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Practices of Vulnerability: Openness, Production, and Transformation

1. *Introduction*

In the contemporary ethical landscape, vulnerability has become an object of study, analysis, and discussion. The need to define its scope, alternatively considering it a constitutive experience of the human being (Rogers, Mackenzie, and Dodds 2012), a transitory event, a dangerous trap hiding an attempt at stigmatisation and control (Braidotti 2006), a vehicle of resistance and transformation of the existing that also passes through bodies (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay (eds.) 2018), is accompanied by an inescapable consideration, according to which vulnerability is associated with the possibility of violence, which is exercised in the form of arbitrariness, power, and domination. This attestation goes hand in hand with the persuasion that vulnerability is the other side of the power to act (Ferrarese 2018), and therefore always takes the form of a relational event that *happens in between*. The hypothesis guiding this contribution is that the forms and experiences of vulnerability are irreducibly plural, and a distinction must be made in cases where vulnerability is used from a merely descriptive perspective, and those where it performs a normative function. It is in this second case that the ethical depth of vulnerability can be recognised. Vulnerability can either be a source for emancipatory action or can be used as an excuse for oppressive and dominating measures. A relational mode of refiguring ethical autonomy is crucial in discerning the roles of vulnerability, both as a criterion and as the content of vulnerability-related experiences. To substantiate this hypothesis, the contribution is divided into three sections. The first section makes an attempt to re-evaluate vulnerability not so much as a purely defective figure, but rather as a condition of possibility of open-

ness to the world and to relationships (Gilson 2011). The second section points out that vulnerability can be articulated in many ways (Luna 2009, 2019, Giolo, Pastore (eds.) 2018) and requires a methodology of analysis that is oriented towards diagnostic pluralism, highlighting, in particular, a distinction between constitutive and contingent vulnerability, which can be social, ethical-political, epistemic (Johnson 2020), in the conviction that these three levels constitute a test of the normative potential of vulnerability, being united by the risk of its production and induction (Varga 2016), which we have the duty to avoid. Finally, in the third section, the relationship between constitutive and contingent vulnerability and the role of autonomy in discerning between an emancipative and transformative, and a dominative and oppressive vulnerability will be clarified.

2. *Vulnerability as a descriptive category*

In the first step of this path, the category of vulnerability is problematised by highlighting how it is mostly considered in a defective sense, a lack that needs to be filled and overcome, often also through political measures that tend to accentuate the stigma rather than actually remedy it. This idea of vulnerability is often accompanied by a view aimed at 'pathologising' and classifying its manifestations, making them permanent. Herein lies some criticism of the paradigm of "protecting the vulnerable" (Goodin 1985), which would end up masking a suffocating paternalism that is ineffective at the very level of reducing vulnerability. To avoid the defective declination of vulnerability, it is necessary to recognise that vulnerability, insofar as it is linked to lack and dependence, is not an accidental trait, but rather constitutive of the human experience, and cannot be eliminated, and that vulnerability embodies a threshold of openness to the world and to others without which no contamination would be possible, to the benefit of an illusory declination of the self as self-sufficient, capable of exclusively giving itself life and meaning. If it is meant as the condition of exposure and openness to the world, due in turn to the interdependence of humankind, it becomes clear that vulnerability is not interpretable as a condition to be eliminated once and for all[1]. In contrast, "a denial of vulnerability is […]

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[1]   On this constitutive trait of vulnerability, see the famous reflections of Judith Butler (2004), who referred to a "primary human vulnerability", and Roger, Mackenzie, and Dodds (2012) who proposed a taxonomy of vulnerability, comprising three kinds: inherent, situational,

ethically and politically dangerous […] and […] an awareness of vulnerability is central to undoing not just violence but oppressive social relations in general" (Gilson 2011: 309).

Going a step further to explain the potential consequences of a constitutive vulnerability[2] as openness to the others and the world is closely related to the possibility of taking care of what is common among humans, and stepping back from an ethic of mere self-preservation: Even if the originary openness to the world does not automatically imply that we trust each other and it is not automatically a trace of our immediate goodness and attention to the common good, the recognition of vulnerability as this openness leads to decentralising the subject, removing it from a position of complete mastery, and recognising that it not only lives on something it cannot control, but also that its actions should be directed to the others and the communities in which it lives and experiences good relations. The rehabilitation of constitutive vulnerability can be considered at least two-sided: at a personal level, it implies the recognition that "being vulnerable makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and to be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of this feeling" (311); at a socio-relational level, constitutive vulnerability can be considered a trace of openness, as it makes collective action possible: Human agency should start from and end in a condition of interdependence. Its outcome should not be that of self-preservation or self-defence, but rather, its aim should be identified in the possibility to participate in the common good and contribute partly towards realising it. Constitutive vulnerability is both the standpoint of our ethical life[3] and the destination of human agency, which is called to care for this openness and to foster trust instead of closure and merely self-protecting attitudes.

