

Heike Springhart / Günter Thomas (eds.)

Exploring Vulnerability

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Heike Springhart / Günter Thomas

Introduction

Life's vulnerability is a powerful, simultaneously threatening and enriching, dimension of all human life. Though not a new discovery, the awareness of vulnerability and its social importance has increased in recent decades. Incidents like terrorist attacks and natural catastrophes, threats to democracies due to populism and security risks posed by digitized personal data, contribute to a heightened awareness of vulnerability and tempt persons and communities to increase security, hence invulnerability. In terms of individual life, disease, dying, violence, and trauma mark the threatening dimensions of vulnerability. And in communal terms, vulnerability has become a crucial term in medicine and health politics, in geology and economics, philosophical ethics and anthropology, as well as in research on conflict and peace, urban planning and migration, and resilience and happiness. Although theology has only recently joined these conversations, it has much to contribute. A theological concept of vulnerability aims for a realistic description of vulnerability; one that both acknowledges vulnerability in its ambiguity and explores ways to value vulnerability as the human condition itself. We must ask both why we should value life's vulnerability in its various dimensions at all and how we can develop a notion and concept of vulnerability which grasps the complexities of life as well as the multi-dimensional interconnectedness of human life in its individual, social and political forms.

The starting point and focus of our exploration of vulnerability is theology and religion. Based on anthropological, Christological and biblical traces, we explore vulnerability as an inherent yet ambiguous dimension of life. Aiming at a realistic concept of anthropology, this endeavor is driven by a twofold conviction: On the one hand, vulnerability's threatening aspects challenge theology to face the risks and the tragedy of life. On the other, theology offers a transformative notion of vulnerability. We are convinced that such a transformative notion of vulnerability is the basis for adequately valuing vulnerability.

Vulnerability as a phenomenon is related to individual human beings, but also to the social systems and the systemic interconnections between politics, law and medicine. As a theological concept vulnerability has ethical implications and is directed towards "ethical vulnerability", as it is related to questions of care and the socio-political sphere. The ethical and the political

aspects in the explorations in this book unfold and reflect those with regard to their implications for the moral life.

Law and medicine are two practical fields of resonance where vulnerability is of central importance. With respect to law, the challenge is to conceptualize the very basic condition of humanity as essentially vulnerable, not just autonomous. How does the legal system protect vulnerable life and also give room for vulnerability in its enriching dimensions? With respect to medicine and the health care system, the perspective on salutogenesis offers a view in which vulnerable human life can be valued.

Within the various essays of this book the conceptual and hermeneutical aspects of vulnerability are explored from within particular fields of expertise and through various perspectives. They are, however, brought into conversation with the overarching interest in developing a constructive and reflective approach to vulnerability in its various individual, social, political, legal and religious forms.

The essays published here were first presented and discussed at the IWH Symposium “Vulnerability – a new focus for theological and interdisciplinary anthropology” (September 6th – 9th, 2015), held at the International Academic Forum Heidelberg (IWH). The authors represent not only various academic disciplines, but also different religious traditions and multiple sociopolitical contexts (Germany, USA, Denmark, Great Britain, and Taiwan).

As editors of this volume, we are honored to include the contribution of Pamela Sue Anderson (1955–2017). A feminist philosopher, Pamela Sue Anderson was concerned about issues of vulnerability, capability and moral theory in many ways, though she was consistently focused on the flourishing of life. In the spring of 2017, a few weeks before the manuscripts of this book went to the publisher, Pamela Sue Anderson passed away. By including her essay we commemorate a scholar of immense intelligence, kind-spirit and multilayered awareness of vulnerability.

This book would have not been possible without the support of many persons and institutions. We especially thank all of the contributors for their inspiring contributions to the meeting in Heidelberg, where their openness to mutual learning and inspiration was clear, as well as for their essays that mirror our common labor and conversations.

We also want to thank the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for the research grant that made the symposium and this publication possible and the Evangelische Landeskirche in Baden for generous financial support. We express our gratitude to the International Academic Forum Heidelberg (IWH) for providing logistical support to this international and interdisciplinary project and for acknowledging its academic quality and relevance by considering it an “IWH Symposium”.

Finally, we want to thank those persons who gave decisive and necessary assistance to our work: Hendrik Fränkle who helped with the organization of the symposium in Heidelberg; Tobias Friebe and Virginia Johnston White,

who provided thorough proofreading of this book; Moritz Reissing, who paved the way to publication; and, especially, Benedikt Friedrich, who managed the entire process, from organizing the symposium to overseeing the completion of this book.

