Vulnerability – a new focus for theological and interdisciplinary anthropology

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2. Subject

The goal of the conference is to bring together philosophers, lawyers, doctors, psychologists and theologians, in order to examine the extent to which human vulnerability can be understood as a key anthropological category.

The main methodological thesis is that the work on the concept of ‘Vulnerability’ will result in important clarifications of both a substantive and an exemplary nature. The needs and limitations of an interdisciplinary theological terminology will be explored in exemplary and fundamental respects.

In addition to the substantive work on this bridge concept, the conference is also concerned with a methodological challenge: Through the concept of vulnerability, a contact between Theology and other scientific discourses is constructed and a discussion with other relevant disciplines is sought. Simultaneously, the development of Theology’s own resources is challenged; yet it is imperative that contact with specifically theological terminology, as it is tangible in biblical texts, in discourses on the history of Christianity and in the dogmatic tradition, is retained.

Here the theological discussion of vulnerability comes objectively, as methodologically, into paradigmatic significance. The concept of vulnerability derived from systemic ecological research is introduced into theology, and in particular into theological anthropology, and is made fruitful for theological debate and interdisciplinary research. In theological-anthropological research vulnerability has thus far not been a key concept; however, the idea behind vulnerability has been present in Theology, which conveys at the same time critical interdisciplinary discourse.
3. Time and Place

The conference, ‘Vulnerability – a new focus for theological and interdisciplinary anthropology’ will take place from Sunday, 6th September 2015 (beginning with dinner) until Wednesday, 9th September (ending after lunch), in Heidelberg.

The venue is the International Science Forum of the University of Heidelberg (IWH), which offers the ideal environment for such an event. Accommodation for conference guests is also provided at IWH.

4. Scientific Objective

4.1. Issues and Status of Research

The key questions of the project are: How is human vulnerability to be theologicaally interpreted and how is it to be developed over against medical, psychological, legal and philosophical research? Is vulnerability a threat, resource or deficit of humanity? To what extent is it socially dependent and socially effective? What can theology bring to the interdisciplinary conversation about vulnerability?

In psychological and ecological research, in which vulnerability has classically been explored, the concept has been understood as risk and as a threat to integrity, from which follows a focus on resilience and salutogenesis.

This conference also assumes that vulnerability describes the fundamental threat of people; yet as a fundamental threat, it argues that vulnerability can be a resource as well as a deficit. As such, our interest is in a differentiated anthropology, which considers man in his fragility, vulnerability and danger. Thus the implied structures shall be investigated in conversation with medical, psychological, legal, theological, and philosophical approaches. The intention is not - according to certain long-acting theological traditions - to speak in favour of a negative anthropology, but rather to understand vulnerability as a resource, without on the other hand underplaying its gravity.

The investigation of vulnerability stems from an interest, in conversation with relevant neighbouring-disciplines, to work out an anthropology that is both scientifically defensible and at the same time theologically realistic. This investigation specifies the perception of the fragile and finite aspects of human life in interdisciplinary discussion and classifies them in the context of religious symbolism.

The constructive interest in vulnerability as a key anthropological concept is connected to a paradigm shift in the life sciences from one oriented on autonomy and freedom of thought to one with a stronger perception of bodily and social dependence. In particular, vulnerability as an anthropological category comes into view in legal and philosophical drafts.

The discussion and development of vulnerability takes place in three related fields:

a) In the context of interdependencies and an ethic of care, the normative significance of vulnerability for ethics and political theorizing is emphasized, as has been noted by Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2006). Thus, vulnerability is present in socially
dependent conditions - for example, in the doctor-patient relationship - together with the power that is virulent in these relationships. Further, vulnerability implies a specific responsibility. Vulnerability in this sense, and as the central concept of philosophical ethics, is presented in the book ‘Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy’ (2014) by Catriona Mackenzie et al.

b) In bioethical debates vulnerability comes to bear both universally as the condition humana of every individual, as also particularly in the determination of specific welfare for needy, vulnerable groups.

c) Against vulnerability as a differential criterion for identifying specific vulnerable groups of people, philosophical and legal approaches emphasize physical vulnerability as an ontological condition of being human. Following Judith Butler, Martha A. Fineman (2008) advocates, from a legal point of view, the juridically-grounded idea of replacing the notion of autonomy with that of vulnerability. Since 2007 the use of vulnerability as a justification category for law has developed at the Emory University School of Law, in the framework of the ‘Vulnerability and the Human Condition Initiative’ directed by Martha A. Fineman. Her interest is to set vulnerability in the place of the concept of autonomy, in order to come to an egalitarian society, or at least an egalitarian legal system. A broad discussion of Fineman’s thesis can be found in the volume edited by her and Anna Grear, ‘Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics’ (2013).

d) Within Theology, vulnerability has been an ‘idea’ in various respects, but has only in recent debates been given weight as an anthropological category and as a bridge concept to other discourses. One of the few theological drafts on the subject is the volume from Kristine Culp published in 2010, ‘Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account’.

The research interest of the conference consists of examining whether and to what extent vulnerability as a concept and as a phenomenon can be a viable category for theological and interdisciplinary anthropology.

The theological access to vulnerability is associated with a critical impulse against traditional theological interpretations of disease and death, which are associated with the concept of justification and the doctrine of sin. Following Andrea Bieler (2012) and Jonathan Wyn Schofer (2010), the fragility and vulnerability of God and creation are here emphasized, which are reflected in the vulnerability and fragility of man. The vulnerability of God is, in particular, intensively discussed in Jewish philosophy, and this notion will also be fruitful for our constructive theorizing.

