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ABSTRACT:
This essay looks at how a theology of vulnerability can contribute to ethical decision-making in an increasingly secular society. Relationality, power dynamics and scriptural justifications are considered, as well as early contributions made to this nascent field of Christian thought. This essay was written for a class on Health Care Ethics taught by Dr. Mary Ann Kish.

Bioethics and a Theology of Vulnerability
by Carrie ONeil-Smith

Since its emergence as a discipline in the 1950’s, the field of bioethics has become increasingly secular; law and moral philosophy dominate as religious viewpoints ebb.1 Yet, father of bioethics Daniel Callahan questions the absence of religion in a field dependent on interdisciplinary dialogue for its completeness and indeed for its very existence.2 The complexity of the issues addressed in

bioethics is enormous, yet the goal of the discipline can be stated simply: the sole concern of bioethics is protection of the vulnerable. A purely secular definition of vulnerability most often refers to a susceptibility to harm in body, mind, or dignity, either by objective and external forces such as disease or disaster, or by something inborn or innate such as gender, race, or disability. Vulnerability also refers to the ease with which one can be persuaded or tempted. In the secular sense vulnerability is feared because of the associated risk of objectification, dismissiveness, and loss of power or social standing. A theological understanding of vulnerability builds on this definition to place emphasis on additional attributes: the precarity of caregivers and institutions in their response to vulnerability; a Christological understanding of human vulnerability; and an understanding of vulnerability as a vehicle for the divine. To illustrate these concepts this paper will define a Catholic theology of vulnerability in terms of shared human dignity, relationality, power dynamics, and scriptural justification. The value of this exercise is found in the belief that theological concepts, even a nascent theology of vulnerability, have the potential to generate principles that may be useful in making bioethical decisions. To that end this paper will look at a single pastoral application – care of the unhoused mentally ill. A theology of vulnerability grounds and contributes in an essential way to a more complete response to bioethical issues because it considers the vulnerability of the caregiver as well as the cared-for; and supports Christian movement toward beatitude. As part of its conclusion, this paper will consider the place of a robust theology of vulnerability at the intersection of religious and secular approaches in bioethics.

3 Barry Hoffmaster, “What Does Vulnerability Mean?,” The Hastings Center Report, Vol 36, No. 2, Mar-Apr, 2006, 41. Thank you to Dr. Mary Ann Kish for referring me to this article.
6 Idziak, “Theology and the Discipline of Bioethics,” 16.
AN EMERGING THEOLOGY OF VULNERABILITY

Thoughtful scholarly reflection on the subject of vulnerability represents an evolution of thought brought on by the humanitarian crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Irish theologian Enda McDonagh, a scholar deeply concerned with the crisis in Northern Ireland, is credited with first referencing a theology of vulnerability in his work Vulnerability to the Holy in faith, morality and art, published in 2004. In 2010, Augustinian priest and medical doctor Vincent LeClercq referred to a theology of vulnerability in Blessed are the Vulnerable, his research and reflection on the AIDS crisis. The sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church prompted Jesuit priest James F. Keenan to further develop a theology of vulnerability particularly as it applies to the institutional response to the crisis in his 2010 article “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism.” This is a brief sampling; there have been other contributors such as Judith Butler, Linda Hogan, and Roger Burggraeve. All trace roots of the idea of the sacredness of vulnerability to French ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who wrote that ethics starts with philosophy and that philosophy is not only the love of wisdom but the wisdom of love. Levinas’ most referenced book on the subject is Humanism of the Other, published in 2005. Levinas, who died in 1995, was of Lithuanian Jewish descent and lost family members to the Holocaust. Levinas’ lived experience during World War II makes his unique contribution to scholarly work of great interest: for Levinas, vulnerability is a response to suffering, one that takes place outside of the ego. The effect is more than merely a positive view of