This book is also related to *The Enhancing Life Project*, directed by William Schweiker (The University of Chicago) and Günter Thomas (Ruhr University Bochum) and supported by a generous grant of the John Templeton Foundation. Along with *The Enhancing Life Project*, it shares a concern for exploring religious, scientific, and social meanings of “Enhancing Life” and the vision of flourishing life in and through the reality of vulnerability.

Heidelberg and Bochum, May 2017

Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas

I. Theology and Religion

Heike Springhart

Exploring Life's Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality

*As through a long abandoned half-standing house
only someone lost could find,
which, with its paneless windows and sagging crossbeams,
its hundred crevices in which a hundred creatures hoard and nest,
seems both ghost of the life that happened there
and living spirit of this wasted place,
wind seeks and sings every wound of the wood
that is open enough to receive it,
shatter me God into my thousand sounds...¹*

Vulnerability and anthropological realism²

Life's vulnerability is a powerful, threatening, and at the same time enriching dimension of all human life. While this is not a new discovery, the awareness of vulnerability and its social importance is increasing in the last decades. Incidences like terrorist attacks (from 9/11 to the recent events in Nice in July 2016, Berlin December 2016, London and Stockholm in spring 2017), Chernobyl and Fukushima, natural catastrophes, the endangerment of democracies due to populism and the rise of threats to personal data due to digitalized communication, lead to attempts to increase security, hence invulnerability, and at the same time contribute to a heightened awareness of vulnerability. In terms of individual life, disease, dying, violence, and trauma mark the threatening dimensions of vulnerability. Vulnerability has become a crucial term in medicine and health politics, in geology and economy, philosophical ethics and anthropology, as well as in research on conflict and peace, urban planning and migration, and resilience and happiness.³ Theology

1 Ch. Wiman, "Small prayer in a hard wind", in Ch. Wiman, *Every Riven Thing* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2010) 72.

2 I want to thank William Schweiker for helpful comments and enriching conversations on this essay and on vulnerability in vitality.

3 H. Keul, "Verwundbarkeit – eine unerhörte Macht", *Herder Korrespondenz* 12 (2015) 39–43, on p. 40; S. Stålsett, "Towards a Political Theology of Vulnerability: Anthropological and Theological Propositions", *Political Theology*, Vol. 16 No. 5 (2015) 464–478, on p. 464; M. Wenner, "Vulnerability, food aid, and dependency. Views from development geography", *Hermeneutische Blätter* 1 (2017) 158–170, on p. 160; Based on a survey of the projects of the German Research Council (DFG), Hildegund Keul shows that the number of vulnerability-related research projects is constantly rising. In 1999 it was only two projects, in 2015 already 20 projects were realized, none of these, though, was a theological project. H. Keul, "Resilienz aus Verwundbarkeit. Der

has only recently joined these conversations, but has a lot to contribute. This is true, in particular, for theological anthropology, if we, as I will argue, aim at doing realistic anthropology. I will explore a differentiated concept of vulnerability that has its origin in anthropology, but opens up to a theological concept that transcends anthropology.

This exploration will take place in three moves. The first one is focused on the conceptual level and offers a comparison and defense of vulnerability with rival concepts as basis for a realistic theological anthropology. The second move goes from the concept to phenomena of vulnerability and unfolds vulnerability in a matrix of its dimensions. Both moves address the question: How can a concept of vulnerability help us better understand human life? The third move shifts to hermeneutics and is a more substantive, descriptive analysis which provides the content for the concept and its place in theological anthropology. It addresses the question: why and how do theological insights help us better understand human life and its vulnerability?

Theological anthropology, in my understanding, offers a conceptual framework to grasp the broad variety of human experiences. As a theoretical conceptual field, theological anthropology explores lines of reflection of the human condition and gives orientation with relation to the question: what does it mean to live a good life?⁴ It does so within a theological context. Hence, human beings are seen not only as individual subjects, but also within their social and systemic context and in the light of religion. Realistic anthropology aims at a realistic description of what it means to be human. Its realism is humanistic insofar as it raises the prescriptive question about the goodness of human life and the value or worth of vulnerability.⁵ Vulnerability is the human condition; to be human means to be vulnerable. While vulnerability as a phenomenon is not controversial, the question whether and in which respect vulnerability is a value and whether and in what respect it forms the core of a realistic anthropology is an issue to be discussed further.⁶

Vulnerability in its complexity, I will argue, forms the basis and the center of a realistic anthropological framework. Vulnerability is the human condition that becomes real in various forms and situations: dying, disease, harm and violence, but also love, trust, aspirations for enhancing life, just to name a few of the related concrete experiences. Especially the threatening aspects of human life – like disease and dying, violence and trauma – need to be grasped anthropologically – rather than as discreet unrelated experiences – in order to come to a realistic approach to human life.

