



Vulnerability: The Human Depth of a Principle of Bioethics

Vulnerabilidad: la profundidad humana de un principio de la bioética



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Abstract

Vulnerability is an essential principle in European bioethics, given that it precedes and has priority over other principles. This principle, stated in the Barcelona Declaration, is also specified in the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights. This broadens its horizon from a European to a universal level. For these reasons, we need to take time to carefully consider its meaning. For this task, this article offers a summary of the key questions and presents the DNA of vulnerability in eight contexts: cultural, social, institutional, anthropological, emotional, relational, biographical and professional.



Resumen

La vulnerabilidad es el principio esencial de la bioética europea en la medida que es un principio anterior y prioritario a los otros principios. Este principio recogido en la Declaración de Barcelona también es recogido en el art. 8 de la Declaración Universal de Bioética y Derechos Humanos de la UNESCO (2005) ampliando así su horizonte de un nivel europeo a un nivel universal. Por estas razones es esencial detenernos a reflexionar en profundidad sobre su significado. Este artículo, ofrece para realizar esta tarea, de modo sintético y descriptivo, algunas cuestiones claves, presentando el ADN de la vulnerabilidad en ocho marcos: cultural, social, institucional, antropológico, emocional, relacional, biográfico y profesional.



Key words

Vulnerability; bioethics; relational anthropology; fragility; emotion.
Vulnerabilidad; bioética; antropología relacional; fragilidad; emociones.



Fechas

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The principle of vulnerability is an essential principle in European bioethics, given that it precedes and has priority over the other principles. This principle is a bridge between diverse and plural communities because, even though we are different in ideas and beliefs, we are all “equally vulnerable”. This principle, stated in the Barcelona Declaration is also specified in the Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights (Rendtorff & Kemp, 2000). This broadens its horizon from a European level, to a universal level. For these reasons, I believe it is essential for us to take time to consider in depth about its meaning (Carvalho, 2008; Sanches & Gubert, 2012; Masiá, 1997). I will offer, for the accomplishment of this task, some key questions in a synthetic manner, presenting the DNA of vulnerability in eight frames: cultural, social, institutional, anthropological, emotional, relational, biographical and professional¹.

The principle of vulnerability is an essential principle in European bioethics, given that it precedes and has priority over the other principles

1. Cultural frame. Vulnerability in the XXI century

Vulnerability is an essential category for understanding the XXI century because it is a concept related with four important terms with which four contemporary sociologists describe our reality.

1. The first term is complexity. Edgar Morin (1921) points out that we all have, in relation to our world, only ambiguous and unorderly knowledge. Complexity is characterized by having many parts that form an indissoluble whole that is difficult to know. Complexity presents disturbing strokes of confusion, disorientation, ambiguity and uncertainty. We have to learn the art of not knowing, the art of maybe not having the truth at our side, the art of interdisciplinary dialogue. Vulnerability today implies our being open to a knowledge that can crumble, open to an order that can be changed. Assuming the complexity of our world helps us to flee from unilateral and simple visions, being more humble and recognizing “the provisory, fragile and limited” of many of our comprehensions.
2. The second term is interdependence. For Anthony Giddens (1938) “globalization has something to do with the thesis that we all live now in the same world”. Globalization is a new way of living and experimenting, conceiving, and relating to others. With globalization, money, technology, goods, and information cross borders and move faster than ever. Technology has reinforced interdependence between local, national and international communities, in a way no other time had seen. Thus, globalization means approaching and mutual encounters between societies and people, but this closeness does not necessarily imply grater comprehension, knowledge and acceptance of diversity. This closeness and interdependence makes us

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all more vulnerable. We are all closer, we are all interdependent, and we are all more exposed to exploitation, threat, instrumentalization or marginalization.