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7 Enda McDonagh, Vulnerable to the Holy in faith, morality and art (Dublin: The Columba Press), 2004.
vulnerability; it “does not only yield something good...it [vulnerability] is Goodness itself.”\textsuperscript{12} This vulnerable movement outside of ourselves, toward another, defines what it means to be human.\textsuperscript{13} Vulnerability is not always rational; it does, however, always involve feelings. Despite the centrality of feeling to human nature, it is this very aspect, the feelings aspect of vulnerability, that has historically precluded it from rational discussions of morality.\textsuperscript{14} Under the enduring influence of Kant,\textsuperscript{15} rational discussions of morality are most concerned with outcomes and with procedures that protect the autonomy of the individual.\textsuperscript{16} Alternatively, Christian theories of bioethics are formulated against the backdrop of a desire to imitate Christ.\textsuperscript{17}

**SHARED HUMAN DIGNITY**

Vulnerability makes us human. In addition to external factors outside of one’s control, simply being in possession of a human body that ages, decays, has accidents, an imperfect brain or DNA, makes us prone to mistakes, embarrassment, shame, and therefore subject to the possibility of abuse and loss of power. James Keenan sees humanity’s essential vulnerability as firmly rooted in Imago Dei,\textsuperscript{18} a doctrine that states humans are created in God’s image. The doctrine of Imago Dei illumes human dignity because it is an expression of the melding of human anthropology with Christ’s divinity.\textsuperscript{19} Keenan stresses that it is the virtue of humility that allows recognition of vulnerability in another, resulting in a shared experience of human dignity and worth.\textsuperscript{20} In a solely secular

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[12]{Xin Mao, “A Levinasian Reconstruction of the Political Significance of Vulnerability,” Religions 2019, 10, 10, page 5, doi:10.3390/rel10010010.}
\footnotetext[13]{Mao, “A Levinasian Reconstruction of the Political Significance of Vulnerability,” 4.}
\footnotetext[14]{Hoffmaster, “What Does Vulnerability Mean?,” 44.}
\footnotetext[15]{Hoffmaster, “What Does Vulnerability Mean?,” 43.}
\footnotetext[17]{Austriaco, Biomedicine and Beatitude: An Introduction to Catholic Bioethics, 2.}
\footnotetext[20]{Keenan, “Linking Human Dignity, Vulnerability and Virtue Ethics,” 63.}
\end{footnotes}
purview, vulnerability produces shame, an emotion that impedes healing. From the perspective of Imago Dei, the understanding that humans are made in the image of Christ makes room for non-judgement, acceptance, mercy and forgiveness, diluting the feeling of shame that accompanies faults, mistakes, suffering and weakness. Therefore, from a theological purview, vulnerability is a positive condition that elevates the human spirit. Mutual vulnerability, or the recognition of vulnerability in one another, is therefore a positive, generative source of divine wisdom and light. For Keenan, “The divine enters the human through vulnerability.”

RELATIONALITY

If a response to vulnerability is to be healing or empowering, it must, either personally or institutionally, go beyond physical, economic, or social relief to the transcendent. The transcendent is entered into when trust is created. Individuals may make a decision to trust, but that does not mean one feels trust; trust is a grace that occurs spontaneously; and is steeped in an unknowingness because of the risk involved. Relationality is defined by equality and solidarity; equality not in power but in the valuing of and respect for each person’s dignity and worth. This creates the possibility for trust to happen and for life-giving relationality to take place.

Keenan, along with writers such as Erinn C. Gilson, inverts our common understanding of vulnerability as a negative state that implies weakness and dependency; to the less frequently used understanding of vulnerability as the condition of being in a state of responsiveness. Vulnerability in this positive sense is not something to fear or avoid; but something to express outwardly in the form of encounter, solidarity, and

responsiveness. In this sense, vulnerability is something to cultivate in one’s self. From a theological viewpoint, vulnerability represents “the possibility to be relational and therefore moral.”

Keenan uses the story of the prodigal son [Luke 15:11-32] to illustrate mutual vulnerability in human relationships. The younger son is vulnerable because he risks rejection in returning home to his father. The father sees his younger son in the distance and rushes out to embrace him; in his effort to heal wounds, his own and his son’s, the father risks repeated hurt by making himself vulnerable to his younger son. The father, in gratuitously expressing love, graciousness, forgiveness, and generosity, also makes himself vulnerable to his older son’s resentment. For Keenan, the story of the prodigal son is one of mutual vulnerability. Keenan’s emphasis on the father in the text highlights his assertion that vulnerability is about more than precarity; vulnerability is defined by our response to precarity in another.