Vulnerabilitätsdiskurs als Chance für eine gesellschaftsrelevante Theologie”, *Hermeneutische Blätter* 1 (2017) 105–120, on p. 111.

4 See William Schweiker’s contribution in this volume.

5 D.E. Klemm/W. Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future. An Essay on Theological Humanism* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), 76.

6 Stälsett, “Political Theology”, 467.

By approaching these aspects via the concept of vulnerability, it becomes clear that there is no reason to theologically sugarcoat them nor blame them as consequences of sin. Within the long theological tradition of *theologia crucis* from Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518)⁷ to Moltmann's *Crucified God*⁸ and also within the various attempts to approach suffering in theological terms from Jonas' *God after Auschwitz*⁹ to Soelle's *Suffering*,¹⁰ either human suffering or the suffering of God are often seen in relationship to the hamartiological aspects of sin. This hamartiological approach insinuates a causal understanding of suffering, disease, and dying that leads to problematic shortcuts. That is, it claims that human sin is the "cause" of the vulnerabilities that are constitutive of human existence. Vulnerability, I argue, here helps to do what Luther found crucial for a theology of the Cross: taking a sharp and close look at reality and naming things as they are. The threatening and the enriching vulnerable dimensions of human lives are described with such a close and sharp look, even as they are framed and reframed into a theological framework which makes clear that theology is not only about simple solutions, but about naming things as they are.¹¹ At the same time, it avoids the causal structure of hamartologically oriented concepts. In light of these theological traditions we can say: reflecting on vulnerability in theological terms has a long tradition in terms of *content*. But as a term and *concept* it has only recently become part of the classic theological and anthropological semantics.¹²

My general approach is to take real and concrete human experiences seriously and let them challenge the conceptual reflection in order to develop an anthropological concept of vulnerability. The notion and concept "vulnerability" can be applied to theological resources, like the theology of Creation, Christology or eschatology, on the one hand, and can be developed further constructively on the other hand. This belongs, in particular, to the hermeneutical move in this essay. It unfolds the theological dimensions of

7 M. Luther, "Heidelbergae habitata / Heidelberger Disputation (1518)", in W. Härle (ed.), *Martin Luther. Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 53.

8 J. Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1972).

9 H. Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice", in L. Vogel (ed.), *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 131–143.

10 D. Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); F.A. Keshgegian, "Witnessing Trauma. Dorothee Soelle's Theology of Suffering in a World of Victimization", in S.K. Pinnock (ed.), *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 93–108.

11 Naming things as they are is for Martin Luther the key to a „theologia crucis“. M. Luther, "Heidelbergae habitata", 53.

12 Within theology the main contributions are: K.A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory. A Theological Account* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010); H. Springhart, *Der verwundbare Mensch. Sterben, Tod und Endlichkeit im Horizont einer realistischen Anthropologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016); H. Keul, "Verwundbarkeit – eine unerhörte Macht", *Herder Korrespondenz* 12 (2015) 39–43.

vulnerability further under the assumption that theology has to add more complexity, depth and realism to the concept of vulnerability. This is why the phenomena of vulnerability will be referred to theological topics with which they resonate. We first ask, which theological resonances are evoked by vulnerability and then unfold those specific theological topics in order to ask what they offer for a theologically and anthropologically rich and realistic concept of vulnerability.

While the anthropological realism purpose of this paper aims at the differentiated description of human vulnerability in both its enriching and threatening forms, the humanistic character in it lies in the valuing of vulnerability. Hence, vulnerability is considered to be more than a life-threatening dimension of human life. Vulnerability becomes real in vitality in a broad sense, for instance, in love. The relation and realization of vulnerability in love hence will be explored later.