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and pathogenic vulnerability (24). Inherent vulnerability can be equated to constitutive vulnerability. Several definitions of vulnerability have been elaborated on an institutional and international level to provide effective guidelines and manage situations or conditions of increased exposure to harm. Among others, it is worth referring to the one provided by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), which states that vulnerability is an "integral part of the human condition", and simultaneously, "a state of high exposure to risks and uncertainties, in combination with a reduced ability to protect or defend oneself against those risks and uncertainties and cope with the negative consequences". UNDESA, *United Nations Report on the World Social Situation: Social Vulnerability: Sources and Challenges*, un, New York 2003.

[2]   This expression was used also by Ferrarese (2019), who pointed out the difference between it and an "unequally shared vulnerability" (5), which I propose to equate to contingent vulnerability.

[3]   The ethical relevance of this point has been articulated by Donatelli (2016) and discussed by Fabris (2020).

That vulnerability should not only be considered defective is also attested to by the fact that, taking this idea to its extreme consequences, the point of arrival would be invulnerability, the dehumanising trait of which is increasingly evident today (Russo 2021). Trying to eradicate a constitutive finitude, which is the trace of our being formed and shaped by otherness, would mean to cultivate an illusory dream of mastery and perfection[4], whose consequences would be an overload of responsibilities for success, health, and wealth, charged at an individual level. This erasure of the limit can lead to relationally violent ways of claiming perfection, bringing the idea of performance to its extreme consequences.

According to Petherbridge, vulnerability should be defined "neither as an a priori normative category nor as merely indicating a form of injury or primary susceptibility to violence, but rather as a general openness towards the other. In this sense, vulnerability is characterised by ambivalence in the sense that it designates neither positive nor negative states of being or forms of relationality but contains the capacity for either or both" (2016: 591). Thus, vulnerability should not be considered a trace of something missing to be regained. As Esquirol, among others, pointed out, the condition of being vulnerable is not transitory; rather, it is an unending position towards the world and it would be useless to try to eliminate once and for all the human exposition to the wound of the world. Rather, it is telling of an insurmountable condition. Thus, vulnerability cannot be treated as an excuse not to act or to render others unable to act. Rather, it should be interpreted as a standpoint of any ethical action, aimed at taking care of such a condition. Taking care of our constitutive vulnerability means respecting our finitude and recognising that such finitude can be a home for some kind of happiness, as Ricoeur noted, expressing the concept with the famous expression "the joy of yes in the sadness of the finite" (1986: 140). Vulnerability is common to all mankind. It is the possibility of being affected by others – namely events, people, nature – and for this reason, it can be equated to openness to the world, namely our being crossed by others. From this standpoint, the normative core of vulnerability, and what makes it an ethical category lies in the duty to preserve this possibility of joy – a shared joy – within human finitude. To paraphrase what Adorno said about love, the duty to preserve the

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[4] Focusing on the developments of medicine and the experience of COVID-19, Russo referred to the removal of vulnerability as closely related to the idea of complete mastery and the elimination of the mortal and finite horizon of our lives, which is shaped by the striving for perfection and efficiency at all costs.

integrity within a condition of vulnerability means to protect the possibility of "showing yourself weak without provoking strength" (1974: 192).

3. *Articulating the distinction between constitutive and contingent vulnerability*

Many scholars have recognised at least a dual meaning of vulnerability, as, for instance, Macioce summed up: "at the same time, the term describes both a universal aspect of the human condition and a peculiar condition of single individuals and groups" (2018: 140). Universal vulnerability is a constitutive, ontological feature of humankind. It not only depends on our bodily condition, but also on the structural being constituted by the 'other than us', upon the fact that we are not our masters. The contributions that go in this direction are impossible to list[5] because of their huge number. What these accounts of vulnerability usually fail to grasp is the abovementioned openness that goes hand in hand with the possibility of being destroyed. Such forms of destruction vary across time and space, but they are neither reducible nor removable. Constitutive vulnerability is a trace of dependency on the world we live in and on (Danani 2020): going beyond this descriptive level, one should recognise the relational trait of vulnerability, the normative core of which lies in the duty not to transform such a relational dimension into an occasion of violence. This relational trait has been clearly pointed out by Ferrarese (2018), according to whom: "A vulnerability only ever arises as the hollow side of a power to act. It materialises 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 or structure's) power to act, and clearly does not exclude finding a power to act on the side of the vulnerable subject too" (1). What effectively illuminates the notion of vulnerability is thus the idea of "being-at-another's-mercy". This helps recognise the relational and interpersonal texture of relationality. I suggest recognising vulnerability as a relational event by widening the reference to the 'other' that can harm us, including among other things the environment, history, and its evenemential trait, and of course, other human beings. One could reformulate Ferrarese's proposal by affirming that human

