an effort to respond to dispossession and, to some extent, to accept and live with it and resist it when necessary, then it has been experienced even during the pandemic, although it requires substantial reframing. The balancing of internal and external forces whose respective limits are so often conflated means that the aim of an autonomous action or set of actions and of agency is not to definitely eliminate vulnerability, but rather to transfigure it as something to live with, face, resist, and transform by narrating different stories.

Only after having reconstructed the complex and multi-faceted cluster of issues raised by autonomy can the question of "who can afford autonomy during a pandemic" be addressed. Perceiving oneself as potentially capable of an embedded autonomy is far from being taken for granted: the folk conception of autonomy, which fits the aim and implicit anthropology of neoliberalism perfectly, is based on the illusory control of the self that should be able to decide

6 In the context of pandemics, embeddedness means that every human being is a victim and a vector at the same time, as the title of the work of Battin, Francis, Jacobson, and Smith (2009) suggests.

on its own, without interference. It fits neoliberal views perfectly as both ignore the interconnectedness as a feature that goes from biology to society. This path leads to the misrecognition of social and economic conditions that impair autonomy and probably reinforces them, as it ignores the fact that many people cannot afford social distancing and are not completely free to manage their own vulnerabilities. Interferences are a part of autonomy, and if they are not recognized and made visible, they can seriously impair the deliberative process of the subject. In turn, situations of considerable reduction of autonomy can affect policies and views of public health decision makers and workers, as is the case in the course of implementing pandemic clinical triage protocols.[7]

It is possible to answer the question on whether autonomy is possible in conditions of "unfreedom" (to use an expression made famous by Adorno; cf. 2004) only if vulnerability is recognized as implied in the definition of autonomy and an exceeding dimension of creativity even in oppressive contexts is recognized as a human trait, although it may be difficult to let it emerge. While comparing oppression and pandemics as events that aim (even if not voluntarily) to reduce self-ownership to dependence and dispossession, autonomy seems to be the response aimed at recovering the space of self-articulation. The relationship with a norm is only one of the key features of autonomy and can contribute toward enforcing and enduring the capacity of articulation and conceiving projects. This diachronic, context-dependent,

7 Provisions addressing survival in clinical triage protocols usually do not consider the context and the overexposure of some subjects to infectious diseases: "It might be ethically justifiable to assign priority for critical care to patients who are more likely to survive—as is the case with typical triage protocols—if becoming ill from an infectious disease like influenza was simply a matter of bad luck. […] in real-world situations, morally relevant inequalities exist in virtually all populations, and exposure to infectious disease is not assigned randomly. In fact, the likelihood of exposure is often increased for individuals who suffer from morally relevant inequalities." (Kaposy and Khraishi 2012, 77) The translation of this issue in terms of clinical pandemic triage, as the authors noted, is quite ironic: "The irony consists in the fact that attempting to avoid bias in this way may actually lead to bias. Prioritizing survivability might disadvantage those whose social identity is marked by factors that reduce survivability." (Kaposy and Khraishi 2012, 78) This also applies to autonomy. If the questions of who can afford autonomy, who can legislate on his own, and who can afford social distancing are not asked, any appeal to personal autonomy and responsibility would fall into a vacuum at best, or, worse, increase the occasions of infection.

embedded consideration of autonomy leads to a narrative pattern that can have a normatively disruptive effect if it is applied to policies and decision-making processes at individual and social levels.

The adjective "narrative" applied to autonomy does not refer to the coherence of a life expressed by the well-known idea of narrative unity. Rather, the normative force of narrative lies in it being "trajectory dependent" and "interpretation sensitive" (Jones 2008). Being narratively autonomous means to recognize a dependency on the context and on the past in imagining the future, and to be sensitive to upheavals in self-interpretations that increase one's confidence in their capacity to carry out transformative actions. Narrative autonomy also recalls the issue of authorship: self-authorship can be a candidate for substituting the semantic field of self-ownership, as according to some interpretations,[8] the latter is too strictly related to the idea of property. Self-authorship becomes a vector of a normative focus[9] in constant search for proximity with one's center. Narrative autonomy seems a concrete example of what Axel Honneth (2007) called "decentered autonomy."