Anthropological realism and vulnerability

Anthropological realism is based on the conviction that empiricism and experience are of importance for anthropological and theological thinking. The anthropological question “What are human beings?”¹³ points to the tension of particularity and universality in anthropology: Which human being is in the center of anthropology? The dying human? The loving? The vulnerable? Anthropology faces the challenge that the complexity of experience and of reality is always deeper than even the most complex theories. In order to develop a realistic anthropology, the empirically detectable reality is both the starting point and the field of resonance and approval of theological anthropology. This implies that a realistic anthropology is based on empirical reality and also is to be criticized by it. Thus, the relationship between the experiential fields of resonance and the anthropological concepts is one of mutual criticism. This implies that the realism of realistic anthropology is visible in its aim of challenging and questioning empirical experience and reality through interpretation by theological contents that may be anthropological, Christological or eschatological. Realistic anthropology emphasizes the potential of mutual interpretation of empiricism and dogmatics and bears a critical dimension in two directions: with respect to dogmatic contents and with respect to empirical reality.

The anthropological question in realistic perspective is: what does it mean to be human? The goal is to understand the deeper dimensions of humanity by following a crucial pattern. Since I understand the human being as embedded in other forms of life, my purpose is not to raise the question about the

13 Ps 8; NRSV.

uniqueness of humanity or the question about the human essence that marks the *differentia specifica*. Hence, this essay focuses on understanding the processual complexity of human life rather than defining and distinguishing human life from other forms of life. By doing so my intention is to give room and a theological framework for the multidimensionality of human life, such as multidimensional experiences like joy, anxiety, violence, love, suffering, disease and dying, multidimensional humanity in body, soul and spirit and multidimensional existence that is realized through its embeddedness in various contexts, such as social, political, regional and religious contexts. This concept of vulnerability aims at the mutual interwovenness of these dimensions and seeks to grasp it, describe it and value it.

Vulnerability, as a core category of realistic anthropology, faces skepticism and risks, which must be addressed. Feminist thinkers, like Judith Butler, have pointed out that the feminist skepticism about vulnerability has been “quite enormous” for a long time because of the identification of women with vulnerability and the consideration that women are the vulnerable sex.¹⁴ In this interpretation, vulnerability was seen as a weakness of a particular group that could be socially defined and used for social discrimination and exclusion.

Similar skepticism is expressed by representatives of Disability Studies. Following the conviction that persons are not per se disabled, but that they experience being disabled by society, there are high levels of sensitivity and skepticism of vulnerability as a social category. Both the feminist skepticism and the skepticism of Disability Studies thinkers are right to point out that vulnerability is not a distinguished characterization that only describes specific human beings, such as women, people with disabilities, people of a specific race, etc.

Instead of using vulnerability as a means or criterion for social discrimination, emphasizing the fundamental or ontological character of it makes clear that vulnerability is the shared human condition that is essential for all human life, regardless of gender, health status, race or religion.

We have to differentiate between ontological or fundamental vulnerability and situated or contextual vulnerability.¹⁵ Ontological vulnerability addresses vulnerability as the human condition. There is no invulnerable human life; human life as such is vulnerable. Birth and death mark the vulnerable transitions in which the interrelated dependency, fragility and the bundle of possibilities ahead and behind become real. Human life is susceptible to harm and to love, to transformation and violence, to disease and decay. In its

14 J. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 123.

15 H. Haker, “Vom Umgang mit der Verletzlichkeit des Menschen”, in M. Bobbert (ed.), *Zwischen Parteilichkeit und Gerechtigkeit. Schnittstellen von Klinikseelsorge und Medizinethik* (Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2015) 195–225, p. 197. See also the contributions of Andrea Bieler and Stephen Lakkis in this volume.

ontological dimension, vulnerability names the potentiality of being harmed, wounded and affected. Ontological vulnerability is the shared human condition of every human being. Situated vulnerability addresses vulnerability in different levels of realization as there are social, cultural and environmental conditions that increase or lower vulnerability. With respect to situated vulnerability, natural, social and theological aspects are overlapping. Talking about situated vulnerability implies considering the conditions under which vulnerability is increased or decreased and also the conditions under which vulnerability is life-threatening and endangering. If one seeks the enhancing of life, one can likewise consider the conditions under which vulnerability fosters openings for deeper interpersonal or religious relationships, for love and for mutual trust.

Anthropological realism needs to keep ontological and situated vulnerability together. If one would reduce vulnerability to its ontological dimensions, it would lose its transformative power and also the realism in taking the human condition seriously. If one would reduce vulnerability to its situated dimensions, one would run the danger of discriminating against vulnerable social groups which would then be seen as deficient, weak, or even not fully accountable for life. A thick theological concept of vulnerability is counter-cultural in the sense that it puts a critical sting to the attempts to describe humanity primarily or even exclusively as autonomous, independent, strong, and powerful. It is important to note that vulnerability is not meant to deny the importance and constitutive character of human freedom, which leads to autonomy, independence and strength, but it is meant to form the foundation of an anthropological and theological space for suffering, disease, risk and tragedy in human life and beyond.

