Chapter 2
Vulnerability as a Part of Human Nature

Alfredo Marcos

Abstract The chapter argues that vulnerability should be recognized as a part of human nature. The debate about human nature has recently returned to the forefront of philosophical inquiry. Some authors outright deny the existence of human nature. Others reduce it to a pure animal condition. Still others—trans and post-humanists—advocate radical artificial intervention in human beings. In this chapter I seek to sketch the contours of this debate. In addition, I will defend the following positions: (i) There is indeed a human nature. (ii) It includes our animal condition, this is what makes us vulnerable; so, vulnerability is part of human nature. (iii) However, human nature is much more than simple animality; we are also social beings and rational by nature, endowed with self-awareness and some degree of freedom. Hence, we can mitigate our vulnerability thanks to our social interdependence and our condition as a rational being. In sum, regarding human vulnerability, I will argue for the following formula: recognition + mitigation. Vulnerability should be recognized as part of human nature and mitigated by improving the integration between the animal, social and rational aspects of human nature. I will reject, therefore, the two other alternative positions: conformity with or resignation to extreme vulnerability, on the one hand, and the attempt to overcome vulnerability by overcoming human nature itself, on the other.

2.1 Human Nature

I begin here with the hypothesis that vulnerability is closely connected with human nature. But we should not forget that this latter concept is currently the subject of an intense debate.[1] I will review this debate, albeit it briefly, in order to determine whether the connection between vulnerability and human nature is—or is

[1] Interested readers may consult A. Marcos, 'Filosofía de la naturaleza humana', *Eikasia. Revista de Filosofía*, No. 4, 2010, pp. 181–208.

A. Marcos (✉)
Department of Philosophy, University of Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain
e-mail: amarcos@fyl.uva.es

A. Masferrer, E. García-Sánchez (eds.), *Human Dignity of the Vulnerable in the Age of Rights*, Ius Gentium: Comparative Perspectives on Law and Justice 55,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-32693-1_2

not—sustainable. I will, therefore, summarize the most influential positions in the debate about human nature.

2.1.1 Negation, Naturalization, Artificialization

Among the theories of human nature, one that has been very influential is that the human being simply lacks any nature; he is pure freedom, he determines himself and constructs himself through little less than his will and on the basis of his own will. A text of the Renaissance thinker, Pico della Mirandola, is often cited as a precedent in this regard. In della Mirandola's work, God speaks to Adam with these words: "We have given you, Adam, no fixed seat or form of your own, no talent peculiar to you alone. This we have done so that whatever seat, whatever form, whatever talent you may judge desirable, these same may you have and possess according to your desire and judgment".[2]

This is, doubtless, a naive exaggeration, proper to a humanism that is in its earliest stages. The human being possess freedom and choice, but is not exempt from conditioning factors of various types, among which are those which derive from her own nature. Nevertheless, other later authors, representing widely varying philosophical traditions—Enlightenment, idealism, Marxism, behaviorism, historicism, utilitarianism and, in particular, existentialism and nihilism—have insisted on this idea of the human being as being beyond any previously given nature. Today, this perspective is present within the post-humanist current that has its roots in Nietzsche, and is defended by the German Peter Sloterdijk.[3]

Without human nature there will be nothing in common between human beings and nature itself, nor among human beings themselves, each imprisoned within their own unconditioned freedom and will to power. This human being without attributes, having "no fixed seat or form of your own, no talent peculiar to you alone", will have to dedicate her entire life to deciding what she should do with it, starting from zero, in a vacuum of values.

I will apply here basic common sense rooted in our daily experience: we are free, yes, but not in a complete and unconditioned way. And if we were to completely lack conditioning factors, we would not even be able to exercise our freedom. Kant said the same thing via an apt metaphor: the dove that notices the resistance of the air thinks that it would fly better without it, but the fact is that without this resistance, which conditions and limits its flight, the dove would not even be able to fly.[4]

---

[2] P. della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 117, translation by M. Riva, F. Borghesi and M. Papio (written in 1486).

[3] See P. Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1993; P. Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2008 (first published in 1999).

[4] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2001 pp. A5 and B8, translated by W. S. Pluhar.

At the other extreme—or, rather, at the other point of excess—we encounter the positions of the radical naturalists. According to these, the human being is nature and nothing but nature. The question about the human would thus have a simple response: each of us is an organism of the *Homo sapiens* species, a primate.