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[5]   Among others, Ferrarese noted that vulnerability is increasingly receiving attention, which leads one to ask "why at this time do we all seem to need the concept of vulnerability?" (Ferrarese 2019: 2).

beings are more than other living beings at the mercy of an inhospitable world, and that this trait is not negative in itself. It becomes negative when the condition is exacerbated, taken advantage of, and denied in order to gain an illusory position of mastery.

Against the backdrop of this descriptive dimension of vulnerability, which recognises it as constitutive, the second section examines the possibilities that there may be an accentuated, increased, and even induced vulnerability, which is added to the first and sometimes makes it impossible to authentically take care of the constitutive vulnerability. It is fundamental to recognise that constitutive vulnerability is something to address and take care of. In this sense, vulnerability does not happen in particularly dangerous situations or conditions; rather, it can be traced back to the bare fact of living together in a world that we do not master. This 'everyday' trait of vulnerability has been clearly highlighted by Sandra Laugier, according to whom vulnerability is always already present in our forms of life, and this is the reason we should take care of it. She speaks of the need to protect and defend "the ordinary work that makes our lives possible" (2020: 55). In a recent pamphlet devoted to the lessons that should be learnt from the recent COVID-19 experience, Laugier and Vallaud-Belkacem noted that it is such everyday vulnerability that many people protect with their actions and work, and that this kind of commitment does not eliminate, but rather helps bear vulnerability and allows the maintenance of society as such[6]. Laugier and Vallaud-Belkacem showed how, during the pandemic, a misrecognition became clear: precisely, the misrecognition by society of what 'makes it alive', and that the entire set of 'these vital functions' is entirely submerged and invisible in normal times, even though fundamental (4-5). Similarly, Veena Das (2001: 111) reflected on the structural vulnerability of what Ferrarese (2019: 3) later labelled as "the form of human life", and pointed out that "most people in the world learn to live as vulnerable beings among the dangers that human cultures pose to each other". Even if the reflection of Laugier and Vallaud-Belkacem takes its cue from a particular sanitary, social, medical situation, it helps articulate the relationship between constitutive and contingent vulnerability, its side-effects, and its consequences in terms of normativity and ethical life. Constitutive vulnerability is similar to everyday vulnerability, to which we are all called to pay attention and of which we

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[6] This idea of care as fundamental to social reproduction and can be also found in Fraser (2016), according to whom the end of care is one of the main contradictions of the capitalistic system.

are all called to take care, at both collective and social levels. This constitutive vulnerability calls for common action and a commitment to preserve the conditions of existence of humankind in the heart. To do so, we should all be in the condition of taking such commitment, without any increased vulnerability or overexposure. Contingent vulnerability exceeds this constitutive trait of a human being and can be produced, induced, and fostered through practice, policies, and intentional conduct that exacerbates violence. This contingent vulnerability leads to closing oneself to the possibility of being in relation with others and taking care of this relational dimension.

The difference between constitutive and contingent vulnerability is made by an overexposure to the possibility of the trauma that can be both biological and socio-political, as Malabou noted[7]. This sort of overexposure can be recognised as one of the main causes that block any path to emancipation: totally absorbed in a solitary fight against the possible wounds coming from the world, the subject does not spend any effort to change the world, and, as Badiou (2001) noted, it seems that "the only thing that can really happen to someone is death" (2).

Before exploring some forms of contingent vulnerability, it is necessary to focus on a deeper reflection on the relationship between both. Contingent vulnerability can be recognised as an augmented exposure that threatens the possibility of fully living a dimension of finitude and interdependence, of experiencing relationships in a trustful manner, while bearing witness to an openness that cannot transform itself into a closeness towards the world. Contingent vulnerability is capable of impairing the human attitude towards common good, by fostering indifference and selfishness, and replacing interest in common good with a self-centred perspective.

