Vulnerability and Trust: An attempt at phenomenological description

IGNACIO QUEPONS

*In its natural state, man's skin is too thin for
this world. (Bertolt Brecht)*

I. Introduction

The following pages are an attempt to describe two intermingled dimensions of human vulnerability from a phenomenological perspective. First, we have vulnerability as an essential dimension in the constitution of embodiment,¹ and second, we have vulnerability in regard to trust, as a form of interpersonal disposition. Thus, vulnerability does not only refer to mere physical fragility but to the situational horizon from whence emerge progressive anticipations of “possible harm”. Moreover, vulnerability appears as a practical horizon of emotional awareness of risk involving not only bodily fragility but a dimension of the concrete existence of individual persons, namely, the intimate affectation of being harmed, injured or deprived (see Harris, *Dignity and Vulnerability*).

On the other hand, vulnerability of trust reveals a more radical sense of this notion: the emotional risk and “intimate fragility” that opens to consideration a dimension of human existence revealing human persons in their absolute and individual concreteness (Steinbock, *Moral Emotions* 13).

In order to clarify the twofold dimension of vulnerability, this paper outlines a genetic account of the origin of what it means to be vulnerable beyond the mere consideration of physical fragility.

¹ With embodiment I mean here the transcendental constitution and appropriation of one's own corporeal body [*Leiblichkeit*], as a progressive constitution or “continuous ongoing act” (Zahner, *The problem of embodiment* 249). This dynamic process involves the system of kinesthetic capability, understood as a horizon whose correlate is the constitution of the spatial situation of our own body in its experiential context.

For a preliminary ontological analysis, vulnerability, as an attribute of a being, is entirely circumstantial and relative to the possibilities revealed by each situation. Certainly, from the point of view of its formal definition, nothing is essentially fragile in itself; nonetheless, almost anything could be considered fragile or vulnerable depending on the circumstances. Thus, vulnerability appears as a relational predicate: in each case vulnerability is relative to someone who anticipates the possibility of harm, failure or destruction of what is revealed under certain circumstances as vulnerable.

However, if we consider vulnerability in its affective dimension, as emotional awareness of risk, following the path explored by Anthony Steinbock in his book *Moral Emotions*, it is possible to observe how vulnerability constitutes a fundamental dimension of inter-personal experience, so long as it reveals how each of us, as human personas, are given in relation to others (*Moral Emotions* 28).

Thus, on one hand, vulnerability reveals a realm of primordial passivity connected to the kinesthetic dimension of embodiment present in the constitution of the perceptual field of the surrounding world (Behnke, “Bodily Protentionality” 191); but at the same time, vulnerability reveals another deeper dimension: the progressive individuation of persons and their concrete givenness in the form of what Steinbock claims as a form or evidence of the heart (*Moral Emotions* 7). This “deeper dimension” of vulnerability is not founded in the “fragility” of the perceptual body, according to the classical schema, but it instead happens exactly the other way around: the emotional awareness of risk is precisely what constitutes the primordial meaning of being vulnerable, because it indicates a horizon of possibilities belonging to an individual person in a non-transferable dimension. To be fragile is to be subject to being “broken,” but vulnerability in its etymological root refers to a wound, and to being wounded (the Latin *vulnus* means “wound” and the verb *vulnerare* means “to wound”).

In accordance with one of the main hypotheses presented by Steinbock in his book, the emotions in general, and particularly the moral emotions, constitute a dimension of evidence on their own, and to a certain extent, they differ from the cognitive dimension of the acts of representation (*Moral Emotions* 15). The radical exposure to risk, and the sense of intersubjective bonds and dependence involved in the experience of vulnerability, reveal a dimension of the human person as an absolute being irreducible to the generalization of representations or logical meanings.

II. Embodiment

The first step in our description starts with the outline of the intentional structure involved in the bodily awareness of vulnerability. This dimension is rooted in two essential aspects of bodily life: on one hand, the dynamic structure of time consciousness (Behnke 204) and on the other hand, the ongoing constitution of the bodily life understood as the synthetic unity of

potentialities of self-motivated movement: the region of the so called *Leiblichkeit* (Landgrebe, *Faktizität und Individuation* 78).

