The predicament of irreversibility

The third form of vulnerability is based in the irreversibility of past actions and experiences and is connected with the fact that we cannot free ourselves from the consequences of past traumas, sufferings or wrongdoings (Arendt 1958: 238). The predicament of irreversibility endows an ordinary life with past pains and suffering, and so limits our capacity for self-protection and cooperation with others. This form of vulnerability stems from painful experiences that diminish the emotional capacities of individuals, lower the possibilities for realizing our individuality and reduce the chances of collaborative relationships with others who are seen either as responsible for our traumas and emotional vulnerability or as wounded or damaged by us. Only when released from the consequences of such past experiences, only by constant willingness to change our minds and start again, can we ‘be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new’ (Arendt 1958: 240). Without some ‘redemption from the predicament of irreversibility’ (Arendt 1958: 237), our capacity to recover from past traumas and engage in collaborative actions would be restricted.

While the first form of vulnerability is connected with present dependencies and the second form of vulnerability refers to future insecurities, the third vulnerability is associated with past actions that set off processes which cannot be reversed or ‘undone’. It points out the fact that within the flux of social life everyone at one time or another has experienced great pain caused by another’s person wrongdoings. ‘A lot of human vulnerability does not result from the very structure of human life, or from some mysterious necessity of nature. It results from ignorance, greed, and malice, and various other forms of badness’ (Nussbaum 2001: xxx). The third form of vulnerability arises out of the harmful actions of others and captures the victim’s anger, bitterness and hostility, which are accompanied by a sense of distrust and disbelief that such a terrible thing was done. In short, vulnerability rooted in the irreversibility of the past can
be presented as a narrative of trauma which was precipitated through the actions of others.

While talking about the third form of vulnerability, we cast the consequences of individual or collective violence in terms of trauma and our concern is with healing. Traumas, understood as wounds, are subjects of analysis in medicine as well as in the humanities and social studies, although the most significant role in the history of the conceptualization of trauma has been played by psychoanalysis (Hacking 1996; Young 1996). Vulnerability and trauma share the same root in the Greek word for ‘wound’, with psychological traumas (representing the extremities of human experience and vulnerability) seen as causing the debilitating effects of these painful experiences. Currently the notions ‘vulnerability’ and ‘trauma’ are very prevalent and their popularity translates into a growing number of studies of vulnerable victims of traumatic events. Yet these are two different types of investigation. The first type of study, which now constitutes the major field of vulnerability science, focuses on victims of catastrophes and natural disasters (Cutter et al. 2003). The second type is concerned with investigations of disruptive events, such as wars, genocides, economic depressions, mass violence, politically motivated atrocities or crimes against humanity (Glover 1999). The main difference between these two types of work is associated with the fact that people ‘don’t resent the injuries caused by earthquakes or tidal waves; they only resent injuries that have been deliberately inflicted by one who is able and required to respect – but does not – their value and rank’ (Hampton 1988: 54). Since only responses to the second type of event are rooted in an emotion which reflects the judgement that the harm experienced was wrong and demeaning, here we focus on the burden of trauma inflicted by other human beings and we will look at the debilitating effect of such traumas at both the individual and the social level.

At the social level, trauma refers to the loss of a sense of moral community, low or no cooperation, intolerance and a lack of trust between communities (Derrida 2001; Hutchison and Bleiker 2008; Glover 1999). Trauma, in the sense of a condition experienced by a group as a result of disruptive events, can be seen as a ‘social fact’ in the classic, Durkheimian sense of the term: ‘it is shared and widespread among the members of a certain group. It acquires facility or externality with respect to each of them, and it is perceived as imposed on a constraining for their actions’ (Sztompka 2000: 458).

Trauma, seen as a collective phenomenon, a memory of which is shared and widespread among the members of a certain group, acquires externality by relying on cultural vehicles for its expression. As extreme traumas lead to the dissolution of moral identities and empathic capabilities between individuals, the scope of care and sympathy for others is also undermined. ‘There is, in a nutshell, little or no concern for the dignity of the other and no commitment to the expression of empathy for the other’ (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008: 338). At the individual level, trauma is a terrible