Oddly enough, these positions that at the outset appear to be contraries end up producing the same fruit—the artificialization of the human being—and have similar intellectual roots. The convergence of naturalization and of negation already appeared in Nietzsche,[5] one of the authors who has most influenced those who negate human nature, as well as those who support a radical naturalization. This connection also produced a similar agenda: trans-humanist, in the Oxonian version, or post-humanist, in the continental version. From both sides—negators and naturalizers—there comes the proposal of a profound modification and artificialization of the human being, which they call *enhancement*. In the final analysis, if human nature is totally natural, then it is available to technological modification, and if human nature simply doesn't exist, then we have the task of inventing it through technical means. Anthropotechnics without criteria are proposed by both approaches.[6]

The problem is that without a normative idea of human nature, it is impossible to speak of enhancement or improvement. Neither negation nor radical naturalization of human nature enables us, therefore, to identify improvements. In these conditions we can only speak of changes in the human that are produced by anthropotechnics, never about improvements. Nietzsche knew this very well: "The last thing *I* would promise", he warns us, "would be to 'improve' humanity".[7]

My proposal, in positive terms, consists in developing a conception of human nature that is inspired by Aristotle and which is close, furthermore, to what common sense and daily human activity teach us. In the Aristotelian tradition there is an affirmation of human nature, but without any reduction to the purely natural level. One might call it a moderate naturalism. The idea of human nature proper to this tradition has clear normative implications, through notions like those of virtue (*areté*), happiness (*eudaimonía*) and function (*ergón*), which the human being can attain to. The notion of human nature I propose can, therefore, be of use in dealing with our current problems. I speak of developing, not merely of recuperating, a certain conception of human nature. That is to say, this conception must be developed in correspondence with the state of our current knowledge. Today we are in a better position that any of our predecessors for finding out what a human being is,

[5] See F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo. How One Becomes What One Is*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, translated by D. Large.

[6] See A. Marcos, 'Filosofía de la naturaleza humana', *Eikasia. Revista de Filosofía*, No. 4, 2010, pp. 181–208. To be precise, one must distinguish between a *moderate* naturalism and one that is *radical*. According to the first—which I hold to without reservations—the natural sciences are important in order to understand the human being. For holders of the second kind of naturalism, everything human is reducible to its physical and biological bases. It is this latter position that I seek to distance myself from.

[7] F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo. How One Becomes What One Is*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 3, translated by D. Large, italics and single quotation marks in the original.

and this is thanks to recent advances in the natural, social and human sciences. Therefore we must develop or update a certain very valuable conception of humanness, beyond mere recuperation.[8]

Stated concisely, the human being is, according to the Aristotelian tradition, a rational social animal (*zoon politikon logon*). The method for developing this idea will consist in the opening and exploration of each of these three boxes. That is to say, we must find out what is included and what is implicit, respectively, in our animal, social and rational condition. We must interpret these three terms in the light of our current knowledge. We are confronted by a task that goes far beyond the reach of a brief text like this one. I will conform myself, therefore, with peeking briefly into each of these boxes in order to shed light on some of the elements present within them. Perhaps it will turn out, after all, that we do have a *seat* and *talents* that are proper to us.

The fact that we are animals has deep implications. Sometimes one tends to pass over these terms and we end up considering the expressions "rational animal" and "rational being" as being practically synonymous. But they are most definitely not. We human beings are not just any kind of rational beings; rather, we are precisely rational *animals*. This obliges us to think ourselves starting from the body, from the experience of the animals that we are. The old discarnate rationalism tended to identify the human being exclusively with rationality. Today we know this was an error. Many more recent authors, from Nietzsche himself to Merleau-Ponty, have showed how this approach is wrong. If, by nature, we are animals, this means, among many other things, that we are situated in natural surroundings, in a world (*Welt*) that for us is "environment" (*Umwelt*). It also means that we are *vulnerable*, susceptible to harm and suffering, to pleasure and pain, as I will discuss in more detail below. It should be noted that the three traits of human nature actually form an integrated subject. They are only separable in concept. Therefore, our vulnerability as animals also involves social and rational vulnerability. We see that the fact of being vulnerable does not make us less human, but rather is one of the things in which being human precisely consists. In addition, our animal condition should make us remember the many things we share with other animals. In this sense, the sciences of life, such as ecology and ethology, will be very helpful for illuminating the human condition.

Our social condition makes us mutually *dependent* and locates us in a determined community, the human family. The same thing that occurred with vulnerability happens with dependency, that is, that it does not make us less human, but rather is precisely a part of what being human consists in. Of course, the discoveries by the social sciences turn out to be, regarding this point, an immense aid in assessing human nature. In philosophical terms, perhaps it is Alasdair MacIntyre who in recent years has best understood and analyzed these aspects of the human. He has known how to develop an ancient Aristotelian idea about the human being as a

[8] This labour is inscribed within a more general project, consisting in the construction of a postmodern Aristotelianism. The reader may consult, in this regard, A. Marcos, *Postmodern Aristotle*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

political animal into his contemporary formulation as a dependent animal. We depend on others even to be autonomous, and we have to put our autonomy at the service of others.[9]

With this observation we are already lifting the top of the third box, that of rationality. We are, indeed, rational. This locates us within a new spiritual sphere. It includes our capacity for thinking and for thinking about ourselves, for reflecting, for contemplating and for weighing the reasons for heaving and believing. It is because we are rational that we ask for and offer reasons, we seek explanations and causes (including those that are the most radical and final), we deliberate, we decide voluntarily to act in one direction or another, we value the good and the beautiful. I understand being rational in a broad and contemporary sense, which includes and integrates emotional intelligence, the contributions of intuition, and, in general, our common sense. There is no doubt that the human sciences—and other perspectives, such as those we can obtain through the arts and religion—shed light on the task of understanding these characteristics of the human. Thanks to the rational aspect of the human condition we are constituted as *autonomous* subjects, we can give norms and criteria to ourselves, and can, in a lucid and free fashion, accept—or not—the direction we receive from others. Our capacity for autonomy, just as Kant saw, is rooted in this zone of the human.