A condition of healthy relationality is understanding one’s own vulnerability; this applies to individuals as well as institutions. The Hippocratic tradition requires healers to heal themselves before serving others. With regard to institutions, Keenan’s voice is one that takes the discussion of the Church’s sexual abuse scandal further than the issue of accountability. In responding to the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, Keenan’s paper, titled “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism,” proposes a “culture of vulnerability” as a path to “servant priesthood” and

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a “servant episcopacy.” For Keenan, vulnerability creates the possibility of relationality, resulting in moral individuals and moral institutions.

POWER DYNAMICS

In the absence of the equilibrium that relationality provides, vulnerability can result in a disproportionate balance of power, leaving vulnerable persons – both caregivers and the cared-for – at risk for abuse, deception, or coercion. A disordered power dynamic impedes eudaemonia, or human flourishing. An ethical relationship, for communal and individual concerns, cultivates a power dynamic that is free from coercion, deception and abuse, thereby preserving human dignity. In pastoral and institutional relationships that are ethical, an awareness and cultivation of boundaries promotes eudaemonia. In Taking Care, Carrie Doehring describes the characteristics of a healthy relational/power dynamic as empathetic and empowering. An unhealthy relational/power dynamic has disordered boundaries; and is described by Doehring as disengaged, merged or overpowered. Doehring describes the centrality of recognition and all of its synonyms in the cultivation of rightly-ordered boundaries: to “…affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar, and love.” It is vulnerability and human dignity that are being recognized.

Dependency is an inescapable fact of being human. However, dependency does not by necessity imply a defect in agency. The vulnerable cared-for can be empowered by recognizing, to the degree that they are able, the vulnerability and dignity of those who care for them. In the depths of vulnerability and suffering, the impetus to recognize the same in another can bring perspective, healing, and solidarity when it takes place within a framework of healthy boundaries and a rightly-ordered power dynamic.

31 Roberts, “Vulnerability as strength: Keenan’s key to dismantling clericalism.”
34 Doehring, 165.
Self-understanding and reflection on one’s own weakness, vulnerability, and suffering is essential to a healthy power dynamic, i.e. knowing where “I” end and where “you” begin. For individuals, Jungian “shadow work,” meaning deep reflection on one’s own vulnerabilities, is a path toward improved awareness and cultivation of healthy boundaries. From an institutional perspective, as mentioned previously, James F. Keenan writes of the Church’s need for such self-reflection at an institutional level in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal. An improved power dynamic at the institutional level, one that actively recognizes the dignity of all, is the fruit of institutional self-reflection. The Catholic Church’s present-day synodality, or movement toward becoming an institution that prioritizes listening, is an example of an institutional mutual vulnerability and an ethical institutional power dynamic.

SCRIPTURAL JUSTIFICATION
The act of creation is a gratuitous expression of love made by a vulnerable God. Likewise, it follows that salvation, incarnation, death on the cross, and Eucharist, which we know to be expressions of God’s love, are in fact expressions of His vulnerability. God is love [1 John 4:16]; God is vulnerable. Scripture is direct regarding a disciple’s responsibility to respond to vulnerability. Christians should work for and care for the poor and oppressed [Isaiah 58:5-7]; they must not refuse to help the vulnerable [1 John 3:17-18]; and they should not benefit from another’s vulnerability [Exodus 22:20-26]. Scripture speaks to the relationality of a disciple’s heart with regard to the vulnerable: Bear one another’s burdens [Galatians 6:2]; shelter and strengthen the vulnerable [Isaiah 25:4]; and be vulnerable to one another [James 5:16]. The vulnerable are strengthened by the nearness of God in their suffering: My power is made perfect in weakness [2 Corinthians 12:9-10]; He does not leave the vulnerable [Isaiah 41:10]; God always responds to the faithful in time of need [Psalm 41:1].