3. The third term is the liquid world. For Zygmunt Baumann (1925-2017), we live today in societies in constant change, in societies that are not “solid” but “liquid”, characterized by mobility, insecurity, and relativity in values. In these societies, the search for identity is a vital responsibility of the individual. In liquid modernity, the only value is the need for creating a flexible identity that can confront the varying mutations that the individual will have to face through his life. Identity is set as a constant auto realization. Identity has to be invented, created, and molded. This is why our identities become vulnerable in a world in constant change.
4. The fourth term is risk. For Ulrich Beck (1944-2015) society of risk is that “phase of development of the modern society where the social, political, economic and industrial risks tend to increasingly escape the control and protection institutions of the industrial society. These risks cause systematic and frequently irreversible damage. They bring with them a political and institutional void and increase the process of “individualization”. Recognizing the risk implies acknowledging the un-

predictable and the threats. Mass media form a reality with news of ecological catastrophes, financial crisis, terrorism and wars. This risk affects not only the personal level, but also institutions, companies and States. Risks are part of life, of an investigation, of love, of games and of innovation. Vulnerability is associated with a life of risks that one has to learn to manage so that we can live.

Why are we vulnerable? Because we live in a complex world that we do not fully understand, because we live in societies of risk, because we live interdependent and because we live in a liquid world in constant change.

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2. Socioeconomical frame. Social vulnerability

Vulnerability has a dimension that has relation to the other, which is provoked by others, that refers to our present socioeconomical reality, to those “vulnerability spaces” where there is possibility of harm (UNESCO, 2011). Being this aspect more obvious and known, I will simply name some traits of the present vulnerability.

1. An unequal world. In today’s world reigns a profound and increasing inequality. The first is at the level of rent. In Spain, for example, the twenty richest have equal money to the 30% of the poorest. When inequality is scandalous and unjust, vulnerability increases. For example, in public health, the first source of vulnerability is economic inequality.
2. A flexible world. We live in a world with increasingly less limits in the occupational, economic, political, moral, etc. In the occupational area there are frequent garbage



contracts, free internships, extension in work hours, non-paid extra hours, companies in tax havens, etc. We all feel vulnerable in a world increasingly incapable of establishing rigid and unnegotiable limits. For Gilles Lipovetsky (1944) everything appears to be subject of negotiation, agreement, pact or transaction (for certain power groups).

3. Excess. A world orientated to success. Our current culture enjoys luxury, pretense, money and well-being as a proof of excellence. It reflects the urgency to stand out. Work is lived as the occasion to reach success and richness. But vulnerability teaches us that failure can arrive at any moment. The experience that more than 90% of people live is that dreams do not accomplish, that there is failure in the education of their children, in their marriages, at work, in relation to their authorities, etc. This is normal experience. Failure is related to vulnerability because it shows us, from its etymological sense, the possibility of breaking and sinking, crashing against the rocks, the failure of many plans.
4. A fragmented world. Allan Bloom (1930-1992) denounces in his books the cognitive fragmentation and the moral relativism in the west. Bloom suggests the need to acquire a global vision of the world, a moral vision, a more comprehensive vision

of knowledge, so that we can be critical. Our fragmented and super specialized culture, erodes and collapses any and every systematic construction, any global order, and every comprehensive view of reality. Thus, the vulnerability of all comprehensive knowledge, of all interdisciplinary intent, of all holistic critical thinking that goes beyond the fragments.

Why are we vulnerable?
Because we live in a world increasingly unequal, without limits, obsessed with success and excesses, and installed in fragments that do not allow us to think critically and search for global meaning

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3. Institutional frame. Institutional vulnerability

I will not elaborate on this point. I will simply mention four fundamental elements of institutional vulnerability. Our institutions are vulnerable mainly because the technological, economic, bureaucratic and legal mediations can become ends in themselves (De la Torre, 2016, pp. 33-50). When means devour the ends, they can drag institutions to failure. An uncontrolled seduction for technology, can mortally damage institutions. An obsession for the economic viability, for the maximization of rent or benefit in everything, has enormous costs for the institution: inequality, competitive dynamics. An excessive confidence in the bureaucratic control from above, in strategic planning, can make us forget that human institutions are vulnerable because they are unpredictable as a result of innovation, unexpected consequences of decisions, growing alternatives,



trivial contingencies that can affect powerfully, our own ignorance, the desire of many individuals to be unpredictable, etc.

Why are we vulnerable? Because we live in institutions with the danger of making means, ends, in the technological, as well as the economic, bureaucratic and legal dimensions.