It would seem, then, that we *do* have a proper place, a *seat*, or even more than one: the natural environment, the social world and the sphere of the spiritual. And we *do* have certain characteristics—let's say *talents*—, by nature: vulnerability, dependency and autonomy.

What is interesting about this aspect of ourselves is that these three dimensions of the human, which I have sketched in such a rushed manner, are not reducible to one another, nor are they merely juxtaposed. Their mutual relationship is better described by the term "integration": each one of them completely impregnates the other two. Our intelligence is sentient, our form of perceiving is affected by our thought, our rationality is social and dialogical, it can only be constructed through communication with others, our animal functions are carried out in a cultural manner, our autonomy, as I said above, is at the service of those who are dependent, and we depend on others in order to construct that autonomy itself. It is in this sense that one must understand the words of the French thinker Paul Ricoeur when he affirms that autonomy and vulnerability are complementary concepts. Human autonomy is that of a vulnerable being, who recognizes other vulnerable beings in her environment, beings that limit and at the same time make possible their autonomy.[10]

---

[9] See A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chicago, Carus Publishing Company, 1999; A. Marcos, 'Antropología de la dependencia', in A. Muñoz (ed.), *El cuidado de las personas dependientes ante la crisis del estado de bienestar*, Valencia, Tirant Lo Blanch, 2013 pp. 21–34; A. Marcos, 'Dependientes y racionales: la familia humana', *Cuadernos de Bioética*, No. 23, pp. 83–95.

[10] P. Ricoeur, 'Autonomie et vulnérabilité', in P. Ricoeur, *Le Juste*, Paris, Esprit, 1995, vol. 2, pp. 85–105.

If we probe deeper into the question, we realize that we have obtained a certain knowledge about the human, a certain lucidity, via analysis and abstraction. We conceptually divide up what is physically one, and we consider separately in our minds, in an abstract way, each one of the aspects that we have distinguished. This is an approach to reality via operations of *logos*, which at the same time have distanced us from the real, physical plane. In order to return to the real from the conceptual, to that substantivity that is each *person*, we must always keep in mind that the human occurs in an integral, unitary and indivisible way in each of us.

2.2 Vulnerability

Having established the connection between vulnerability and human nature, I can now focus on the concept of vulnerability itself, on its origin, content and current importance. I will also investigate what the best action strategy is in the face of human vulnerability. The preceding considerations concerning human nature suggest the strategy that we should employ.

2.2.1 Etymology and Mythology of Vulnerability

A reflection on the etymology of the term "vulnerability" will help us take a first step towards its current-day content and importance. The *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines "vulnerability" as the state in which something "can be wounded or physically injured", and "vulnerable" as that which is "susceptible to physical harm or damage". In fact, the term comes from Latin, "*vulnerabilis*", a language in which the term also refers to that which is susceptible to being harmed. Equally, in many Romance languages the verb for "harm" comes from Latin "*ferire*", which means perforating or cutting. That is to say, the vulnerable is the perforable. In more basic terms, it has to do with an entity into which another can be inserted, which logically requires the distinction between inner and outer. The idea of functional damage is also suggested. The insertion of something external into an entity is considered to be a wound if it causes functional damage in the entity in question. The characteristics mentioned, ie the distinction between an interior and an exterior, as well as the functionality, exist in living beings in a paradigmatic way. Living beings have an interior and an exterior, they possess semi-permeable barriers which identify them and separate them from their environments; at the same time, however, they communicate with that environment, which makes them functional but also, and at the same time, vulnerable.

The separation of the living being with respect to its medium, as well as its individuality, give rise to an internal "face" in the most diverse senses and degrees. The living being appears, in all cases, to possess a certain degree of intimacy or interiority: from the spatial region enclosed by a membrane or by skin, to the intimacy and

immunological identity that encloses an it-self and separates it chemically from all other beings; this occurs beginning with the most elemental perception of the environment, all the way through a rich and developed mental activity, whose most extreme realization is the mental and self-conscious intimacy of the human being. Save for the blindness of behaviorism, we cannot even deny that many animals also appear to have mental activity and a certain degree of non-reflexive consciousness.