It is necessary to make good use of this contingent vulnerability, which is linked to events, the forms of ethical, social, and political life, and inaccessibility of knowledge and information. In the case of accentuated and increased vulnerability, it is not difficult to find that it often becomes a ghettoising and stigmatising cage, and that, by categorising people or groups as vulnerable, one risks building an impassable enclosure around them, relegating them to a protecting sphere that renders voices even more feeble. There is a production of vulnerability that is functional in maintaining the

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[7]   Malabou wrote: "The behaviors of victims of trauma due to abuse, war, terrorism, captivity, sexual abuse, present striking similarities to those with brain damage. These traumas can be called "social political traumas". This umbrella term indicates cases of extreme relational violence" (2017: 37).

state of affairs, often linked to emergency situations where there is no or-
ganic and long-term response (Laugier, Vallaud-Belkacem 2020). The pro-
duction of vulnerability unites different types of this experience: often an
ethical-political component is associated with a social and epistemic vul-
nerability. Common to all of them is the fact that those affected may experi-
ence a progressive silencing that manifests in the impossibility of taking
the floor, having a voice, considering oneself the author of one's story, or,
conversely, they may be base forms of resistance, struggles for recognition,
and ways of transforming what exists.

Contingent vulnerability, even if not always immediately visible or rec-
ognisable, is a sign of a overexposure, an increased exposure that leads to
forgetting the idea of the common good itself and makes people indifferent
to the destiny of others. We become bound to the need to preserve ourselves
without the capacity to take care of the common good. Contingent vulner-
ability can be intentionally induced and become an instrument of power,
or simply generated by distorted relational dynamics, as it is the case with
epistemic, social, and ethical-political dimensions. It can be induced by
policies irrespective of the environment, that penalise only some popula-
tions, or some populations more than others; it can also be social, when
there is an overexposure to events, which is not compensated by common
and shared decisions – in this case, human passivity[8] becomes pathological;
it can be ethical, as it can affect our deliberative processes, or epistemic, to
the extent that we do not have all the information we need to make decisions
or we cannot afford to decide according to our values and to what we would
like to take care of.

Contingent vulnerability includes all forms of the relationally increased
possibility of being harmed (or harming ourselves), which impedes us from
fully living and taking care of our constitutive vulnerability. This care owed
to constitutive vulnerability, which does not indicate a defective condition to
be filled in, but rather a condition of openness to the world and others and,
in an ethico-political perspective, the possibility of acting from the margins,
radically changes the conditions of exploitation, domination, and opposition
to negative examples of cohabitation and attention to the common good. If it
is led to its extreme consequences, the production of contingent vulnerabil-
ity can condemn humanity to playing the role of the master: quite paradoxi-

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[8]   The 'pathic' dimension of human life has been described vividly by María Zambrano:
"The first, the initial "opening" of a human life to the things that surround it, to circumstances, is
to suffer from them" (2008: 169).

cally, the more it invites one to forget and neglect constitutive vulnerability, the more it imposes control, masters, protects, and defends the boundaries of the self from external threats. Even though in a different context, this point was made by Coeckelbergh (2015), who described the condition in which technologies lead humanity to increasingly depend on them, while simultaneously impeding them from fully recognising this dependency, by compelling people to remain masters. According to Coeckelbergh (221), "we wanted to be masters of nature and in our struggle with nature we put our lives at risk in order to achieve that mastery, but once achieved, then as masters of technology we become more dependent than ever – now on technology. We thus find ourselves in the Hegelian tragic situation of the master: it is through our own actions, aimed at freedom, that we achieve (a new kind of) bondage".

Coeckelbergh's argument is specifically aimed at the explanation of the relationship between humans and new technologies. It can be extended and treated as a typical mode of approaching vulnerability that not only deals with applied ethics, but also with fundamental ethics. The more humankind makes efforts to reduce its constitutive vulnerability, the more it creates conditions to increase contingent vulnerability and dependence. The less ready humanity is to acknowledge vulnerability as an unavoidable component of human life, the more it resorts to ideas, tools, and inventions, that produce and increase contingent vulnerability. Thus, the relationship between constitutive and contingent vulnerability becomes apparent in Coeckelbergh's reflections as well, as there is an 'infrastructural' vulnerability that can be avoided. However, in contrast, it also seems designed and produced to erase constitutive vulnerability that is meant as dependence on nature, events, and others. The production of contingent vulnerability as an illusory cancellation of the constitutive one condemns humanity to the role of the master.

From such a perspective, mastery should not be seen as a remedy for vulnerability. Rather, it is precisely this attitude that increases vulnerability. The authentic vulnerable is the one who condemns herself to master something that, by definition, she cannot master at all, or can master only in part. Refusing to recognise our constitutive vulnerability can lead to an increase in contingent vulnerability precisely when we try to remedy and cancel the former and reassert an unrealistic centrality of humankind. Mastery, the tragedy of mastery, is one of the most powerful vulnerabilities, as it impedes us from fully living our condition of dependency and arbitrarily tries to remove it. Paradoxically, if led to its coherent and consistent consequences, this argument purports that the main and irreparable vulnerability would be

that of a master of nothing, who needs to create the objects of her mastery by herself, and is condemned to discover that she cannot fully control or exercise influence either over what she herself creates or produces.