4. Anthropological frame. The vulnerable condition

We will now focus on what is, from my point of view, the most essential dimension, the anthropological dimension of vulnerability. The four columns of vulnerability are fragility, nakedness, the possibility of contempt and weakness. We will describe them briefly in company of four great authors of the end of the XX century (Montero, 2012).

1. M. Nussbaum (1947) conceives vulnerability as fragility. Fragility etymologically refers to something that can be easily broken. Human life is submitted to fortune and infortune, to circumstances that drag to ruin or to success. Good fortune can dawn at any instant: the sick can heal the next day, the infertile can give birth, and the unemployed can find work. But what takes time is to repair and cure the damage brought on by misfortune. Years are necessary to restore self-esteem in the long term unemployed, years so that new projects and desires can rise in a handicapped that restores his health, years to establish new emotional ties in who has lost a loved one. But in vulnerability there is a profound beauty that today we have difficulty in perceiving, because fragility, today, seems something shameful and something that has to be hidden, when the truth is that without fragility we would be less human, less attractive.
2. Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) conceives vulnerability as exposure to the other. Vulnerability is found in nakedness, in openness, in exposure; in waiving to defend the own intimate indigence, in showing oneself without masks, authentic. Vulnerability refers to the relation with the other, to being prisoners of others, responsible of the other. The others face, his closeness, his nakedness demands on our responsibility. This responsibility is not chosen. It is a clear call. We are impotent to reject the call of the other. We cannot stay within ourselves. Human subjectivity is responsibility for the other, an extreme vulnerability to the face of the other. Human task is to avoid or to prevent the moment of inhumanity, of the betrayal of the other, of blindness to nakedness and deafness to his call.
3. Charles Taylor (1931) conceives vulnerability as the permanent exposure to the respect or rejection of significant others. Our identity is formed by acknowledgement, recognition, the lack of acknowledgement or a false acknowledgement. False acknowledgment and lack of acknowledgment damage, oppress and imprison the person in a way of being that is false, deformed, degraded and reduced. The person can be approved or disapproved, appreciated or dis-appreciated, valued or infra valued. This possibility is a deep risk that damage and crumbles the person's identity.

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A false acknowledgment can be a means of oppression and instrumentalization. Taylor thus demonstrates how the necessity of acknowledgement manifests the vulnerability and fragility of the human being.

4. Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) conceives vulnerability as lability, the possibility of failure, of falling, of moral evil, of decay, collapse, of error, consequence of his finitude, of his constitutional weakness. Most sufferings are brought on man by man; they are the result between violence between men. But it is also possible to circulate benefits and values, the interchange of gifts, gratitude, generosity as “pacified” experiences of mutual acknowledgement, as states of peace. The human being is capable of evil and humanity, of hurting and communion.

Why are we vulnerable?
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Why are we vulnerable? Because we have the four faces of vulnerability: fragility, nakedness, weakness and the possibility of contempt. This four dimensions of vulnerability show “positive” characteristics of the human being: we are permeable, transparent, accessible, disarmed, always in project, in construction, unfinished, openness, “needy” and limited.

5. The emotional frame. The “emotional” turn of bioethics

Vulnerability raises an emotion before demanding a choice, an election, a manner of relating to others, a response to another. The thin and fragile skin always causes an emotion. Vulnerability tunes in profoundly with the emotional turn of current ethics: Scheler, Nussbaum, Stein, Sherman, Goleman, Marina, etc. (Cortina, 2010, p. 19). Emotions, however, have not been taken into account in modernity for three fundamental reasons: because of the emphasis on individualism and personal autonomy, because of ignorance about the body, and because of the assessment of rationality. But emotions are not, by nature, something confused, arbitrary or weak. Since Hume, “sympathy” and closeness to others, constitute shared moral sentiments of our common humanity. There is a “sentimental” tie towards others, a feeling of respect, of satisfaction, of benevolence, of compassion for others. This supposes that a person’s heart has the *capability of feeling*. We will briefly analyze this “emotional” turn for vulnerability.