Vulnerability has somatic, psychic, and systemic dimensions, but it is the somatic, bodily dimension in particular that makes it a crucial topic for theological anthropology. In recent years, the importance of embodiment and corporeality of human life has become a crucial issue for anthropological thinking.¹⁶ The most obvious vulnerability is the bodily vulnerability related to disease, violence and wounds. Denying vulnerability means denying the bodily dimension of life. But it is also the vulnerable body that reminds us that we are always more than our bodies. The tension between having a body and being a body, which has been developed by Helmuth Plessner, can be referred back to the tension of ontological and situated aspects of vulnerability.¹⁷ The idea of being a body addresses the fact that being human means being a body, we may add: being human means constitutively being a vulnerable body. The

16 Klemm/Schweiker, *Religion*, 77. The body and embodiment have been put into the center of theology and philosophy via two almost independent traces: the early feminist theologies and the recent debates on interdisciplinary anthropology. For a detailed discussion see Springhart, *Mensch*, 173–82.

17 H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1975).

idea of having a body addresses the fact that human beings are able and responsible for dealing with their body in the sense that they can make it an object distinguished from themselves. Having a body has its resonance in the situated vulnerability. This can be seen, for instance, when a person gets seriously ill and when the whole life seems to be reduced or to a high degree focused on the disease, for example the fight against cancer, or the attempts to reduce pain which overwhelms all other sensations. At the same time, in situations of severe disease it becomes utterly obvious that we are more than our bodies. The body might wane, but there are many cases where the power of life, creativity, and relationships increase in those intense phases of life.¹⁸

A realistic anthropology focused on a differentiated concept of ontological and situated vulnerability forms the basis of a theology of vulnerability. Such a theology of vulnerability cannot be developed in total in this essay, but it would have to explore the aspect of vulnerable creation and its being threatened by sin and shame, guilt and destruction. At the same time, it grasps the inherent susceptibility to transformation that nourishes aspirations and is the precondition for enhancing life. It would then explore divine vulnerability addressed in incarnational Christology and God's susceptibility to humanity. The stigmata of the resurrected Christ are traces of vulnerability and are the signs to prove God's humanity. As after resurrection the stigmata lose their destructive character we would have to ask in an eschatological perspective whether vulnerability is part of the continuity in humanity which is perpetuated in the New Creation or whether and how far the threatening and the enriching dimensions of vulnerability would be overcome in the Eschaton. The third strand of a theology of vulnerability is human vulnerability which points out that human beings as creatures are *per se* vulnerable.

Human vulnerability as ontological and situated vulnerability is threatening as well as enriching; it is an ambiguous feature of human life. It is important to note that the ambiguity of the negative threatening aspects of vulnerability and the positive enriching aspects of vulnerability is not an easy balance. It is the realization of a broad range of realizations of vulnerability, which, in some cases manifest as pure threat and endangerment, in others pure joy or trust, and still others as all of the above. The intention here is to dare a sharp look and to raise the question about the value of life's vulnerability.

We will explore vulnerability further as a form of human vitality. In order to do so, we first have to explore vulnerability versus the struggle for invulnerability and then, second, explore the opposition of vulnerability

18 This is related to the fact, that the body binds human life up in a "network of relations", as Judith Butler puts it: "We cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside of this conception of its constitutive relations to other humans, living processes, and inorganic conditions and vehicles of living." J. Butler, *Notes*, 130.

and resilience. Invulnerability and resilience are the two traditional reactions to vulnerability, and they are rival concepts to vulnerability. Both respond to vulnerability as a problematic dimension of human life to overcome. The rival concepts to vulnerability, invulnerability and resilience, however have marked shortcomings, as they lead, each in its own way, to a static and isolationist understanding of the human life. Vulnerability as a concept offers room for the processuality of life and for mutuality in social life. Hence, as a category, vulnerability is essential for a complex, thus realistic, anthropology. Through comparison with other concepts, I will unfold that vulnerability is relatively more adequate than other concepts for anthropological realism.