4. *Contingent vulnerability and autonomy between domination and resistance*

Contingent vulnerability can be caused and produced by humans. It can be defined as the exacerbation of the possibility of relational violence or the transformation of the relational trait of vulnerability into relational violence, or by external circumstances of which humans can be at most, and not so often, recognised as co-authors. At least two possible stances towards contingent vulnerability should be examined: one is a ghettoising attitude that blocks people in their transitory vulnerability, making it permanent; the other is the possibility that such increased vulnerability and overexposure become vehicles and vectors of emancipation. Before exploring this double alternative, let us recall that in any circumstance, contingent vulnerability – whether natural, artificial, or induced – leads to the same consequence, that is the oblivion of the common good, whose care depends on the recognition of constitutive vulnerability, and self-enclosure, a defensive positioning of oneself towards the world, led by the perception that there is no room to think of the common good. The recognition of what we could lose when we are overexposed can transform contingent vulnerability into an occasion of emancipation from domination.

Contingent vulnerability can be caused by external and non-human factors, by the co-responsibility of short-term and blind policies (just think of the climate crisis and its effects in terms of migrations on populations that are not responsible for climate change) that reveal the danger of human attitudes towards others, and it can even be induced by human policies, interpreting contingent vulnerability as a permanent condition, and defining and delineating strategies of protection of the vulnerable that in the long run prove to be cages, exclusionary, and discriminating tools based on the victimisation and the will to keep vulnerable people in a subaltern condition. At the extreme pole of this attitude, the situations of the production of vulnerability and vulnerable subjects are worth mentioning; such subjects are prone to their needs and depend on their satisfaction. This production of vulnerability is aimed to exploit vulnerable people. This mode of silencing people can be traced back to the impossibility of taking care of a dimension

that overcomes the mere individual space and self-interest, and is telling of a precise will to separate individual needs, interests, and ideas of the good from the collective dimension of good and the collective reply we should give to such needs by recognising structural interdependence.

On the other hand, contingent vulnerability can also be the occasion for emancipation: a situation of common overexposure – common to groups, individuals, populations living in the same geographical area – can be thus taken not as an excuse to increase the sense of victimhood and cultivate it in order to erase personal and collective agency and take advantage from this induced condition of subalternity. Rather, such induced sense of victimhood can be recognised as a pitfall, a way to subtract people the possibility to emancipate, and then a shared condition of contingent vulnerability can become a potential for a common action aimed at preserving the possibility to take care of constitutive vulnerability. The first step to turn this contingent vulnerability into an occasion for emancipation should be that of recognising it as something changeable and modifiable. It can be done only if it is perceived as transitory and interpreted in a plural manner: Contingent vulnerability gives itself in many ways, and there is not only one way for it to manifest. This is why diagnostic pluralism[9] should be adopted to detect and gather vulnerabilities at stake in our societies, rather than classifying them once and for all. Diagnostic pluralism keeps different types of vulnerabilities together and reads the situational one as a matter of "layers, not labels" (Luna 2009). According to Luna, "the metaphor of layers gives the idea of something 'softer,'" which cannot be diagnosed once and for all but should be updated, by also taking into account the modes of resisting as performed by the subjects involved. Contingent vulnerability as a provisional condition is better understood by considering it a multi-layered experience that avoids the fixation of some features as labels that capture and imprison the subject to her weakness, recognising her capacity of overcoming, in some way, that level of vulnerability. The advantage of this system of layers allows for a recognition of different levels of vulnerabilities that can operate simultaneously and has the merit of avoiding the risk of blaming people for their vulnerability, just as it can happen with respect to extreme poverty, addiction, and criminality. Deepening and rearticulating her definition of vulnerability

[9] I owe this expression to Rainer Forst, who explicitly declared that in order to detect and recognize injustices, one should adopt a multifaceted approach open to different sets of values and criteria of justice, and sensitive to the context and to the historical condition of the people involved in the critical analysis of injustices (Forst 2014).

as a matter of layers, Luna went a step further and proposed the notion of the "cascade layer of vulnerability" (92) to highlight the devastating effect that some contingent vulnerabilities have on human agency, as they are able to generate a "cascade effect" and give rise to many other overexposures. Even if her field of inquiry is bioethics and public health ethics, the production of some vulnerabilities goes beyond a merely provisional harm and may easily turn into a no-way-out route, and lead to an increasing loss of self-esteem and self-effectiveness in the world.