1. Vulnerability and emotions. Emotions make us vulnerable. “All emotion, by definition, makes us vulnerable, changes our body, our conscious experience, our cognitive functioning, our world of needs” (Jódar, 2013, pp. 81-98). Emotions dis-adapt us, predispose us to dysfunction, to disorder. We can have difficulties in integrating them because of lack of emotional conscience and regulation, because of difficulty to express them. But we can also make ourselves conscious, regulate, express and make them a means of relation with others. *Love*, for example, makes us more vulnerable than any other emotion because it exposes us to the strength of its emotion, fear of rejection, jealousy, affective dependence, the possibility of losing control, the risk of being hurt or not loved back. When we relate, make ties with others, we expose ourselves to loss, we risk losing ourselves when we give ourselves. For M.



Nussbaum (1947), an individual, who has no ties, no deep relations, only has to worry about his health and success. The one who loves another will be saddened by a double number of events and will be doubly vulnerable to fortune. But love not only increases vulnerability, it strengthens and produces more love, something essential, necessary, good and beautiful in life.

2. Vulnerability of the ties. Vulnerability not only is based on the emotional aspects, but is in itself possible of establishing relations, ties with others. Vulnerability always demands a choice, a way of relating to others, of responding to others. What do you do with me? The others face his nakedness and his vulnerability, calls upon our responsibility because we are always referred to others. Human subjectivity is responsibility for the other. What makes us human is not being “blind” to his nakedness, or “deaf” to his calling. What makes us more human is to see and to hear. Vulnerability orientates us to a deep tie between human beings, because we are not islands. The affective ties are essential and constitute the human being. It is in the midst of these relations where we make ourselves responsible, where we love, mature, acknowledge and care. This is why only when there is an acknowledgment of a tie, a *ligatio*, follows an obligation, a duty that always rests on the tie. Only from the fact of feeling bound to another, can dignity be recognized. The commitment and the duty with the other comes as a second moment.
3. Bonding, physical contact, corporality. The importance of vulnerability teach us that educating, judging or caring shouldn't be based on the forbiddance of physical contact, on increasing distance. It is not possible to cure from a distance, without contact, without corporality. It is not obvious that it is best to leave the child alone in his room too long, send him away to summer camps all summer, to make him eat alone, play alone, not bother, not protest if left him with someone. It is very different not calling your mother because you don't need her than not calling her because she won't answer. We mature and grow in the bond and the corporal contact.
4. Vulnerability as care and compassion. Vulnerability comes with an “inclination” to protect those who are more fragile. “Vulnerability is the obsession for the encounter with the other. Suffering for another is taking care of him; support him, being in his place. All love or hate towards the neighbor as a reflexive attitude, presuppose this previous vulnerability: mercy, shudder from the inside” (Levinas, 1974). This is why when confronted with the vulnerability of the other I cannot remain passive; I have to respond with solidarity and compassion, I have to mitigate this vulnerability. Our most elemental value judgments are based on compassion, in our feeling for the pain of others”. It's true: who lacks compassion cannot capture the suffering of others. Sentimental alphabets close themselves to entire regions of suffering, of bonding, of morality, of humanity. *Vulnerability is also welcome and hospitality*. Vulnerability transform the world with other perspective. Vulnerability is the condition to receive the radical donation of parents, of the elderly, and of society. Thus the importance of learning to receive, to welcome, to depend, to cultivate the virtues of receiving. Vulnerability is absolute reception, to be able to grow, to a possibility of

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healing and welcome. This is why vulnerability is a possibility of encounter and communion. *Vulnerability* is deeply united with reception, welcoming and hospitality as possibility of a restauration, healing, to live beyond the wounds. Vulnerable people give us that the possibility of participating in others progress, in their hopes and happiness, or in their sadness. Vulnerable people give us the possibility of living in others, being responsible to suffering, emptying ourselves to give ourselves to others.

Why are we vulnerable?
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Why are we vulnerable? Because as human beings we are emotional, bound to others, capable of compassion, corporal and receptive.

6. Biographic frame. Vulnerable throughout life

We find human vulnerability in birth and growth, when we become autonomous, and in our memory, mostly at the end of our lives. This means that it accompanies us during our whole lives (De la Torre 2009, pp. 119-137).