In sum, the dependency on trajectories, the interpretation sensitivity, and the projectual capacity[10] design a space of articulation, in which one can understand oneself as being capable of self-authorship. These features are unavoidably interlinked with vulnerability as exposure to events and accidents, with autonomy acting as the capacity to manage this vulnerability by recognizing its use and abuse. Autonomy cannot exist without vulnerability. It is possible to reformulate the issue of autonomy only if vulnerability is recognized as implied in the definition of an embedded and responsive human agency that resists the sacrificial logic at least in two points: infection is not a punishment and does not exclusively depend on the misbehavior or misconduct of the individual alone, and autonomy is neither an inherent feature of human beings

8 Think of the liberal accounts that see the grounding pattern of the self-relationship in property. The concern for self-ownership, particularly outside of liberal tradition, is legitimate and fair, as it stems from the suffering caused by alienation.

9 Here, it is difficult not to think of the regulative ideal coined by Kant, who defined it as *focus imaginarius* (Kant 1998, A645/B673, 591).

10 In this contribution, by "projectual capacity" I mean the ability to conceive and realize projects.

independent from context nor a burden that can easily lead to an overload of responsibilities, which cause the positive aspects of the link between autonomy and responsibility to fade, and instead emphasizes its dark side. Besides the paradigm of control, autonomy can be meant as self-authorship that exerts responsibility in terms of projectual capacity with others.

3. Vulnerability against the background of its misunderstandings

This section explores vulnerability and starts from the experience of the pandemic. This lens contributes toward dispelling some myths concerning the equation between precariousness[11] and vulnerability, and uncovering the layers in the meaning of this term. Starting from some considerations in dealing with a pandemic, the arguments developed will examine current explanations of vulnerability to recognize it as an embedded, and not static or definitive, phenomenon, while also taking into account the possibility that some policies aimed at reducing vulnerability actually increase it, especially at the social level. The pervasive recourse to the theme of vulnerability can be considered a rhetorical device that justifies the existing fragilities without repairing them. Such a process can be labeled as an improper use of vulnerability, and even as an abuse of it.

At first glance, it seems that pandemics have provided further evidence of the intrinsic fragility that characterizes human life on earth.[12] However, upon a closer look, it has become clear that pandemics have been affecting vulnerable subjects and have made evident the necessity to reformulate vulnerability in terms of autonomy. The condition of increased vulnerability, thus, does not refer to an innate condition, but rather to a situation wherein every human

11 Judith Butler pointed out the difference between precariousness and precarity. According to her, while the former is a common trait among human beings, the latter is the result of external conditions of experienced injustice, discrimination, and morally relevant inequalities. Butler referred mostly to the experience of bodily vulnerability as the possibility of being harmed. This possibility gives rise to an ethical response to suffering against the background of a defense of nonviolence.

12 In her insightful interpretation of the ontological and ethical connections between autonomy and vulnerability, Carla Danani recently proposed to ground this issue "on the ontological feature of 'living on the world', on openness and interdependency" (Danani 2020, 198).

being can be affected and wounded—metaphorically speaking—, but the actual wounds are because of the economic, social, psychological, and cultural conditions. The latent condition of vulnerability may emerge and become real or may be aggravated through situations, even if transitory, which impairs the capacity of deliberating and acting subsequently, in order to stay safe, in light of all the information owned, and without being constrained by urgent needs. It can be said that there is a space between being capable of producing unseen vulnerabilities that irretrievably threaten the capacity of taking care of oneself and of others in the long run. This capacity can be read as a projectual one, as it encompasses transformative thinking concerning the past and the future, and the possibility of mobilizing agency.