PRACTICAL APPLICATION: THE UNHOUSED MENTALLY ILL

An estimated 85 percent of unhoused persons suffer intellectual and emotional impairment before losing housing, and the condition of homelessness carries increased risk of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and, as a coping mechanism, substance abuse. Caregiving to an unhoused mentally ill population presents moral tension among issues of consent, respecting autonomy, providing effective care, and a caregiver’s self-protection from harm. The complexity of issues facing caregivers and the cared-for requires more than a secular response. A theological understanding of the divine nature of vulnerability generates hope, motivation, boundaries, wisdom and the love necessary to respond. The four aspects of a theology of vulnerability described in this paper are applied below.

Shared Human Dignity: The framework of the doctrine of Imago Dei necessitates a call for greater attention and resources directed to the suffering of the unhoused mentally ill. This is a difficult population, for reasons of practicality, upon which to compile the data necessary for addressing needs. Narratives are often the most effective way to gather insight. A narrative respects dignity by eliciting the undiluted, first-person voice of both the caregiver and the cared-for. Listening, speaking, and being heard are the first step in a path toward shared human dignity for individuals and institutions. These activities promote shared human dignity and should be prioritized for governments, nonprofits and surrounding faith communities who are in a position to contribute energy and resources.

Relationality: The importance of trust and solidarity can not be overstated here. Given the uncertainty of safety that can accompany care of the unhoused mentally ill, a theological understanding of trust as grace and gift is essential. The predictability and success of pastoral relationships are beyond human control. An awareness of this reality on the part of caregivers cultivates humility and makes the presence of the divine more discernible, inviting greater dependence on the divine.

Power Dynamic: How is it possible to help an individual whose safety and well-being are at risk when they do not wish to be helped? Philosopher Bruce Miller writes of a response to this population’s precarity that respects autonomy and finds a balance between beneficence and persuasion in order to empower improved long-term choice making. A complex area of interest with regard to power dynamic and marginalized persons is the marketing of tobacco products to the homeless population through partnerships with provider organizations. Smoking has been determined to increase anxiety in the unhoused, yet service providers wonder if smoking cessation is an insurmountable challenge during periods of homelessness. The intentions of tobacco companies should be examined to prevent commodification of a marginalized population. Are service providers being manipulated? What are the ethical obligations of tobacco companies who are profiting from a vulnerable population?

Scriptural Justification: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” [Matthew 25:40, 45.]

CONCLUSION
Humans are susceptible to external dangers – geography, weather, the ill will of others, political injustice, social, physical, emotional and sexual abuse; and internal dangers brought on by vicissitudes or deficiencies of the mind, intellect, emotions and psyche. Vulnerability is the inescapable condition of humanity that creates the need for morality.45 A theology of vulnerability incorporates both secular and religious bioethics. Religious themes such as God’s vulnerability to humankind through creation, incarnation, Eucharist, salvation through death on the cross, and Imago Dei provide grounding and theological understanding of the primacy of mutual vulnerability to our shared human dignity. The secular viewpoint that responding to vulnerable persons provides benefit to both parties is demonstrated in humankind’s value of the common good. Levinas’ work, the basis for all scholarly reflection on a theology of vulnerability, is distinctive because it uses secular language to describe the most central of Christian religious values: Love. Institutions are held accountable for the way in which they respond to the vulnerable, indeed some institutions are created for this express purpose. The secular and religious meanings of a theology of vulnerability are symbiotic in nature. Each viewpoint stands on its own in completeness, without contradiction, yet each is complementary to the other in a non-compulsory manner. The religious viewpoint benefits from secular applications, and the secular viewpoint is enriched by the transcendent and nuanced nature of the more abstract definition and Christological aspects of vulnerability. Both viewpoints support the centrality of love to human existence; vulnerability is necessary for love, and love is the essence of vulnerability.46 A theology of vulnerability asserts that grace enters “through the same openness that creates [our] vulnerability.”47 We become vulnerable when we love, and love necessitates our vulnerability.

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