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The First Form of Vulnerability

Dependence on others

The first form of vulnerability, which is rooted in the fundamental dependency of human beings, can be defined in terms of ‘the goods or things one values and whose care one partially entrusts to someone else, who has some discretion over him or her’ (Baier 1986: 235). To say that one person is particularly vulnerable to another is to say that ‘his /her interests are strongly affected by the other's actions and choices’ (Goodin 1985: 143). People's dependence on others, and thereby their vulnerability, differs with their different capabilities to achieve and sustain the balance between independence and dependence and owing to various ways in which they become dependent upon one another. Our dependency, understood as the need to be cared for and being not alone in the world, as illustrated, for example, by infants’ emotional and bodily vulnerability, is at the core of human experience. It constructs bases for the survival, recognition and interconnectedness of social life, as well as for our individuality. ‘We are, in our feelings and for the sake of our survival, mutually dependent and naturally social creatures’ (Solomon 1990: 102). Because being in the world is being with others, dependency can be conceptualized to some degree as given and inescapable. Yet, since many dependencies are ‘largely created or exacerbated by existing social arrangements’, we can try to mitigate, if not eliminate, them (Goodin 1985: 192).

All major religions recognize humans’ inherent need for the attachment to other people, and teach their followers not only duty to their god(s) but also caring and compassion for the dependent. For example, Buddhist thought encourages compassion, the Koran teaches the importance of charity and Christianity emphasizes the idea of universal humanity, charity for the needy and love of neighbours (Wuthnow 1991). Although for the most of history it has been widely acknowledged in the West that society is the natural state of man and that we are all dependent creatures, Western philosophy did not devote much consideration to the notion of dependency.
as a feature of the human condition. Yet some important assumptions can be found in writings from all periods, from ancient texts to contemporary feminist philosophy. Through much ancient thought runs the Socratic truth that no person is self-sufficient, that people ‘need other people, not just for companionship or support in hard times, but to fulfil their humanity’ (Phillips and Taylor 2009: 17). Even the Stoics, themselves exemplars of self-reliance, saw the world as a *polis*, a community in which every human being is a citizen, while Aristotle recognized the importance of compassion, seen as rooted in our awareness of interdependence and vulnerability (Nussbaum 2001). Socrates’s idea that no one is able by herself to look after everything, further elaborated the truth of interdependence. In contrast to this tradition, Hobbes inaugurated a perspective which emphasizes atomistic, instrumental–rational assumptions about human agency and in which rights function as a safeguard against dependence. The Hobbesian account of human beings as selfish and driven only by desire for power and his doctrine of the state of nature as a situation of fear and threats, were inverted by Rousseau, for whom human interdependence extended into the very process of becoming human (Honneth 2007). According to Rousseau, the state of nature was characterized by the tranquillity and autonomy of isolated and independent individuals, and the emergence of society is what gives rise to our dependence. With their loss of the natural security and individual liberty, modern people also lost their independence and it is ‘the weakness of the man that makes him sociable’ (Rousseau [1762] 1979: 221). While viewing dependence as a threat to human authenticity, Rousseau asserted that a common suffering, or a shared vulnerability, supersedes any artificially constructed solidarity, since ‘[e]ach may be tomorrow what the one whom he helps is today’ (Rousseau [1762] 1979: 221). His theory of the social contract presupposes the ability of individuals to reconcile their own interests with the needs of a community and asserts that freedom is not incompatible with dependence as such. The reconciliation of free will with obligation not only renders people free but also makes them citizens. Although Rousseau’s attempt to bring together justice and self-interest has been questioned, his idea of a broad compassion for one’s fellow citizens, seen as founded on a sense of commonness, was an important part of the Enlightenment’s project of a human community based on the idea of inclusion of all so that we can ‘have commerce together’ (Castel 2003: xxiv).

Another tradition associated with the Enlightenment period, as expressed in the doctrine of Scottish philosophers, took the notion of humankind as naturally social and interdependent. This approach’s interest in making comparisons between different ways in which people might lead their lives supported the idea of self-determination against the values of traditional cultural homogeneity. Adam Smith ([1759] 1982: 17, 123), while suggesting that the division of labour in society is dependent upon people’s ‘propensity to barter, truck and exchange one thing for another’, pointed to the fact that