Therefore, the first attempt that should be made to value the emancipative role of the recognition of contingent vulnerability should be that of taking the transitory dimension of contingent vulnerability seriously: Situations of overexposure should be considered transitory and liable to be reduced or eliminated, and in this sense, they are contingent. When Florencia Luna restated her treatment of vulnerability in 2019, providing some effective examples, she highlighted that some contingent vulnerabilities are more serious than others in terms of human agency impairment. Even in such cases, some effort should be made to contrast the "slippery slope" of the paralysis of action, without exacerbating the process of victimisation.

A second attempt should be made to detect all the situations in which contingent vulnerability is produced in order to maintain the status quo, and a third effort should be made in focusing on the aim of the claims of emancipation: it is not a definitive emancipation from all types of vulnerability, but, rather, a reaffirmation of a constitutive vulnerability and the possibility to go out from a self-enclosed, frightened, desperate way of understanding and living a life in common: A reaffirmation of the constitutive vulnerability whose human interdependence is a trace. Above all, the most relevant challenge is that of not falling into the false alternative between autonomy and vulnerability, and this is possible only if autonomy is not considered a capacity aimed at fighting vulnerability.

Coming back to the cases of a contingent vulnerability in the social, ethical-political, and epistemic domains, it is worth articulating additional considerations and providing some examples, without any pretence of being exhaustive. Each type of contingent vulnerability can be produced and exacerbated by the same policies that aim to contrast them both intentionally and unintentionally. At a social level, contingent vulnerability includes all the situations that aim at impairing a qualified participation in the public sphere and in civil society. It is easy to include in this kind of contingent vulnerability the economic and cultural aspects of common life. Such vulnerability is related to both the standards that are considered 'normal' to enable people

to participate in the social and public realm, and to systemic conditions of exploitation. The impossibility to participate in the construction and realisation of a shared idea of common good is thus the outcome of certain policies aimed at exploiting people spoiling them of the possibility of deciding and inducing a vulnerability that cannot but be augmented. An example of this attitude can be found in Varga (2016), who traced it back to a neoliberal attitude which "destroys solidarity, abolishes collective structures that may impede pure market logic, and collapses public values into purely individualistic ones' (92). He showed that there are cases in which this tendency is forcefully encouraged by states, which externalise 'responsibility for central government activities like defence, infrastructure, healthcare, and disaster and recovery aid, but are also allowed to make profits on them" (91). His aim was to recognise that certain policies, especially market-driven ones, are specifically designed to "produce specific vulnerabilities", as the events that preceded and followed Hurricane Katrina showed. If not the production, at least the maintenance of certain groups or classes in a condition of subalternity and exploitation impedes the participation in collective decisions, the possibility of taking care of the common good, and exacerbating the contingent vulnerability, thus turning it into an inescapable iron cage.

An analogous mechanism can be seen at work in the ethical-political field of inquiry. At this level, the production of ethical vulnerabilities depends on the impossibility to act and choose according to a wary practical deliberation, letting other factors decide on behalf of the vulnerable people. Even in this case, it is worth highlighting that there can be a production of vulnerability, as the incapacity of acting and deciding autonomously owing to an external factor that may influence a vulnerable person's choice is considered an excuse to expropriate and silence their capacity for practical deliberation. This can hardly hide a presumption of moral superiority. Several examples can be mentioned here. Suffice it to say that the literature is particularly attentive to issues concerning the healthcare ethics or bioethics, even if they are not limited to those fields. One example of how ethical vulnerability functions can be found in Mastroianni (2009), who provided examples concerning people that could not afford to respect lockdown measures during the H1N1 pandemic, even if they would perfectly agree with them. Other examples can be found in Agomoni-Ganguli, Biller-Andorno (2013). They try to assess, from a moral viewpoint, the story of an Indian woman, Rani, who was compelled to sell her kidney to pay a debt contracted to provide for the cure of her daughter. Is Rani free to choose? Is there a radical impairment of her agency, unavoidably conditioned by external circumstances that

provoke and produce vulnerability? In cases like this, at least two injustices take place in the name of vulnerability: the first is a paternalistic one, a contemptuous glance of moral superiority that feels pity for people that are seemingly compelled to make tough decisions; this attitude derives from the habit of considering vulnerability the opposite of autonomy and agency; the second is the complete misunderstanding of the authentic problem, which is related to all conditions that should be satisfied in order to make autonomous decisions. Instead of paternalistically assessing that situation, and providing money to prevent Rani from selling her kidney, one should accept that her action should be traced back to her agency. This is the first recognition owed to human beings. On the other hand, in cases such as this, the attention due to a constitutive vulnerability in terms of taking care of it disappears: Rani's situation is morally bad in relation to the impossibility of taking care and committing herself in the struggle for emancipation of people living in conditions of extreme poverty, blackmail, and exasperating relational violence against women. Any paternalistic measure in those cases would substitute a serious reflection on structural injustices and would leave – maybe in bad faith – people prone to exploitation by recognising them as incapable of deciding.