It is our condition as living beings, and more specifically as animals, that makes us vulnerable. Rocks are not, nor are the concepts (even though they their owners are). Among living beings we find, more than among any other beings, the clear and objective distinction between inner and outer, zones that are separated and that intercommunicate. In these beings, therefore, there can be insertion, perforation, wounds. Allow me to quote here, as a much more beautiful expression of these facts, some verses by the Nobel Prize winner Wisława Szymborska[11]:

Conversation with a Stone

I knock at the stone's front door.
It's only me, let me come in.
I want to enter your insides,
[…]
"Go away," says the stone.
"I'm shut tight.
Even if you break me to pieces,
we'll all still be closed.
You can grind us to sand,
we still won't let you in."
[…]
"But there isn't any room."
[…]
"My whole surface is turned toward you,
all my insides turned away."
[…]
"You shall not enter," says the stone.
[…]
"I don't have a door," says the stone.

The rock is, hence, invulnerable. Only the living is at risk of dying. Furthermore, there is no living being that is not vulnerable. The human being would only cease to be vulnerable if she ceased to be a living being, in order to transform herself, for example, into software. But, in so doing, obviously, she would have ceased to be human. Recognizing oneself as human implies recognizing oneself as animal, ie as living, and, therefore, vulnerable. Therefore, as MacIntyre was aware, together we must ask ourselves about the animality of human beings and about their vulnerability,

[11] W. Szymborska, 'Conversation with a stone', in W. Szymborska, *View with a Grain of Sand*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995, pp. 30–33, translated by S. Barańczak and C. Cavanagh.

and therefore both questions are crucial for philosophy. The two questions MacIntyre refers to are the following: "Why is it important for us to attend to and to understand what human beings have in common with members of other intelligent animal species?", and, "What makes attention to human vulnerability and disability important for moral philosophers?"[12]

It is clear, on the other hand, that the notions of interior and exterior, as well as that of vulnerability, also apply to non-living beings, for example houses or computers, but this is done in an analogical or metaphorical fashion, taking these entities as though they were living beings, or prolongations in some sense of living beings. As a metaphor, we recall, the alchemists spoke of sickness and curing of metals; just as today we speak of computer viruses or of material fatigue. A house requires both walls to delimit and separate it, as well as windows and doors that allow it to communicate with the exterior. But this is only because the house, of course, is the prolongation, the prosthesis, of a particular living being, for otherwise it would not be a house. And living beings also have, in addition to "walls"—closing elements that delimit, distinguish and constitute them—"windows and doors". That is to say, the distance that the living being maintains with respect to the thermodynamic equilibrium, the challenge to entropy that it constitutes, its functionality, all are sustained only thanks to the continual exchange of matter, energy and information.

The necessary openness of the living being, the fact that its self-sustaining in life depends on exchange with its environment, makes the living being a precarious one, in need and always on the threshold of sickness and death (which has moral consequences). The living being is not a monad, but rather must balance its separation from and its communication with the environment. Without a membrane there is no cell, nor can a cell exist without pores. Any living being marks an interior and an exterior, and in addition places them into constant communication. It is interesting to note that the same Indo-European root found in the Latin word "*ferire*" is also found in the English word "*pharynx*", from Greek "*pharynx*". Thanks to the pharynx the exterior penetrates into the interior as a nutrient and ends up being assimilated, integrated into the interior of the living being. However, the necessary openness of the living being is, at the same time, what makes it vulnerable. The same pharynx serves as a channel for food as well as for poison. And the living being can only eliminate its vulnerability at the cost of ceasing to be a living being. In the case at hand, which is that of the human being, absolute invulnerability would carry with it the loss of the condition of being alive and, therefore, the loss of the human condition itself. Emmanuel Lévinas even came to understand human subjectivity in terms of vulnerability, and identifies the latter as a condition of possibility of any form of respect towards the human.[13]

---

[12] A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chicago, Carus Publishing Company, 1999, p. ix.

[13] See E. Lévinas, 'Vulnérabilité et Contact', in E. Lévinas, *Autrement Qu'Être. Ou au-delà de l'essence*, La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, chap. 3, section 5, pp. 120–128; N. Antenat, 'Respect et vulnérabilité chez Levinas', *Le Portique. Revue de Philosophie et de Sciences Humaines*, No. 11, 2003, published online 15 December 2005, accessed 6 August 2014, URL: http://leportique.revues.org/558.

Of course, we should attempt as far as possible to mitigate our vulnerability and protect ourselves from possible harm, but the aspiration to an absolute invulnerability for the human being is necessarily tinged with absurdity and contradiction. We should have learned this lesson already from the ancient story about the heel of Achilles: when he was born, his mother, Thetis, attempted to make him invulnerable by submerging him in the river Styx. But she held him by the right heel as she immersed him in the current, and as a result that precise spot on his body, where the fingers of Thetis had pressed, was not washed by the water and thus remained vulnerable. During the siege of Troy, Paris killed Achilles by shooting a poisoned arrow into his heel. Perfect invulnerability would have come with a price that Thetis was not willing to pay, ie that she let go of her son completely, abandoning him to the current. This story indicates for us the path to follow concerning human vulnerability: we must recognize it and seek to mitigate it, knowing that its complete elimination is incompatible with retaining human nature.