Before reaching the conceptual level of vulnerability analysis, it is worth focusing on what can be labeled as a pluralization of vulnerabilities that becomes apparent during a pandemic. In the literature concerning the ethics of pandemics, this topic has been addressed several times. Some scholars have pointed out that the misrecognition of social vulnerability may lead to ineffectiveness in pandemic planning. With reference to the H1N1 experience, Anna Mastroianni relates some examples:

> […] an undocumented restaurant worker receiving low wages and lacking job security and health benefits may have no real choice but to continue working through an illness, and may avoid seeking medical attention that he cannot afford and fears might lead to deportation. (Mastroianni 2009, 11)

She argues: "In any community, there are individuals who cannot afford to practice social distancing—undocumented workers, for instance, and those who rely on community settings for their livelihood or for their day-to-day existence […]" (ibid.).

A stronger commitment of all stakeholders in pandemic planning can make it far more effective through the participation of all actors involved, starting from an accurate description of their fragilities and their "capacity to respond to public health directives" (ibid.). It can, therefore, be maintained that her arguments rely on a pluralization of vulnerabilities. The latter cannot be reduced

to traditional ones, such as gender, race, age, and so on, but need to be specified further. Vulnerabilities need to be pluralized both in synchronic and diachronic directions, as they can be linked to a particular situation that is experienced temporarily by the subject that may be overcome or may change with time. If not constantly "updated," these vulnerabilities turn into many pitfalls that may erode the dimensions of self-reliance and agency. It is fundamental to read vulnerabilities as relational and dynamic processes, instead of considering them as statuses, if policies in critical times have to be effective.

Going a step further toward the conceptualization of vulnerabilities, an important contribution in terms of applied ethics comes from Florencia Luna, who proposes:

> […] that the concept of vulnerability be thought of using the concept of *layers*. The metaphor of a layer gives the idea of something "softer," something that may be multiple and different, and that may be removed layer by layer. It is not "a solid and unique vulnerability" that exhausts the category; there might be different vulnerabilities, different layers operating […] (Luna 2009, 129).

Just like autonomy, vulnerability takes the shape of a relational, and even positional, event:

> This concept of vulnerability is a relational one. That is, it concerns the relation between the person or a group of persons and the circumstances or the context. It is closely related to the situation under analysis. It is not a category or a label we can just put on. (Luna 2009, 130)

The emphasis on vulnerability as a lack of attention (as Vaughn 2020 put it) and projectual capacity should not be transformed into an overload of responsibility on the subject, which recalls the appeal to self-entrepreneurship or the widespread rhetoric of resilience. To the extent that the production of vulnerabilities is a matter of personal, social, and political relations and conditions, their reduction or their management should be a concern carried out at a social level, as well. Again, vulnerability lies somewhere in between. In

this respect, Luna's argument is very convincing: "Another way of understanding this proposal is not by thinking that someone *is* vulnerable, but by considering a particular situation that *makes* or *renders* someone vulnerable. If the situation changes, the person may no longer be considered vulnerable." (Ibid.)[13]

The background, against which those conceptualizations gain sense, can be articulated with the help of a well-known attempt to systematize the issue of vulnerability through a distinction made by Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds (2012), who distinguish among three types of vulnerability: "We conclude this section by proposing a brief taxonomy of three different, but overlapping, kinds of vulnerability: *inherent*, *situational*, and *pathogenic*." (Roger, Mackenzie, and Dodds 2012, 24)

Both inherent and situational vulnerability can be "*dispositional* or *occurrent*" (ibid.). In turn, they highlight that:

> In keeping with our commitment to autonomy and fostering capabilities, we would argue that the background aim of any such interventions must be to enable or restore the agency of vulnerable persons or groups […]. In contrast to agency-supporting responses to vulnerability, some responses may exacerbate existing vulnerabilities or generate new vulnerabilities. We refer to these as *pathogenic* vulnerabilities. (Ibid., 25)

In addition to its utility in mapping and framing their consequences in terms of moral and political obligations, this taxonomy deserves to be problematized further with regard to the idea of an inherent vulnerability that recalls the considerations addressed by Butler concerning precariousness; the background assumption that vulnerability is something that can be erased and not something to live with and, in turn, that agency as autonomy is always something that is already owned and quite independent of context, even if relational; as well as the powerful insight on the kind of vulnerability that is termed *pathogenic*.