In this regard, it is important to remark that the well-known difference between lived-body [*Leib*] and physical body [*Körper*], from the point of view of the transcendental reduction, corresponds to the difference between two kinds of synthesis involved in the constitution of their respective unities. In the case of the lived-body, its unity is constituted by motivational synthesis grounded in the capacity of self-movement (Behnke 192). Husserl himself recognizes the pre-eminence of such potentiality--“*Ich bewege*” (I move), over the potentiality of *Ich kann*” (I can) (*Hua IV* 258; Landgrebe 83). On the other hand, the constitution of the physical body is grounded in the realization of a progressive synthesis of causality. Both are forms of associative synthesis; however, the participation of the I in each synthetic nexus is different. The first progressively increases the sense of property over my own movement and its correspondence over the corporeal lived-body [*Leib-Körper*], the second, the physical body, follows its own synthetic process, bringing out the development of a progressive stable surrounding horizon of physical objects, and the regularities of their respective behaviors, in different stages of constitution. Certainly, in either case the kinesthetic synthesis is involved but in two different directions: on one hand, the sensible synthesis of self-motivated movement highlights the progressive exhibition of the physical objects through adumbrations, but on the other hand, such a progressive exhibition of objects of perception anonymously presupposes the synthesis of the unity of the lived-body in its primal potentiality: self-movement (*Hua XI* 50 ss.)

In this regard, it is important to remark that the kinesthetic synthesis itself is a motivational synthesis, called by Husserl a practical motivational synthesis (*Hua XI* 152). Consequently, the sensitive affection is not understood in phenomenology as the mere reception of mere sensible data but the result of a passive synthesis of motivation, linking the allure of sensations with the awakening of the active disposition. In the context of the perceptual experience, this is precisely the importance of the kinesthetic synthesis. The sensations are not isolated building blocks for the intentional structure of consciousness but they are, in a way, a primitive form of intentional direction synthesized by the self-motivated movement of the body.

Additionally, the display of the potentiality of self-motivated movement and the correlative exhibition of physical objects lights the undeniable relation between time-consciousness synthesis and kinesthetic motivational synthesis in the constitution of the space and special objects. Thus, bodily movement is always movement towards a certain direction that preserves the sense of the original motivation and passively anticipates or projects a temporal sequence or cadence, so to speak, of its own movement. This is precisely the context for the clarification of the phenomena of affect,

attention, and movement-toward, which characterize the original dynamics of becoming aware, particularly, becoming aware of our own embodiment.

The progression of the experience brings about a set of habits resulting in the constitution of different levels of normality and familiarity. Therefore, our perception is never perception of isolated objects but rather involves a full context of relations and references. By stressing the role of bodily motion in the development of the different layers of the surrounding world one may notice how important the lived-body is for the constitution of a field of perceptual experience and the development of a sense of familiarity with the environment.

III. Vulnerability and horizons of embodiment

The unity of the lived body is the core of an ongoing process of explication of sense through horizons. In the case of the experiential horizon of embodiment we may consider an inner horizon explicating the unity of the kinesthetic nexus related to the individual body, and an external horizon formed by the spatial field and the relations of proximity and distance among other physical bodies. Husserl does not describe the external horizon of the lived-body as such. However, it is possible to understand such a “limit” as corresponding not only to the physical limits of the corporal body, but to the resistance to the free flow of self-motivated movement. Therefore, we have the first descriptive element of vulnerability: the horizon of limitation of self-motivated movement of the body. However, such limitation is not enough to fully speak about vulnerability. The relations of distance and proximity among bodies may result in sudden invasive effects that not only deprive the capability of self-movement but result in physical harm and unpleasant sensations. Therefore, the anticipation of such sudden effects, depending on the circumstances, constitutes the exteriority of the lived-body not only in terms of physical limitations but as subject to be harmed by external causes.

Furthermore, harm could be understood as an unpleasant effect which is manifest in the sensation of pain and suffering. Such effects could be described in terms of the dynamic constitution of the lived-body mentioned above as the frustration of the proto-tendency involved in bodily movement. Harm, therefore, is mainly experienced as the confirmation of the failure of a practical aim grounded in the tendency of lived-body movement, simultaneously experienced with an invasive lived-experience. The suffering that belongs to the lived-experience of being harmed is not independent of frustration. Thus, even the sensible pain associated with the experience of suffering harm could be described not only as an isolated sensitive lived-experience, but as if it were surrounded by several layers of associative synthesis and always in the context of a kinesthetic motivation.

In his recent phenomenological investigations regarding the experience of pain, Agustín Serrano de Haro has also noticed how important it is to consider the motion (*Regung*) of pain in the description of such experience.

The pain is always describing a trajectory, for the moment attentional, but it may be varying, either in degree, or in its corporal diffusion, or in its quality, or even in its own aversive impact. We may perhaps claim that the pain is in movement, that it is always in itself a “motion” (*Regung*). Whatever may start as sudden shock and commotion, later turns to affliction that lingers and changes (Serrano de Haro 136).

The described trajectory or route, so to speak, of the pain is linked to the kinesthetic nexus, which is, at the same time, the condition of possibility of a bodily passive anticipation of the harm. Additionally, after a painful experience, there remains not only a reflective memory of the unpleasant event but also an affective resonance linked to the bodily awareness, which may derive from the progressive realization of my own condition as something vulnerable.