2.2.2 The Present-Day Importance of the Concept of Vulnerability

Today the concept of vulnerability has acquired great importance in diverse areas, such as medicine and psychiatry, law, social services, economics and ecology, as well as computing and information science. In all these terrains vulnerability tends to be studied in a gradual fashion, not following the utopian perspective where it is an all or nothing issue. The point is to recognize vulnerability and to reduce it to the degree possible. The studies that have been carried out seek, in the first place, to identify the subjects that are vulnerable, which can be persons, populations or even systems of diverse kinds, from ecosystems to systems of networked computers. For instance, Hans Jonas speaks in his book *The Imperative of Responsibility* about the "vulnerability of nature".[14] The possible subjects of vulnerability, as one can see, are numerous and highly diverse. It is not possible to pay attention to all of them in the space permitted for a brief text. As a result, my reflections here will only focus on the vulnerability of persons. This choice has advantages, especially due to the fact that the case of the human being can be considered as paradigmatic in several senses.

Once the subject has been identified, the diverse types of vulnerability that affect it must be studied.[15] For example, in the case of persons, one typically distinguishes between psycho-somatic, social and spiritual vulnerability.[16] The distinct types of vulnerability are correlated with different risk factors; therefore, studies about

[14] H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 6–8.

[15] The reader may consult the monographic issue of the journal *Medic* dedicated to Disability Studies as a new area of research. It can be consulted at http://www.medicjournalcampus.it/archivio-della-rivista/2013/volume-21-dicembre-2013/

[16] See F. Torralba, *Pedagogía de la vulnerabilidad*, Valencia, CCS, 2002.

vulnerability are closely related to studies about risks and their prevention.[17] Each type of vulnerability is connected with specific risks. For example, the risk of bodily or psychological disorders, ecological risks—whether they be natural or generated by humans—threaten us to the degree that we are bodily and psychologically vulnerable. The risks of social exclusion and of poverty correlate with our social vulnerability, and the risks related to lack of information and to the loss of meaning in life correlate with spiritual vulnerability.

Obviously, the types of vulnerability that I have distinguished are related to the three basic aspects of human nature. And in addition, these types of vulnerability, even though they are conceptually distinguishable, are in reality intimately interconnected and mutually affect each other, as I have shown to occur with the three aspects of human nature. For example, bodily illness can cause psychological disorders and vice versa, and both of them can affect social relationships and generate crises of meaning. Furthermore, a crisis of meaning can end up provoking various diseases and changes in social relationships, and so forth. In other words, vulnerability is the possibility to be hurt, and when this possibility is made real and one becomes really hurt on the psycho-somatic, social or spiritual plane, one therefore becomes more vulnerable to new wounds in any of these aspects. In this sense, it is very important to also study the effects that being actually harmed have on the vulnerable subject.

The next step in the studies on vulnerability consists in the development of quantitative or comparative studies in order to be able to estimate vulnerability.[18] Thus, for example, the Red Cross publishes a Global Indicator of Vulnerability each year.[19] The possibility of measuring or comparing vulnerabilities constitutes a decisive step towards the design of actions that mitigate harm in humans. As is known, there are groups in which persons are especially vulnerable. The Spanish Red Cross identifies, as groups with notable vulnerability, elderly persons, children and youth, immigrants, the unemployed, women, the poor, those affected by some kind of drug addiction, persons belonging to diverse kinds of minority, shut-ins and the handicapped.[20] It is necessary, thinking in global terms, to add refugees and persons living in zones of war to this list. In addition, in my view, human beings in their prenatal stage are especially vulnerable. All of these are situations that increase and modulate the vulnerability of persons, but this characteristic of being vulnerable has an ontological basis that makes it inevitable.

---

[17] See U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, New Delhi, Sage, 1992; U. Beck, *Weltrisikogesellschaft: Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Sicherheit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2007.

[18] See J. Birkmann (ed.), *Measuring Vulnerability to Natural Hazards: Towards Disaster Resilient Societies*, New York, UNU Press, 2006.

[19] See Cruz Roja Española, *Informe 2013 sobre vulnerabilidad social*, Madrid, Cruz Roja Española, 2014, pp. 53–86.

[20] See Cruz Roja Española, *Informe 2013 sobre vulnerabilidad social*, Madrid, Cruz Roja Española, 2014, part 2.

Once a situation of vulnerability arises there are a number of diverging paths of action. One can opt for simple resignation, which especially prejudices those who are most vulnerable. In the second place, one can choose the utopian path of dehumanization, since it is, in the end, our human nature that makes us vulnerable. I hold that this path places at risk the very existence of humanity, and therefore fails to comply with the categorical imperative announced by Hans Jonas: that there must be a humanity.[21] The third path consists in the recognition and mitigation of vulnerability, with particular attention paid to those persons who are most vulnerable. In what follows I will extend my characterization of these three paths of action, presenting a critique of the first two and defending the third.