The third field of manifestation of contingent vulnerability has been defined as "epistemic injustice"[10] (Fricker 2007) and finds one of its main applications in the ethics of information technologies and AI systems nowadays. Contingent vulnerability can be promoted and produced by the intended and planned decision to keep people in the dark, unaware of fundamental pieces of information to make their decisions. This ignorance is the cause of vulnerability, and it is deliberated, as it aims at paving the way for mistakes, wrong decisions, and bad behaviours that can be used as justification for the domination, exploitation, production, and an increase in suffering that emerges from the minority status. The lack of or gap in information as a condition for the production of vulnerability is apparent in the processes involved in AI-based technologies, as Rubel, Castro, and

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[10] Epistemic, hermeneutical, and testimonial injustice can be considered tools that strengthen domination, through the exclusion of some people from deliberative processes and through a systematic will to avoid autonomous and fully informed personal choices. According to Miranda Fricker, epistemic injustice takes the shape of hermeneutical or testimonial injustice: "testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources put someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (2007: 1).

Pham (2021) noted[11]. Epistemic vulnerability not only relates to educational systems but also to the collectively organised information systems and technologies, and with the ways in which ignorance of the criteria of judgement or data correlation and collection used by AI can provoke distortions, and produce unedited and unpredictable vulnerabilities and forms of exclusion.

All cases presented above can be considered occasions of production of vulnerable people or groups, categories of people who, to some extent, are useful for the maintenance of a particular order of domination, oppression, and exploitation. These conditions are detrimental to the possibility of recognising and taking care of a common, constitutive, "everyday" vulnerability, as they compel individuals to experience fear of the other, and to live their constitutive openness to the otherness only in terms of the possibility of being harmed, thus fostering a self-defensive, self-enclosing attitude instead of letting people recognise the 'blessing' of vulnerability as a feature that definitely sets aside the cruel desire for perfection. Another possibility of living and experiencing contingent vulnerability is that of making it an occasion of emancipation, which is first and foremost from fear, mistrust, and the absolutising prioritisation of the self-centred perspective that excludes any form of relationship in the name of its potential transformation into evil and violence. Such emancipatory traits can see and foster paths to reach the common good. The emancipative trait of contingent vulnerability can give back to people the possibility of caring for the common good and seeing it as the aim of a well-lived life. Thus, emancipation is not liberation from finitude, but rather a mode of accepting it, fully living it while recognising the unavoidable interdependence and working to promote it, whenever possible. So, there can be an at least dual response to vulnerability, which makes the transition from a descriptive level to a normative one apparent. At the normative level, transforming and reducing contingent vulnerability without any paternalistic intervention and avoiding the transformation of victims into ghosts entirely expropriated of their voice must be ensured.

This dual response to vulnerability directly calls into question a normative dimension in which the idea of ethical autonomy plays a prominent role. Therefore, it is worth analysing the relationship between constitutive and

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[11]   The authors proposed a solution to live with decision-making systems based on AI technology and to limit the harms they can cause in terms of epistemic injustice: "Reasonable Endorsement Test: An action is morally permissible only if it would be allowed by principles that each person subject to it could reasonably endorse" (Rubel, Castro, Pham 2021: 52). For an ethical discussion of the automated decision making process see also Fossa, Schiaffonati, Tamburrini (ed.) 2021 and Fabris (2021).

contingent vulnerability through the lens of autonomy, hypothesising that the extent beyond which the latter becomes an instrument of domination rather than of resistance can be found in the impossibility of experiencing the former as a non-defective, but fully human dimension, in which the recognition of mutual interdependence and dependence is at stake (Dadà 2022). Contingent vulnerability can be a source of this recognition and promotion of a sociality capable of acting normatively and effectively on reality. This emancipative trait is made possible through an interpretation of vulnerability not only as a passive phenomenon, but as the condition of possibility of action, a protest against unjust and discriminating conditions. Thus, there is a "critical vulnerability" (Simmonds 2007) as a reason and standpoint for action. There is also a vulnerability we claim and do not want to dismiss, as it is a sign of tenderness towards the world. However, it can also constitute an incurable wound inflicted on dignity, a dulling of the diagnostic-critical exercise in ethical and social relations, of the capacity to act to transform evil into common good.