Acknowledgement of vulnerability versus striving for invulnerability

From ancient philosophy until today's national security-based politics, striving for invulnerability has been a leading principle, or at least vision, of anthropological, social, political and theological thought.¹⁹ The relation to invulnerability hints to the root of the term "vulnerability" in the military realm. Its Latin root is *vulnus* and *vulnerare* meaning wounds and to wound. The traditional struggle for invulnerability can be seen in the Stoic philosophy, but also in the mythologies about Achilles and the Germanic myth of Siegfried whose bath in dragon blood was meant to make him invulnerable. Heroes are those who are invulnerable and who are not affected by what is opposed to them.²⁰ This leads to a subtle connection between invulnerability and shame. If we think about the deaths of soldiers that were called the death of a hero (so-called "Heldentod"), the shame of being overwhelmed and killed was covered by attributing this death to specific strong conditions or for the sake of a higher good, like the nation or the ideology.

With the current awareness of vulnerability through terrorist attacks, shootings or plane crashes, as well as the manifold attempts to enhance personal health and fitness, the increasing awareness of vulnerability leads to

19 E.C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 75. See also: T. May, *A Fragile Life: Accepting our Vulnerability* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 67.

20 The Hero was considered to be a person whose nature is characterized by an attractive shape and with extraordinary bodily strength. See the article on "Held / heros" in "Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste": „Held, lat. Heros, ist einer, der von Natur mit einer ansehnlichen Gestalt und ausnehmender Leibesstärke [sic!] begabet, durch tapfere Thaten [sic!] Ruhm erlanget, und sich über den gemeinen Stand derer Menschen erhoben.“ Vgl. Art. Held, heros, in Johann Heinrich Zedler: *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*. Band 12, Leipzig 1735, Spalte 1214 f. For a discussion of the Stoic tradition see the contribution of William Schweiker in this volume.

aspirations to invulnerability, which in the long run increase vulnerability instead of decreasing it.²¹ Within the theological tradition, the axiom of apathy with relation to God also follows the line of invulnerability. Focusing on invulnerability implies several problematic aspects. Beyond the failure of attempts to become invulnerable another problem is disregarding sociality and mutuality as essential parts of the human condition.

The striving for invulnerability is basically reduced to situated vulnerability, as it is related to specific situations and conditions under which invulnerability can be sought, enhanced and envisioned. In contrast, consenting in vulnerability instead of invulnerability has existential and conceptual aspects of calmness and an acceptance of the fundamental openness of life, because it is connected to an acknowledgement of the contingency of life. In this respect the concept of vulnerability can be considered as a counter-cultural force that forms the foundation of a realistic anthropology. Its counter-cultural character lies in the fact that it denies the surprise about the fundamental vulnerability which becomes visible in the sudden aspirations and attempts to become invulnerable after incidents that confront us with vulnerability. Paradoxically, it is not the struggle for invulnerability that enhances life and gives room for vitality, but the venture of vulnerability. The venture of vulnerability is not to be confused with a pure acceptance or embracing of vulnerability.²² The venture of vulnerability for Dorothee Sölle is connected with the courage to weep, which includes the abandonment of pride and the openness to the Spirit of consolation.²³ In weeping the openness to vitality and to consolation gives room for enhancing life instead of silent regression towards invulnerability.²⁴

In short: while striving for invulnerability diminishes mutual openness among human beings and of human beings towards threatening or enriching ways of life, the venture of vulnerability enhances vitality because it strengthens the susceptibility to change and transformation. Its enhancing

21 We may think here of the attempts of states to become more secure in the face of terrorist attacks by intensifying the activities of national security agencies. While they in most cases fail to avoid those attacks, they increase the vulnerability of communication among citizens of free countries. We may also think of authoritarian ways of leadership on all social levels, which is based on the attempt to have an invulnerable leader but which leads in fact to a loss of trust and hence to a weakened leadership.

For discussion of strategies of invulnerability see the contribution of Kristine Culp in this volume.

22 R. Sirvent, *Embracing Vulnerability* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014); B. Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012). For a critical account in terms of bioethics see R.A. Klein, "Schmerzfrei Leben? Religionsphilosophische Perspektiven auf den Diskurs über die Affirmation und Integration von Verletzlichkeit", *NZStH* 2015; 57(3), 301–337.

23 D. Sölle, "Lob der Tränen", in D. Sölle, *Das Fenster der Verwundbarkeit* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1987) 228–237, p. 229.

24 There is a long tradition of weeping figures in literature: Achilles weeps over Briseis, Odysseus weeps because he was meandering for 10 years, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, Hiob weeps over his misfortune, Sokrates weeps over his friend and Isaia weeps over his people. Sölle, "Lob", 230.

force lies in the processive character that comes with this susceptibility to change and transformation. It takes the course of life and the ongoing transformation of life not only seriously, but considers it an essential part of life rather than an endangerment of a certain status of life.