2.2.3 Strategies in the Face of Vulnerability: Between Resignation and Dehumanization

It is intuitively clear that simple resignation is not a morally acceptable attitude. The empirical studies carried out by the social sciences reveal to us the extreme vulnerability that many people suffer. The recognition of vulnerability is in itself a positive step, but it is clearly insufficient if it is then followed by a simple crossing of the arms, given that an extreme vulnerability frequently turns into extreme suffering and a lack of freedom, both of which are incompatible with human dignity. All of this is so evident that the attitude of resignation has almost no supporters in the arenas of academic and political debate, beyond the occasional reappearance of Malthusian ideas. The problem here is of a practical character. That is, there does not always exist a coherence between the most widely extended theoretical positions against resignation and the real practices.

The second possible position, upon facing the reality of human vulnerability, is that which advocates a transition towards a post-human stage, in which some of the characteristics proper to the human shall have disappeared, among them vulnerability. This position does have very influential defenders within the halls of academe. It can be said that the trans-humanists -in the line of Bostrom and Savulescu- and the post-humanists –in the line of Sloterdijk- point in the same direction.[22] As I have shown, both are ideologies that demand an overcoming of the human. This line of action also presents, of course, its own problems of a purely practical character. Nobody knows whether it can truly be attained or whether it is a mere futuristic fiction; nobody knows whether it can be carried out in a manner that respects justice, or whether it will bring with it new and worse forms of exclusion. Nor does it seem to be sensible to bleed ourselves dry in a utopian attempt to attain zero vulnerability,

[21] H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 41–44.

[22] See J. Savulescu and N. Bostrom (eds.), *Human Enhancement*, Oxford, OUP, 2009; P. Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2008 (first published in 1999).

when so many people could benefit from reasonable and accessible forms of mitigation of extreme vulnerability.

But beyond merely practical objections, the dehumanizing attitude is also susceptible of theoretical criticisms. Permit me to cite here some fragments written by Martha Nussbaum. We can, via these same fragments, clearly intuit the post-human landscape we will have to confront in order to achieve invulnerability, in which our entire conceptual, emotional and social universe would be disrupted, with the consequent loss of moral references.

> Aristotle once said that if we imagine the Greek gods as depicted in legend—all-powerful, all-seeing creatures who need no food and whose bodies never suffer damage—we will see that law would have no point in their lives […] What need would they have for laws against murder, assault, and rape? We humans need law precisely because we are vulnerable to harm and damage in many ways […] But the idea of vulnerability is closely connected to the idea of emotion […] To see this, let us imagine beings who are really invulnerable to suffering, totally self-sufficient […] Such beings would have no reason to fear, because nothing that could happen to them would be really bad. They would have no reasons for anger, because none of the damages other people could do to them would be a truly significant damage, touching on matters of profound importance. They would have no reasons for grief, because, being self-sufficient, they would not love anything outside themselves, at least not with the needy human type of love that gives rise to profound loss and depression. Envy and jealousy would similarly be absent from their lives.[23]

The connection between vulnerability and the emotions is also present in the Stoic tradition. For the thinkers of that philosophical current, the reduction or elimination of emotions would have the ability to make us invulnerable, since no external mishap would really affect us. But let us consider, as Nussbaum suggests,

> the large role that emotions such as fear, grief, and anger play in mapping the trajectory of human lives, the lives of vulnerable animals in a world of significant events that we do not fully control. If we leave out all the emotional responses that connect us to this world of what the Stoics called "external goods," we leave out a great part of our humanity […] Law has the function of protecting us in areas of significant vulnerability. It makes no sense to have criminal laws if rape, murder, kidnapping, and property crime are not really damages, as a strict Stoic would require us to believe.

Without a doubt, total invulnerability would open the door to a landscape that is clearly dehumanized, alienated from all that which we commonly know as human nature and the human condition.[24] Someone might say that even so we would be in a better world than the one we currently live in. In the face of this response, a primary objection is raised which has to do with the normative character of human nature. And the objection has two aspects. On the one hand, the negation of human nature leaves us without criteria of evaluation. We condemn ourselves to no longer knowing whether the coming of the invulnerable superman (*Übermensch*) would be

[23] This quotation and those that follow are from M. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004, chap. 1.

[24] For the conceptual distinction between human nature and human condition, the reader may consult H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, first published in 1958.

for good or for evil. Strictly speaking, as Nietzsche held, it would be beyond good and evil. Nietzsche himself, as I have noted, was very conscious of the fact that the overcoming of the human does not involve an improvement, but rather is merely a transformation. The problem, seen from a post-Nietzschean perspective, inspired by thinkers such as Jonas and Soloviev, is that beyond good and evil… one only encounters evil. Stated in other terms, axiological indifference is an evil, since it negates any possibility of value.[25]

On the other hand, humanity is normative in the sense that Hans Jonas defends. That is, there is a categorical imperative that obliges us: that humanity exist, that there continue to be human beings and that they be able to live a properly human life, a life in which they can impose duties on themselves (among others, the duty marked by the imperative itself). Any action which is contrary to the continuity of human life, properly human, must be considered as unacceptable from the moral point of view. Jonas's imperative, clearly, can be subjected to critique; however, in my opinion, in addition to being compatible with common-sense moral intuitions, it possesses a very solid philosophical grounding.[26]