Finally, there is the progressive feeling of lack of control over the circumstances that comes with the emotional awareness of risk constitutive of the feeling of vulnerability. According to Martha Nussbaum, emotions are essential in the display of our connection to elements that we consider important for our wellness but which exceed our control. Therefore, vulnerability is felt as a kind of emotional awareness of risk derived from lack of control over circumstances. The self-motivated movement and the progressive confidence over my movement brings out the configuration of the perceptual field in accordance with the familiar style with which the surrounding world appears to me. Such command over my own bodily movement and the display of the practical field consequent with my movements produces progressively a feeling of “control” over the circumstances. In this regard, the sudden resistance or failure of the practical kinesthetic motivations defines a horizon of limitation of movement which is, at the same time, the expression of my lack of control, which consequently manifests the emotional risk related to feeling vulnerable.

IV. From bodily vulnerability to trust

In the previous outline of phenomenological description, stress is placed on the relation of vulnerability with the ongoing progress of embodiment and its connection to the field of perception. However, the most essential dimension of human vulnerability is still missing in this account. Vulnerability has been presented so far through a formal and negative perspective, in terms of the external horizon of negative fulfillment regarding self-motivated movement. Thus, what is still missing is a clarification of the sense of intimacy in such vulnerability.

There is an intimate sense of exteriority revealed in the condition of feeling vulnerable which is referred not only to our body but to our entire life as a project subject to risk. Moreover, such exposure does not appear through explicit acts of representation, and it is not necessarily revealed in an extreme case of physical vulnerability. It is implicated in emotional experiences where a sense of vulnerability emerges out of what we are in regard to other persons, especially in the experience of trust (*Moral Emotions* 206).

Thus, there seems to exist an emotive sort of personal evidence revealing our concreteness that precedes and, to a certain extent, grounds the constitution of bodily vulnerability in regard to its fragility. Human vulnerability is not mere physical fragility but a spiritual dimension which is certainly explicit in embodiment but, as a matter of fact, seems to reveal at the same time the individuality of what is under threat. The bodily exposure to possible harm and the feeling of vulnerability resulting from events that matter to us but that are beyond our control reveals vulnerability as a field of contingency derived from a passive facticity.

The description of vulnerability in terms of a horizon of self-motivated movement understands vulnerability as a predicate founded in the representation of objective acts defining the object of representation in terms of accidental conditions, deprivation of the capacity of movement and *weakness*. From the point of view of the rationalistic representation and analysis of the horizons of intentional determination of vulnerability, vulnerability appears as a sign of weakness and does not add anything to the definition of what is given as vulnerable. Nevertheless, the phenomenological account based on the description of the dimension Steinbock calls “vertical experiences” (Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*) allows us to consider vulnerability in a positive and, especially, an ethical sense.

If we consider our first description of vulnerability in terms of an external horizon of passive or, at least, pre-reflective anticipation of possible failures of our practical intentions, it happens that, for instance, the experience of shame is precisely to feel exposed to others because of what we are. On one hand, we have, for instance, the experience of shame, to which, according to Steinbock, belongs a sense of disappointment regarding an aspect of our conduct or a personal expectation about ourselves, and the sudden realization of the failure of such expectation.

An important insight about shame that we may borrow from Steinbock to consider the temporal structure and givenness of vulnerability is that, on one hand, feeling shame or feeling vulnerability are not neutral instances of effect or self-awareness. Rather, they involve self-revelation through an open horizon of engaged possibilities about what we are. On the other hand, the temporal protentionality of the experience of harm is not the emotional awareness of risk essential in the experience of feeling

vulnerable. Feeling vulnerable is a kind of expectation which is not grounded in the continuity of what is perceptually given (protentionality), but rather points to something that matters and nevertheless goes beyond our control. Additionally, feeling vulnerable does not necessarily mean feeling fear or anxiety. In such experience, the stress is placed on the emotional disposition of dependence on something beyond our control compromising the absolute values of a personal life.

Thus, the analysis of vulnerability certainly starts with the description of bodily vulnerability. However, its meaning runs beyond mere physical fragility towards a spiritual sense revealing the concrete person and his or her individual worth. Perhaps the most radical possibility of such vulnerability is to be found in the experience of trust.

The act of trust is not a mere belief, not even an actual position to be taken for a given within a state of affairs, but rather a spontaneous act of investing oneself in the other person, in what he or she says or does. "Trust is lived out as a process of being bound to another, whose essential feature is vulnerability" (*Moral Emotions* 197). For example, I may "believe" someone's words regarding the description of a certain location I have not yet visited, but we speak of "trust" when his or her words comprise not only epistemic beliefs but also values and personal projects. In the experience of trust, I realize my own exposure to risk so long as it binds me to circumstances that go beyond the reach of my control. However, in the act of trust, such circumstances depend upon, to a certain extent, actions of an agent able to take over the situation, and particularly someone able to understand the meaning of this social act.