Vulnerability and Resilience

Another rival concept to vulnerability is the concept of resilience. In psychological perspective, resilience is considered the appropriate response to vulnerability.²⁵ The strengthening of resilience aims at stabilization and survival under threatening conditions.²⁶ We cannot follow the research on resilience in broad details here, but we have to focus on the main aspects which are constitutive for resilience and which form the interface on which the vitality of vulnerability can be explored.

In a narrow sense, resilience is the capability to survive under threatening, traumatizing conditions. In a broader sense, it is the power to get along and to arrange oneself with the given, which aims at the acceptance of a given situation and the focus on how to live with it. Here again, the distinction between situated and ontological dimensions is of importance. In terms of situatedness, there is no doubt, that resilience can be seen as a capability to live on, to survive and to cope with threatening situations. In terms of ontology, though, which here also means in terms of a broader conceptual perspective, resilience as a basic concept has its limits. The reason for that is that it stops the struggle for improvement, hinders resistance in a political sense²⁷ and is not open to the vision of enhancing life. Due to the basic assumption that a specific situation is what it is instead of the assumption that a specific situation can be or has to be transformed, enhanced, or made flourishing, resilience lacks the vision of a possible transforming and enhancing of life. Hence, it was noted that resilience is “the terrain of restoration par excellence”.²⁸ While invulnerability tends to nourish the anxiety and be overly disquieting, resilience in contrast nourishes pacification and tends to be overly quieting.

Resilience as a basic pattern of culture and conceptualization needs to be

25 See the contribution of Antje Miksch in this volume.

26 The importance of resilience was explored in research with holocaust survivors. In trauma-research the guiding question was: what were the conditions and factors that helped these people not only to survive but to live on with no major post-traumatic disorders. See L. Reddemann, *Kriegskinder und Kriegsenkel in der Psychotherapie* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2015); A. Kühner, *Kollektive Traumata* (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag 2007).

27 See the contributions in J. Butler et al. (ed.), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

28 S. Bracke, “Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience”, in J. Butler et al. (ed.), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 52–75, p. 59.

corrected by a concept of vulnerability which is more open to the transforming visions of enhancing life due to the susceptibility to life-threatening and enriching facets of human and social life. This openness to enhancing life is based on the processive character of vulnerability that is rooted in its constituent mutuality and responsiveness. Unlike resilience, vulnerability implies both the acceptance of given vulnerable situations and the need to enhance life and deal with risky parts of vulnerability. This ambiguity is of crucial importance for the anthropological realism that is shaped by the mutual resonance of experience and theological and anthropological reflection.

In short: while reliance on resilience as a basic human pattern diminishes visions of enhancing life, the concept of ontological and situated vulnerability addresses both the fundamental vulnerability of all human life and situations as well as conditions under which vulnerability is decreasing or increasing. As a processive concept it opens up for realistic visions of enhancing life. The comparison of vulnerability with the rivaling concepts of invulnerability and resilience shows that vulnerability is relatively more adequate for a realistic anthropology than those other concepts. That leads to the question: how should we value vulnerability?

Valuing vulnerability as Enhancing of Life

While it is not controversial that human life per se is vulnerable, the question whether or not life's vulnerability can be considered a value or good of human life is controversial. The assessment of vulnerability differs in the many books on vulnerability that have been published over the last years. Interestingly enough, most of them were published outside theology and religious studies. Overall these works offer two different conceptual tendencies in terms of the assessment of vulnerability. The first one follows the origins of the term vulnerability in psychology or medicine. Here, vulnerability is basically considered as a risk factor for somatic or psychic health, which means vulnerability is considered the problem, which shall be solved by increasing resilience. The basic question then is: How to avoid or cope with vulnerability? Vulnerability in this first category, is considered to be mainly negative, it is not considered to be a good of human life. The second tendency goes in the opposite direction and pleads for embracing vulnerability.²⁹ These approaches take vulnerability seriously not only as a weakness but also a strength. They reflect that reality that being vulnerable also means being susceptible to love, to trust and to friendship. They rightly point out that a shared vulnerability increases mutual trust. The problem in many of these approaches is that they

29 See the books of Roberto Sirvent, Brenée Brown and Kristine A. Culp.

tend to overlook the threatening dimensions of vulnerability. The basic question of these approaches is: How to embrace vulnerability? Vulnerability, in this second category, is thus considered to be positive, a value or good of human life.