Let us turn now to the third way, that of the recognition and mitigation of human vulnerability. It is a question of reducing vulnerability, insofar as it is possible, with special attention paid to those who are most vulnerable, by means of a deepening in what it is to be human, by means of the full realization of the human, and not through its negation, suppression or overcoming. We have seen how human nature in the Aristotelian tradition is constituted by our animal, social and spiritual aspects. Vulnerability derives from our animality. Recognizing that we are vulnerable is nothing other than knowing and accepting our own nature. This recognition is by itself a virtue, and the development of other virtues depends on it. For the current case, one can apply the same arguments that MacIntyre developed to argue for the recognition of dependency and the development of the corresponding virtues. But vulnerability is mitigated precisely thanks to the other two defining characteristics of the human. To the degree in which we are successful in integrating harmoniously the three aspects of the human, vulnerability will be both recognized as well as mitigated as much as is possible.

Martha Nussbaum suggests something similar when she writes:

> Our insecurity is inseparable from our sociability, and both from our propensity to emotional attachment; if we think of ourselves as like the self-sufficient gods, we fail to understand the ties that join us to our fellow humans. Nor is that lack of understanding innocent. It engenders a harmful perversion of the social, as people who believe themselves above the vicissitudes of life treat other people in ways that inflict, through hierarchy, miseries that they culpably fail to comprehend.

The recognition of vulnerability provides us with an irreplaceable moral teaching: it teaches us the importance of solidarity and altruism. Together, social relations,

[25] See H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 46–50; M. Fernández, *Vladimir Soloviev y la filosofía del Siglo de Plata*, Valladolid, Universidad de Valladolid, 2013, doctoral dissertation.

[26] See H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

mutuality, solidarity and altruism, as well as legal frameworks that promote justice, save us from extreme vulnerability.

We counteract vulnerability thanks to our belonging to the human family. We do not negate the effects of risk on human life, effects which are in fact obvious, but rather we seek a human manner of facing up to them, of keeping ourselves safe to the degree possible, through mutual social support. It is not a question of all or nothing, rather it is a question of degree and of history, of the progressive protection of the most vulnerable in the face of various risks. This is what human development consists in. There is development to the degree that we progress in mitigating the factors of vulnerability. We can apply the term "developed" to those societies which best protect vulnerable persons from the forces of destiny and of randomness, those that give their citizens power over their own lives, and those which most favor the autonomy of their members. The Aristotelian vision is very sensible, empirical and realist: it does not tell tall tales about utopian landscapes where vulnerability is zero. Nevertheless, extreme vulnerability is not necessary, and we can avoid it precisely through human development. This has to do with changes that include the abolition of castes, the establishment of systems of mutuality and of social security, the avoidance or elimination of structural barriers, and the building of an enormous catalogue of gradual changes that constitute the history of human progress. Thanks to the mutual help we give one another, vulnerability is compensated via prevention and an increase in resistance and resilience.

The third of the aspects of human nature, as I discussed earlier, speaks of our rational or spiritual condition. This undeniable aspect of human nature also serves to mitigate our natural vulnerability: it protects us from the many risks that affect us. Science, art, practical wisdom, moral traditions, religion, all of these have a role to play in reducing our human vulnerability.

Again we can appeal to the teaching of Martha Nussbaum, this time to her book *The Fragility of Goodness*, in which she has recourse to the "philosophy of human things" in order to mitigate the vulnerability of our nature and confront our fragility.[27] In this now classic work, Nussbaum confronts the strange dilemma that we human beings live in. On the one hand we seek the good and justice, but, on the other hand, we are very fragile in this quest, very vulnerable to external factors of all types. Nussbaum rejects the Platonic idea that reason is capable of attaining for us full protection or self-sufficiency, of making us into agents of the good and justice in total independence from our vicissitudes. She instead accepts a more realist vision, of an Aristotelian stripe, ie that up to a certain point life is tragic, and nothing protects us in an absolute way. Even more: according to her, the recognition of one's own vulnerability is indispensable for the accomplishment of the always-fragile human good. However, it is true—according to Nussbaum—that reason does permit us to attain certain degrees of autonomy with regards to external threats.

Finally, it can never be insisted on too much that the three facets of the human—animality, sociability and rationality—with their respective characteristic notes—

[27] See M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

vulnerability, dependency and autonomy—are found integrated in each person. Although we have to refer to them in sequential fashion, it must always be remembered that they are united, integrated, they belong to one another, and can only be separated via abstraction or via pathology. I have already discussed the intimate connection of vulnerability with dependency and autonomy. In addition, I showed above that these two characteristics are closely interconnected. In sum, each person forms an integral unity; he is not merely a juxtaposition of animal, social and rational elements. And it is precisely the progress achieved in this integration that makes vulnerability be recognized and at the same time mitigated.