13 The debate concerning vulnerability as a label is wide-ranging and, although it cannot be reconstructed here, it should at least be mentioned that the labeling approach is usually understood as opposed to the analytical approach, of which Luna and Kipnis (2003) are two representative authors.

As for these reasons of interest, inherent vulnerability can be equated to precariousness, as it depicts a common condition of uncertainty, dependence on others, and embodiment that can be summed up as what has previously been indicated as the impossibility to control each and every aspect of one's life. Thus, since inherent vulnerability is close to precariousness as Butler (2004) described it, it seems worth deepening what the relationship between inherent and situational vulnerability is, on the lines of the link Butler drew between precariousness and precarity. At any rate, the focus on specific and targeted interventions that should follow an attentive analysis of vulnerabilities seems to suggest that there is something that should be repaired in terms of resilience and capacity to cope with suffering. The impression is that such a taxonomy relies still too much on a static vision of vulnerability as something that occurs to individuals and not among individuals: the interventions proposed aim to restore something damaged in the individual or in their life, not to transform oppressive and negative circumstances in order to distribute vulnerability and risks equally.

Inherent vulnerability sounds like a recognition of the finitude of humankind, and of the interdependence that constitutes and structures every life. Situational vulnerability seems rather interesting because it deepens, exacerbates, and even accelerates the path toward death. It transforms a common condition into a moral harm, to which one has to oppose the projectual capacity acquired *via* narrative autonomy. The individual cannot be overloaded by discharging the responsibility of the external conditions on him or her, but conditions should be created and enforced to allow for a self-confident subject that is capable of attempting syntheses between actions and events, wishes, dreams, and circumstances. Two opposite tendencies should be avoided: that of removing responsibility for social issues from the state and blaming individuals for suffering and experiencing vulnerabilities; and the equally dangerous attitude of sticking a label of vulnerability that converts into a cage enforced by policies only apparently, but indeed paternalistically, targeted at the reduction of vulnerability.

Pathogenic vulnerability can be related to the uses and abuses of vulnerability at a social and political level. Behind the insistence on the need to protect the vulnerable (to quote the title of the groundbreaking work by Goodin 1989), there can be a large amount of interest to keep some categories thus, and not

foster their capacity to manage vulnerability through informal channels and solidarity bonds. Pathogenic vulnerability may also be interpreted as an outcome of the process of labeling vulnerability and vulnerable categories, without recognizing the intersectional dimension and the in-between dimension of it. Vulnerability as a process, as an event that occurs in the relational space, and as an interplay of forces, can be defined not only as relational, but also positional, meaning that it depends on the position and the role assumed from time to time, with this category. If referring to an inherent vulnerability makes sense, it is because sooner or later, every human being may experience a situation of vulnerability that makes interdependence, embodiment, and exposure more than evident. The policies and social constructions, in which he or she is embedded, should ensure a space of articulation of such vulnerability, and not prevent people from organizing bottom-up actions aimed at reducing the abuse of vulnerability and managing it without letting it become the source of other new vulnerabilities. Some measures are counterproductive and increase precarity and vulnerability instead of reducing it. This idea was shared by Mitroupoulos (2020), who described quarantining as one of these pitfalls.

A life outside vulnerability is unthinkable. Even autonomy without vulnerability is an illusion. Rather, "[w]hat needs to be understood is the capacity to notice disturbance and its relevance to everyday life" (Vaughn 2020, 519). This insight is useful in recognizing a process of impairment of projectual capacity as a common trait of the vulnerabilities (environmental, social, and so on), which starts from analyzing and being capable of recognizing the external factors that can seriously compromise it and undermine the long-term vision of the future. Even if this latter usually lacks and cannot be said to be innate, it is true that it can be crucial from a normative standpoint. The situations of increased vulnerability do not generate *ex novo* this inability to think in the long run, but simply exacerbate it.