The approach to vulnerability follows an interdisciplinary method, and explores the complex structures which follow from the fragility and vulnerability of men in three steps.

4.1.1. Where is vulnerability to be located?

Where does vulnerability gain significance and relevance? Vulnerability refers to the physical nature of man. To what extent is it to be understood in the context of the current ‘embodiment discourse’ (Thiemo Breyer)? To the philosophical embodiment discourse there corresponds the theological concept of an ‘embodiment theology’. Vulnerability refers, furthermore, to social interdependencies - to what extent can one speak of the social vulnerability of humanity (Günter Thomas, Charles Mathewes)? It goes beyond the field of anthropology to that of ecotheology,
which is the field from which the term is originally derived (Mike Hogue). Finally, human vulnerability shall be questioned in the light of a possible vulnerability of God (Adam Afterman, Dean Bell).

4.1.2. How is vulnerability to be assessed?

In terms of its characterization, the potential of vulnerability for conceptual development depends on interdisciplinary anthropology. Is vulnerability clearly to be described as a deficit or at the same time as a resource (Antje Miksch)? What are the opposing concepts that vulnerability critically harmonizes: resilience, autonomy (Martha A. Fineman), the glory of man (Kristine Culp)? Is vulnerability a useful term to denote the state of dying, death and human finitude (Heike Springhart)?

The theological-phenomenological avenues are supplemented through reviews of vulnerability in biblical texts, especially the Old Testament (Andreas Schüle), as well as through interpretations of vulnerability as a virtue in ancient philosophy (Marina McCoy). They are also brought into conversation with the reception and critical analysis of vulnerability in the philosophical drafts of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Judith Butler (Hanna Reichel).

4.1.3. What practical exports emerge out of human vulnerability?

Localization and evaluation form the basis for the question of possible exports. New perspectives in practical theological anthropology here come to bear on the concept of vulnerability (Andrea Bieler). The conference will also discuss the extent to which a realistic theological ethic focussing on vulnerability is possible, for example through a differentiated interpreted concept of responsibility (William Schweiker).

Insofar as culture-specific reviews of vulnerability are to be addressed, concrete exports are to be discussed in relation to vulnerability and human rights in the context of Taiwan (Stephen Lakkis). On this level the critical impulse of Martha A. Fineman against the libertarian legal and social system in the example of the USA also comes to bear.

4.2. Exploratory work and research area

The project affiliates several interdisciplinary research projects and connects with parallel research initiatives.

The medical-anthropological research project, ‘Disease interpretation in the post-secular society’ (Prof. Günter Thomas, Isolde Karle, 2005-2006 funded by the executive initiative of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, humanities shaping future perspectives) enabled discussion between theological exegesis, church history, practical theology, systematic theology and sociology, the results of which were published in the volume The interpretation of disease in the post-secular society: Theological approaches in interdisciplinary conversation (ed. G. Thomas, I. Karle; Stuttgart 2009). An important result of this research project consisted in the insight that interpretations of disease in Christian Traditions depend essentially on whether and the extent to which disease, usually experienced as besetting human finitude, is connected or contrasted with the idea of ‘eternal life’. Accompanying interview studies have moreover reinforced the insight that there is a considerable trend in contemporary Christianity of employing hope in otherworldly redemption as a worldly ‘coping mechanism’.
Development of this research project took place between 20th-22nd June 2008 in Bochum via the interdisciplinary research symposium ‘Bad Finitude - Healing Limitation: The finitude of human life in philosophical, theological and medical ethical perspectives’ (supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation), the contributions of which in Finite Life: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Phenomenon of Disease have been published (ed. M. Höfner, G. Thomas, S. Schaede; Series Religion and Enlightenment 18, Tübingen 2010). This research symposium led not only to an interdisciplinarily compatible differentiation in the interpretation of finite life, but also showed that religious and theological perspectivizations of human finitude can barely manage without the antonym of ‘eternal life’, yet nevertheless differ in the assignment of finitude and eternity.

Both of the aforementioned projects join the proposed research project, while it provides vulnerability as realization of finitude and makes it the subject of interdisciplinary dispute. While the connexion of theological and biomedical perspectives augment the already conducted research, we will consciously include other discourses alongside law and psychology, in order to better illuminate the social implications of the topic.

Parallel to the proposed project is an international project entitled "Enhancing Life" (Starting Date Oct 2014), the Principal Investigator of which is Prof. Günter Thomas (together with William Schweiker / University of Chicago Divinity School). At its centre stand analyses of various (not just medical) optimizations of life, based on a more essential-oriented rather than perfection-oriented understanding of man.

Dr. Heike Springhart has, through the work for her habilitation thesis, developed extensive exploratory work on the subject. In her work on "dying, death and finitude as a challenge for theological anthropology" she crystallizes vulnerability as a challenging thing, fruitful for constructive theological work and, further, as a resilient interdisciplinary concept.

4.3. Planned Action

As previous research symposia with a comparable format have shown, an interdenominational, interdisciplinary and international openness is fruitful, as long as it does not at the same time lead to randomness. As such, the Christian symposium undertaken here has an openness to Jewish philosophy and theology; and it brings the disciplines of philosophy, psychiatry, medicine, law, ethics, and theology into conversation with each other. The countries of origin of the researchers are USA, Germany, Denmark, and Taiwan. At the same time, the symposium brings together excellent young scientists and renowned researchers.

The individual topics of the planned conference, ‘Vulnerability – a new focus for theological and interdisciplinary anthropology’ are each presented in forty-minute lectures, which are then followed by twenty minute discussions. The conference papers will be brought to publication in a conference volume.