2.3 Conclusions

Vulnerability is a concept which has recently gained importance in many terrains. In this article I have wanted to deal—from a philosophical point of view—with the vulnerability of human persons. I have defended the thesis that we are vulnerable by nature, or said in another way, that our vulnerability is due to our own human nature. As a consequence, one is not less human for being more vulnerable. All persons, whether they are more or less vulnerable, possess equal dignity.

In order to establish this direct linkage between vulnerability and human nature, I have had to discuss, first, the concept of human nature itself. I have identified the most common positions in this debate, which I can summarize through three descriptions: negation, radical naturalization and artificialization without criteria. I have critiqued all of these, and compared them with the Aristotelian idea of human nature that I have defended here. According to this position, the human being is a rational social animal. These three aspects of human nature are found integrated into the unity of the person.

Next, I discussed the consequences that follow from this position in relation to human vulnerability. This vulnerability must be recognized—which itself results in important new knowledge—and at the same time mitigated. I showed in addition that other strategies turn out to be less defensible in theory and practice. Simple resignation in the face of vulnerability is not acceptable, given the harm that it causes to those who are most vulnerable. In turn, the utopian attempt to reduce vulnerability to zero is also unacceptable, since it seeks to achieve its ends via a supposed overcoming of human nature itself. This latter proposal involves an effort which has lost all sense of direction, an effort that is of a eugenic stripe, and which could end up by prejudicing those persons who are most vulnerable. There are antecedents in this regard. In certain historical cases the quest for the invulnerable superhuman has been accompanied by undervaluing those who are most vulnerable, who have been reduced to social invisibility and exclusion, who have seen their condition as persons be denied, or, as has occurred in certain cases, they have been directly eliminated. The correct way to mitigate human vulnerability is not the overcoming of the human, but rather a deepening in the human, that is, the appropriate integration of all the aspects proper to human nature.

References

1. Antenat, N., 'Respect et vulnérabilité chez Levinas', in *Le Portique. Revue de Philosophie et de Sciences Humaines*, n° 11, 2003 (published online 15 December 2005, accessed 6 August 2014, URL: http://leportique.revues.org/558).
2. Arendt, H., *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007; first published in 1958).
3. Beck, U., *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (New Delhi, Sage, 1992).
4. Beck, U., *Weltrisikogesellschaft: Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Sicherheit* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2007).
5. Birkmann, J. (ed.), *Measuring Vulnerability to Natural Hazards: Towards Disaster Resilient Societies* (New York, UNU Press, 2006).
6. Fernández, M., *Vladimir Soloviev y la filosofía del Siglo de Plata* (Valladolid, Universidad de Valladolid, 2013; doctoral dissertation).
7. Jonas, H., *The Imperative of Responsibility* (translated by David Herr) (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984).
8. Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason* (translated by W. S. Pluhar) (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2001; first published in1781).
9. Lévinas, E., 'Vulnérabilité et Contact', in Lévinas, E., *Autrement Qu'Être. Ou au-delà de l'essence* (La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), chap. 3, section 5.
10. MacIntyre, A., *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago, Carus Publishing Company, 1999).
11. Marcos, A., 'Filosofía de la naturaleza humana', in *Eikasia. Revista de Filosofía*, No. 4, 2010, pp. 181–208.
12. Marcos, A., *Postmodern Aristotle* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).
13. Marcos, A., 'Dependientes y racionales: la familia humana', in *Cuadernos de Bioética*, n° 23, 2012, pp. 83–95.
14. Marcos, A., 'Antropología de la dependencia', in Muñoz, A. (ed.), *El cuidado de las personas dependientes ante la crisis del estado de bienestar* (Valencia, Tirant Lo Blanch, 2013), pp. 21–34.
15. Mirandola, P. della, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (translation by M. Riva, F. Borghesi and M. Papio) (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004; written in 1486).
16. Nietzsche, F., *Ecce Homo. How One Becomes What One Is*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007 (first published 1888; translated by D. Large).
17. Nussbaum, M., *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001).
18. Nussbaum, M., *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004).
19. Ricoeur, P., 'Autonomie et vulnérabilité', in Ricoeur, P., *Le Juste*, Paris, Esprit, 1995, vol. 2, pp. 85–105.
20. Savulescu, J. and Bostrom N. (eds.), *Human Enhancement* (Oxford, OUP, 2009).
21. Sloterdijk, P., *Weltfremdheit* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1993).
22. Sloterdijk, P., *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2008; first published in 1999).
23. Szymborska, W., 'Conversation with a stone', in Szymborska, W., *View with a Grain of Sand* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), pp. 30–33 (translated by S. Barańczak and C. Cavanagh).
24. Torralba, F., *Pedagogía de la vulnerabilidad* (Valencia, CCS, 2002).
25. VV. AA., *Informe 2013 sobre vulnerabilidad social* (Madrid, Cruz Roja Española, 2014).