To some extent, it can be said that the concept of vulnerability should be fragmented and seen through a glass prism, in order to avoid the risk that it may be used (and abused) as a label that impedes autonomous agency. In turn, increased or multiple situations and conditions of vulnerability should be recognized as one of the causes of the impossibility of performing fully autonomous actions. A middle ground between the impairment of

autonomy because of the stigmatizing use of vulnerability and deliberate disregard for *situational* vulnerability is necessary. Both attitudes may lead to *pathogenic* policies: the former because of a crystallization of vulnerability, an ontologization of it, and the latter because of a deliberate indifference toward vulnerabilities that can lead to stigmatizing processes. The effectiveness of health policies also depends on this balance between the ontologization and the negation of vulnerabilities. This is only possible if vulnerability begins to be seen as something that happens and that is transitory. The content of such vulnerability is unpredictable, but it can be assumed that in some form, it is present in the lives of every human being.

The fact that vulnerability is an in-between mode of relations has been recently highlighted by Estelle Ferrarese, who defined this phenomenon with well-argued content:

> A vulnerability only ever arises as the hollow side of a power to act. It materializes only vis-à-vis a power that either threatens to act or, on the contrary, fails to do so. To speak of vulnerability is to speak of another's (or of a pronouncement's or a structure's) power to act, and clearly does not exclude finding a power to act on the side of the vulnerable subject too. What effectively illuminates the notion of vulnerability is thus the idea of "being-at-another's-mercy." (Ferrarese 2018, 1)

This quotation clearly shows the relational quality of vulnerability, which is not only an endogenous phenomenon, but rather one that can be seen as something that happens within the social realm and between subjects. The feeling of being-at-another's-mercy is a trace of an event that involves at least two subjects. She sets the issue out in terms of power or failure to act with consequences for another subject. As Ferrarese notes, this definition of vulnerability is highly different from the kind of vulnerability that is said to affect every human being, as it depends on the quality of the relations and rights involved, as abuses of vulnerability do creep into the social world.

This space generated by the interplay of at least two agencies, one of which provokes the other's feeling of being at another's mercy, can be analyzed further. After comparing different models of vulnerability and providing an exhaustive

framework of the main current theories, Ferrarese effectively articulates the in-between trait of vulnerability, and points out that it:

> […] necessarily appears at the same time as the horizon of obligations (fulfilled or not) and of normative arguments, and as materialising right at the level of social interactions. […] Exposure is permitted and shaped by normative expectations that are situated *between* subjects. (Ibid., 57)

The content the Ferrarese indicates shows that the normative expectations, which are implicit in any exchange and in mutual actions, generate and delimit the width of vulnerability, which is always morally informed.

4. Toward a narrative autonomy as the management of vulnerability

Is autonomy the other side of vulnerability? The discourse of autonomy and vulnerability usually interprets these two fields as being opposed to each other. Having clarified a few aspects that emerged during the pandemic, this section reads them together as part of the same phenomenon. This has been made possible as the pandemic accelerated the processes of reflection on those themes. The standpoint of such a reading is that the recognition of their interconnectedness could considerably enhance health policies. Only a few authors have outlined their intrinsic interconnections. Among these, in a thought-provoking fashion, Estelle Ferrarese affirmed:

> Access to the principles of justice only ever occurs negatively. It is therefore only because they are infringed, only because expectations are disappointed, only because vulnerability is averred, that something approaching a political subjectivation is realised. Vulnerability is thus instituted as a cognitive operator. (Ibid., 75)

Therefore, according to Ferrarese, vulnerability appears to be like a heuristic principle that is able to prompt individual and collective action. The moral and political subject is not only the outcome of a process of anonymous subjectivation. Rather, it emerges from a context of denied and

ignored normative expectations. When not met, they compel the subject to live at the mercy of others, systematically dispossessing them of the capacity of self-articulating, deliberating, and caring for themselves.[14] Autonomy and vulnerability meet precisely in the interstice between unfulfilled expectations and the resignation of being at another's mercy.