1. Vulnerability at birth. Nobody is born in a perfect family with perfect parents. We are vulnerated, violated, when our parents aren't receptive to our needs, when they respond destructively to our destructivity, when they don't have courage, or when they don't provide a safe scenario or they don't build our confidence. We are acknowledged and protected when our parents maintain permanent attention, when they show preference for the interests of the child above their own interests, when there is unconditional devotion. This is why being parent's means denying treating a son in relation to his qualities and aptitudes, it means taking care of the child in the same way if he is ugly, sickly or retarded, as if he is handsome, healthy and smart. This dependence on the attitudes of the parents is what makes us vulnerable when we are born.
2. Vulnerability while growing. Friends, teachers and companions are essential in this growing. We all need of others to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves in our infancy, in our old age and in our disability (dressing, feeding); we need of others to imagine possible futures with realism, to be cared for, protected from sickness and damage, to identify dangers, to be protected from excessive fears, to play, to be good professionals, to take distance from desires or to awaken them, to discover our particular way of being, to dialogue, to avoid extremes and to be prudent. This dependence of others makes us vulnerable in our process of growing.
3. Vulnerable autonomy. We need of others to be able to maintain our autonomy. Others are essential in adulthood for imagining different and alternative futures, to obtain an adequate sense of self, to reach our wellbeing, which is impossible to achieve without searching for the common benefit, to deliberate, to investigate, to avoid pride, reductionism and fear of the different. This is why during our whole lives others are necessary for our growth and for us to be able to maintain ourselves independently. For this reason only the independent person that establishes himself



in a network of reciprocities can keep himself independent. Human life is formed by patterns of reciprocity and in the proportion that we abandon our dependency of others, our autonomy becomes more vulnerable. *Besides when* we are autonomous we are vulnerable to moral and intellectual mistakes. Human beings can make intellectual mistakes because of overlook relevant data, or trusting excessively an unfounded generalization. We can make mistakes because of moral errors such as a excessive influence of a feeling of dislike for someone, or certain fantasies about a situation. The consequence is that the best protection against this vulnerability to error is friendship and deliberation in common.

4. Vulnerable to forgetfulness of what has been received. The human being knows, from memory, that he has received attention and care, and knows, at the same time, that he will have to give those cares from time to time. And also knows that having given those cares, he will have the need – from time to time – of others to care for him. This is why we are inserted in a web of reciprocity relations in which, in general, what one can give depends in part of what one has received. The forgetfulness of what one has received and of our future necessity makes us profoundly vulnerable.

Why are we vulnerable? Because we are vulnerable at birth, in the process of growing, in our autonomy and in our memory of what we have received

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7. Relational frame

Vulnerability implies a manner of relating to others that has four traits.

1. Vulnerability as acknowledgement of our dependence to others does not imply that others aren't imperfect, that others won't sometimes be a threat or a danger, and that we must accept their petitions. Vulnerability does not lead to the mystification of the other.
2. Vulnerability makes reference to a unpredictable world, to relations that cannot be based on strict reciprocity. This is why it goes beyond egalitarianism and contractualism. We are almost always called on to give what we have received to others, many times we must give something greater or less than what we have received and many times what we give and receive there is no way of comparing. Besides we don't know to whom we shall have to give and we don't know what they will give because of we cannot predict the future.
3. Human vulnerability means recognizing that we are in debt. An independent person's relationships are such that from the beginning he acknowledges his debt. The adult person acknowledges that he owes because he has received. This is why he recognizes his responsibility to the family, society, friends, teachers, etc. For this reason establishes and acknowledges reciprocity nets that are not strict and egalitarian (MacIntyre, 2001).



4. Recovering beneficence. Beneficence implies maternal cares that are not selfish. This is why we have to go beyond a horizontality in clinical relations understood as a mere contractual pact, mere information or exchange. The adequate model in the health world is an interpretative model that helps define values. It is a deliberate model that helps choose the best values from confidence in the master or the friend (Pellegriño, 1998).

Why are we vulnerable?

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Why are we vulnerable? Because others are not perfect, because most of our relations are not equal or contractual, and because we are in debt.

8. Professional frame. Health professionals and vulnerability

These types of relationships with vulnerability cannot be assumed from the principle moral traditions and require another approach. We will briefly present four current moral models in relation to vulnerability (De la Torre 2009, pp. 119-137; MacIntyre, 2001).