Constitutive vulnerability aims at grasping a permanent feature of our being. Contingent vulnerability is always vulnerability to something external, and is linked to events and factors that cannot be fully mastered, such as a relational and situational event (Coleman 2009). The possibility of taking advantage of vulnerability as an occasion for exploitation is vividly described through the abovementioned case study in Agomoni-Ganguli and Biller-Andorno (2013). Contingent vulnerability can affect and impair our capacity of recognising constitutive vulnerability – this entails a wide range of attitudes that go from being blind to our finitude and aiming at overcoming our unescapable limits, to the opposite attitude of renouncing action as we are paralysed by a sense of ineffectiveness.

Examples of vulnerability that lead to common action and emancipation range from the local to global levels. At the first level, it is worth referring to the Italian system of welcoming refugees with vulnerabilities: The only way to enter those structures is to have and maintain a specific vulnerability, which is, in most cases, a psychic one. Operators who work in those structures (called Sprar) confirmed that such recognised vulnerabilities often act as labels that impair the capacity to act and choose autonomously, but, in some cases, the way out of this contingent vulnerability is the acceptance of a dimension of interdependence and recognition that this ghettoisation of contingent vulnerability prevents people from taking care of each other and of the common good. Instead of a process of victimisation that blocks personal initiative, what would be necessary in those cases is precisely the possibility of mutual systems of support and aid, rather than top-down pater-

nalistic measures that would lead to forget constitutive vulnerability to the benefit of contingent vulnerabilities to take advantage of. At a global level, recognising oneself as experiencing a contingent vulnerability means to be disposed to overcome it with the people who undergo the same circumstances[12] and relaunch commitment towards common good, avoiding the pitfall of self-preservation at all costs, despite the interdependence that constitutes our being in the world. The work of Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay (2018) is paradigmatic of this mode of conceiving of vulnerability as an occasion for resistance, as a way of putting in common and sharing vulnerability to bring its burden together. Their project aimed at reading vulnerability as a form of resistance and not as its opposite. Critical vulnerability means recognising and protecting constitutive vulnerability against the corrosive forces of contingent, induced, and produced vulnerability.

Ethical autonomy, declined in a relational sense, is crucial for discerning between a contingent vulnerability that does not allow one to recognise oneself as constitutively vulnerable and interdependent and a vulnerability, equally contingent, that can constitute a vehicle of emancipation.

Autonomy and vulnerability are not inversely proportional. The proponent of this inversely proportional relationship maintain that more a subject is vulnerable, so the arguments go (see for instance Ricoeur 2007), the less they will be capable of autonomous choices. This mode of intersecting autonomy and vulnerability can be changed only if we think of autonomy not in terms of protection of an individual in ways that are impermeable to the external world, but rather as the capacity to contribute to a certain vision of society and common good. Autonomy is not only a criterion, but also a practice to be promoted in vulnerability, as a capacity to act for the common good, starting from, and not in spite of, vulnerability. Autonomy makes it possible to discern between experiences that make vulnerability both an opportunity for domination and a reason for action.

5. *Concluding remarks*

Can the concept of vulnerability as 'being incapable of protecting one's own interests' be universalised? Or, is contingent vulnerability the condition

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[12]   An example of the use of this shared contingent vulnerability an engine for transformation and action can be found in Emanuele Profumi's works that were devoted to his experiences in Latin America (Profumi 2016).

in which it is impossible for us to take care of and participate in the common good? This contribution aimed to relaunch the distinction between constitutive and contingent vulnerability. The first can be traced back to a descriptive attitude. The second gives rise to normative considerations, as it can be produced and can encourage victimist and passive policies and strategies of survival, or, vice versa, such production, ghettoization, and victimization can be recognised as an obstacle to the commitment to the common good; this recognition could be the engine for the vulnerable to plan and act towards the realisation of the common good.

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Abstract

In the contemporary ethical landscape, vulnerability has become an object of study, analysis, and discussion. The hypothesis guiding this contribution is that the forms and experiences of vulnerability are irreducibly plural, and a distinction must be made in cases where vulnerability is used from a merely descriptive perspective, and those where it performs a normative function. It is in this second case that the ethical depth of vulnerability can be recognised. Vulnerability can either be a source for emancipatory action or can be used as an excuse for oppressive and dominating measures. A relational mode of refiguring ethical autonomy is crucial in discerning the roles of vulnerability, both as a criterion and as the content of vulnerability-related experiences. To substantiate this hypothesis, the contribution is divided into three sections. The first section makes an attempt to re-evaluate vulnerability not so much as

a purely defective figure, but rather as a condition of possibility of openness to the world and to relationships. The second section articulates the distinction and the relationship between constitutive and contingent vulnerability. The third section focuses on the distinction between oppressive and emancipatory uses of contingent vulnerabilities through the lens of autonomy.

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