Borrowing and applying the icastic reference to the layers from the description of vulnerability, it can be maintained that autonomy has layers, too. The first comprises acknowledging one's vulnerability and being able to link it to a specific unfulfilled normative expectation. The example of the undocumented worker is emblematic here, as he can neither protect himself nor give himself the law (i.e., the imperative of social distancing). Being autonomous thus means gaining a space of self-awareness, with a self-reflective attitude concerning the situational vulnerability that does not allow the restoration of projectual capacity in a meaningful present. Society, in general, and institutions, as well as their policies, are involved in this, as they must remove obstacles that impair such capacity. The second comprises gaining confidence that visibility will be achieved through action. This implies self-consideration as the author of one's own actions as well as a privileged observer and interpreter of them. The third step implies an additional level of awareness to the effect that situational vulnerability is unavoidable. Autonomy can be configured as the capacity to manage it not in the sense of accepting unfair situations and labeling processes, but, rather, in the sense of the steps explained above. Being autonomous does not mean mastering internal and external conditions of life, but rather considering oneself an author who is capable of synthetizing actions and events, projects, and circumstances, and who never stops seeking or inventing sense.

In order to make the connection, the refiguration of vulnerability proposed in the previous section needs to be linked with the proposal of a narrative autonomy as self-authorship. One possible response to the question as to the kind of link that exists between autonomy and vulnerability lies in the capacity

14 In a pandemic or epidemic, it is fundamental to remember, as previously stated, that the subject is a victim and a vector at the same time. Thus, care for the self automatically becomes care for others. This process deserves a more in-depth analysis from an ethical viewpoint.

of conceiving projects starting from the difficulties involved in a particular situation. Autonomy and vulnerability are events and not things. They are positional and relational, and outline a means of occupying a position, a quality, and not an essence. Autonomy as narrative capacity for managing vulnerabilities depends on the context and should not be taken for granted. Defined thus, it is capable of recognizing vulnerabilities and transforming them into reasons to act. It refers to the management of the space to heal wounds. It thus outlines a kind of management of vulnerability, not in the sense of resilience or overload of responsibilities, but rather in the sense of confidence in the transient nature of some vulnerabilities and in transformative agency at an individual as well as collective level. This translates to the abovementioned projectual capacity. Vulnerability and autonomy do not appear opposed. Rather, they are the main characters of the same scene, and the latter cannot exist without the former.

"Layers, not labels," which is the title of Luna's mentioned contribution, is the sentence that has been guiding the analysis of vulnerability. In response to this pluralization, a promising approach comprises an intersectional insight that grows within the bonds of solidarity:

> […] to develop a new vision of intersectional solidarity that is not beholden to the hegemonic models of the past, but inspired by local struggles and achieves the remarking of humanism, seems to be one of the most crucial intellectual and political tasks of our time. (Gomes Duarte and Lima 2020, 137)

That a pandemic will automatically lead to a better world based on solidarity (see Žižek 2020) is a highly problematic view. It is quite difficult to see it as based on solid ground. It can, of course, seem like a wish, and it falls in the realm of moral duties. Nevertheless, the likelihood of sanitary and ecological emergencies should help redefine the blurring contours of autonomy and vulnerability with self-awareness placed at the heart of this redefinition. How can the vulnerable be autonomous? Only the vulnerable can be(come) autonomous, as autonomy means enjoying the (internal, relational, social, and political) conditions that allow for a narrative and transformative management of vulnerability. The latter can finally be recognized as the fundamental precondition for autonomy.

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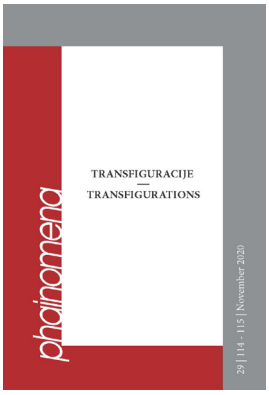

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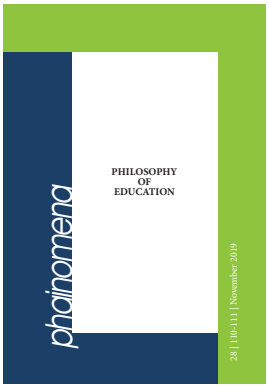

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