When I trust, I do more than merely live in a straightforward belief attitude; I invest myself "personally" in the other person, and therefore in what the other person says or in how the other person acts; I give myself over to him or over to her "word". *Trust binds me to another.* (*Moral Emotions* 206)

Therefore, trust does not only reveal a constitutive vulnerability but it makes us actively engage our vulnerability as the very condition of possibility of the experience of trust itself.

If we consider in retrospect the results of the analysis, we have 1) the horizon of limitation of self-motivated movement that may happen in sudden, unexpected and unpleasant ways, 2) the horizon of anticipation of possible harm that belongs to our bodily disposition to be harmed in certain circumstances, 3) the emotional awareness of risk displayed in the experience of "care" regarding the emotive anticipation of eventual failures compromising our life, and 4) the experience of trust as active recognition of our constitutive vulnerability as an essential bond to others. The first three points invoke a vulnerability understood as a passive horizon of fragility and weakness; nevertheless, the fourth point involves an active engagement with what we are as human "persons" in the most intimate

sense, because it results not only in a recognition of our vulnerability but in a *becoming* vulnerable in an active and positive sense. Such recognition is not independent of the givenness of what we are in regard to others, and constitutes the actual configuration of what we are as persons.

Although I become vulnerable in a trust act, the fact that I am vulnerable is not the overriding issue. If it were, I would never arrive at trusting; I would be concerned with being vulnerable. Instead, I trust. The vulnerable aspect, which is always already present in the trusting, becomes especially pronounced or exposed in a betrayal. (*Moral Emotions* 211)

In this regard, the meaning of emotional risk is not only the horizon of deprivation of movement or physical harm, but the possibility of betrayal that compromises a personal project in regard to the actions of other persons we trust. “It is vulnerability, which is not exclusive to trust, but is essential to it, that makes us susceptible not to a mistake, but to betrayal. A betrayal is a violation of personal bonds established in trust” (212).

Perhaps the most important dimension of human vulnerability, grounded in other meanings of being or feeling, is precisely this dimension of becoming vulnerable in trust. While we experience bodily vulnerability as weakness and fragility, dependent on external circumstances and chance, vulnerability of trust is not only a recognition, but an active engagement in becoming vulnerable, an act of openness of myself to others (see Ziri6n 146). What is revealed in the act of becoming vulnerable is not only the horizon of what I am afraid to lose and what I care for, but the intimacy of the individual person in an active offering to others. In this regard, the emotional risk involved in the experience of feeling vulnerable reveals a disposition other than fear or anxiety, just as the binding to others might display other emotions like serenity or peacefulness.

On the other hand, the act of becoming vulnerable in trust does not only constitute an essential dimension of evidence of what we are as persons, but it reveals the life-world itself as a practical field of interpersonal dispositions.

In this regard, we may suggest a last remark. According to Husserl, the objectivity of the world lies within the intersubjective constitution of one and the same world (*Hua I* 149). From the point of view of Steinbock’s phenomenology of moral emotions, it is possible to suggest a phenomenological retrospective analysis towards emotive evidence of the life-world as a pre-given inter-personal world. The recovery of the life-world claimed by Husserl as a dimension of the most primitive evidence reveals, from the perspective of moral emotions, a form of non-representative givenness of the world itself as the inter-personal practical field of experience related, in this case, to a *vulnerable subjectivity*.

The natural attitude does not only imply an implicit belief in the existence of the surrounding world, but also a non-reflective practical disposition toward those I feel I belong to in different horizons of what Husserl calls the home-world (*Hua* XXXIX, 155; Steinbock, *Home and Beyond* 173). Therefore, it is possible to speak about an unreflective trust, which we cannot merely “give for granted”: it is not a belief, but a practical assumption supporting daily life activities (Zirión 144). On the other hand, there is an active trust according to which I bind myself to others. It is only once I realize the possibility of a transgression of the horizon of familiarity (*Home and Beyond* 250) and the anticipation of risk compromising the entire life project that trust gains its fundamental meaning as an active *becoming* vulnerable toward others. In other words, trust is not a belief, but rather the revelation both of a sense of radical alterity beyond any possible act of representation, and (within an alternative perspective about self-givenness) of the individual person in terms of a *vulnerable self*.

Therefore, not only is trust a bond between individual persons, but it makes possible the progressive development of a social world grounded in a pre-given social disposition toward engagement with others. In this regard, the Husserlian criticism of the abstraction of the scientific framework could be taken as analogous to forms of abstraction in inter-personal relations. It is an active *becoming* vulnerable that will allow us to recover the life-world as an inter-personal *peaceful* world.

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