Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, University of Oxford
'CARE PRACTICES: towards a re-casting of Ethics'

Bodily and social vulnerability: a phenomenological perspective on the practice of care

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Paradox

... “what is revealed is the two poles of the essential alternative inscribed in the condition of vulnerability: wounding and caring.”

Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism. Naming contemporary violence*, 20
Vulnerability: The condition of the possibility of alterity

„Le Moi, de pied en cap, jusqu’à la moelle des os, est vulnérabilité“ (Levinas, Humanism de l’autre homme, 93).

The I, from head to toe, up to the bone marrow, is vulnerability.

„La vulnérabilité (...) est l’aptitude – que tout être dans sa ,fierté naturelle‘ aurait honte d’avouer – à ,être battu‘, à ,recevoir des gifles‘.“ (93).

The vulnerability is – which every being in its natural pride would be ashamed to confess – the capability to be beaten, to get a slap round the face.

Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics of alterity
Injury and Vulnerability

rights

language

body

relations
To be harmed because of and by rights
To be hurt *because of* and *by* language

We are „linguistic beings“, who require language in order to be. „Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms?“

Judith Butler, *excitable speech*, 2

Injurious speech, as e.g. racist expressions, hits „like a slap in the face“ and hurts immediately. / Nevertheless there is a difference between a linguistic and a physical injury.
**John L. Austin** (1911-1960), brit. Philosoph, Founder of the **Theory of Speech Acts**

**Illocutionary acts**: the performance of an linguistic utterance with illocutionary force and intended social significance, such as a question, command, warning, threat, promise, thanking...

„doing something *in* saying something“

**Perlocutionary acts** aim at an actual effect, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something, whether intended or not (Austin 1962)

„doing something *by* saying something“
Problems:

• Who defines language that hurts, sexists, racist speech?
• When does it emerge?
• Who is the subject of the speech act and the action?
• And why does certain speech hurt?
Body and life (injury)

I am bodily injured / my body is injured

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*
„How I am encountered, and how I am sustained, depends fundamentally on the social and political networks in which this body lives, how I am regarded and treated, and how that regard and treatment facilitates this life or fails to make it livable.“

Vulnerability because of and by the body

We are subjected to the other as bodies and as linguistic beings.

Vulnerability:
- Condition of possibility of desire
  (touch, relations, language, rights ...)

- Condition of possibility of cruelty, subjection, repression
„My rip is broken, and I can find no one to heal me
My body is frail, and I can see no relief ahead
[...]
The tears of someone else’s longing are affecting me
My chest cannot take the vastness of emotion“

Abdulla Majik al-Noaimi, Guatánomo
Physical and psychic injury and violence.

“Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language learned."


“Even if the physical wounds are healed, their signs and injuries can remain.”

Schües, *Verwundung*, 2013, 211.
“Judith’s distinctiveness as a storyteller is her illness. Illness was not just the topic of her story; it was the condition of her telling the story. Her story was not just *about* illness. The story was told *through* a wounded body.”
Life has its sense according to the experiences in relations. Experiences of the sense of life are always and necessarily made in the realm of social and generative relations.

This is a fundamental Apriori
Underlying thesis:
Experiences are bodily embedded and they are made within relations, relation with oneself, with others, with the world....

Care can change the experience of the meaning of life by caring for good relations.
Vulnerability because of and by relations

Trust is ...

1) indispensable
2) subtly
3) transgressing
Responsibility

The *normal* and *anormal*? Contingent vulnerability
Illocutionary act

Thank you!

„doing something in saying something“
Literature