1. The “utilitarian” health professional has many limitations to face vulnerability. If what is good is maximizing the satisfaction of my preferences and if there are no more debts than those voluntarily assumed and agreed. Negotiation will always have primacy over sympathy. For utilitarian’s bonds are chosen and the vulnerable usually do not increase our “satisfaction” and interest. But the truth is that with the vulnerable we are in debt, that affection and reciprocity primes over negotiation, and that original ties do exist.
2. The “Kantian” healthcare professional acts by duty and according to duty. Acting just by duty is a moral limitation. We have to cultivate and train dispositions to feel. It is not completely true that one doesn’t control affections. Compassion is essential when confronted with serious and urgent need. Feeling the necessity and the pain of the other as one’s own leads to giving him what he needs. Not having the inclination to act in this way is always a sign of a moral defect. We act by duty when we don’t recognize within ourselves the motive that is necessary to “move” our hearts with generosity. For this reason it is necessary to cultivate certain dispositions to act according to certain feelings.
3. The aristotelic megalopsychos healthcare professional forgets what he has received and always remembers what he has given. Like Aristotle said: “it is a sign of superiority to concede favors and of inferiority to receive them” (EN 1124b, 9-10). This attitude is the illusion of self-sufficiency that characterizes the rich and powerful, and for this reason they are excluded of certain types of communitarian acts. They do not possess the virtues of receiving. They don’t know how to live in moral reciprocity, in giving and receiving.
4. The nietzschen healthcare professional lives in isolation, cuts his commitments, shows an iron and hardened condition, feels responsible only before himself, thinks



Why are we vulnerable? Because in our relations we are not the nietzschen ironman, nor the utilitarian maximalist, nor the aristotelic megalopsyphos, nor persons who act driven by the pure Kantian duty

that compassion is an illness, a weakness. Compassion drifts apart from the own way, where the will of power is the guide. This description is the opposite of vulnerability and compassion.

Why are we vulnerable? Because in our relations we are not the nietzschen ironman, nor the utilitarian maximalist, nor the aris-totelic megalopsyphos, nor persons who act driven by the pure Kantian duty.

1. Which are, then, the characteristics of the vulnerable healthcare professional?
2. The root of vulnerability is the urgent and extreme neediness of the person. The type and degree of the necessity dictate what has to be done. The attention given will be proportional to the need and not to the relationship with the persona who suffers it. This is why it goes beyond duty and the imperatives of reason.
3. The width of vulnerability is generosity, because it always requires going beyond the limits of the family ties. Generosity extends itself beyond the limits of community, and it goes beyond calculations and personal preferences. This adult generosity is also always prudent, because it knows that to be a caregiver one has to take care of oneself.
4. The “exteriority” of vulnerability is hospitality. The stranger who makes himself present by chance and to whom hospitality is owed, just for the fact that he is a stranger, plays an important role. Before the hurt not only must compassion be shown, but welcome in a home where full health can be restored. This attitude is founded on the bonds that we all have with each other; we are related with every other beyond the temptation of isolation.
5. The “inclination of vulnerability” is expressed in mercifulness. The mercifulness involves discovering beauty in the midst of “misery” and acknowledges our vulnerability to the appearance of beauty, a healthy body and a keen intelligence. All of us have to understand the value we assign to a pleasing, intelligent and healthy appearance, in others and in ourselves. We all tend to give more weight to reason depending on beauty, intelligence, health or age. Most of us are incapable of taking distance from our feelings of displeasure, repugnance or even horror to suffering, illness, deformity, ugliness, aging and death. If we do not critically judge those feelings, we cannot take steps towards a deep mercifulness. Only when we discover that our judgements are influenced by these feelings, can we move towards mercy. This is why once we have ceased to be captivated by the appearance of beauty, intelligence and health, we will be capable of understanding the courage of those who have to overcome the affliction produced by illness, weakness, ugliness, or awkwardness (MacIntyre, 2001). And when this happens, we are in disposition to learn from their ability forgive, socialize, or courage. This is how our merciful inclination becomes admiration and amaze for the vulnerable.



Why are we vulnerable? Because we cannot stop meeting the most urgent and extreme needs, because of our generosity called on to go beyond our community, because of our hospitality to the foreigner and because thanks to mercifulness we can become humble apprentices of the ill.

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