Yet, both ways to approach vulnerability fail in coming to a sufficiently complex and thus realistic view and concept of vulnerability, because they have a one-sided perspective of vulnerability which lacks the realistic and thick description of the ambiguity of vulnerability. Neither a purely negative notion of vulnerability nor an exclusively positive one is able to grasp the complexity of life's vulnerability. A realistic anthropology which values vulnerability as a human good has to deal with the ambiguity of vulnerability in its threatening as well as in its enriching dimensions. Valuing vulnerability as the core of a realistic anthropology marks the programmatic dimension of such an anthropology, so it can also be seen as a humanistic anthropology.³⁰

The question then becomes: How can we develop a concept of vulnerability, that values vulnerability as a human good, but is also realistic and sensitive about the ambiguities in vulnerability as threatening and enriching? Naming and facing those ambiguities, I argue, is part not only of the realism of this concept but also part of enhancing of life in its vulnerability. Vulnerability as a thick theological concept helps overcome simple either-or-alternatives between an exclusively negative or exclusively positive notion of vulnerability. Thus it helps to see both: The chances of being affected and susceptible to human and non-human environments and a way of an essential openness to life, but also the power of being exposed to dangers, the necessity of taking risks and life between risk and tragedy.

It is the complementarity of ontological and situated vulnerability, that makes vulnerability a value of human life. As ontological, vulnerability is the human condition, and as such it is the precondition of trust, love, communication and mutual affection, and also the finitude and fragility of human life. As situated, vulnerability is shaped by actual conditions and factors and can be decreased and increased. In both perspectives, ontological and situated, vulnerability is a risk and a resource of human life. On the fundamental or ontological level, we can say that it is good to live a vulnerable life, while at the same time, vulnerable vitality exists under the threat of death and its finitude. On the situated level, we also may value the multifaceted vulnerability, but face at the same time the strife-filled and threatening dimensions that come with it. In other words: the full range of vulnerability makes it a value, not the particular situations of vulnerability, or at least not all of them.

Theologically, this position is based in Creation and the goodness of Creation. Vulnerability, finitude and fragility are dimensions of God's good creation. This leads to the question: Is it theologically and ethically possible to

30 See K.M. Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998).

draw a distinction between those forms of vulnerability, which are a dimension of God's good creation on the one hand and destructive forms of vulnerability, where there is the need to work on the enhancing of life and to strengthen vitality on the other? This is connected to the hamartiological question and a realistic notion of sin. Sin as the fundamental brokenness of humanity is part of the ontological vulnerability, as it is the unavoidable human condition. If sin becomes real in deeds of guilt, we may connect it with situated vulnerability. In terms of sin, the distinction between sin and guilt is crucial for a hamartiology that avoids moralistic short-circuits as well as hamartiological blindness. An understanding of sin that is correlated to vulnerability has the potential to grasp the destructive and threatening forms of sin in Creation but also sharpens sensitivity to the reality that there are powers of sin and structural dimensions of sin, which we cannot use to explain threatening aspects of life. On a descriptive anthropological level, valuing vulnerability hence implies to value the threatening and the enriching forms of vulnerability. The realism acknowledges that the basic value of vulnerability implies a challenge, sometimes a threat for human life, but it does not destroy the fundamental worth and dignity of it. The programmatic humanism then points out that this fundamental worth has to be defended and needs according action, which one may connect with the situatedness of vulnerability. Realistic anthropology discovers and protects the finitude of human life and treasures it, but also gives room to struggle with it and see and name life as it is. In this respect it gives up on a vision of a perfection reachable out of human action, while simultaneously keeping the horizon of eschatological consummation, which takes the threatening aspects of vulnerability seriously.

Dimensions of Vulnerability – a Matrix

So far, I have explored why the concept of vulnerability is relatively more adequate to form a realistic anthropology. In the following we move from this conceptual defense of vulnerability to actual content and a claim about how to adequately understand vulnerable life. This marks the shift to the hermeneutical move that will unfold the theological dimensions of vulnerability further under the assumption that theology has to add more complexity, depth and realism to the concept of vulnerability. In order to understand vulnerable human life better, I will explore the dimensions of vulnerability within a matrix that helps to grasp the different phenomena of vulnerability. Its explanatory range reaches from the somatic via psychic to social systemic dimensions of vulnerability and takes internal and external aspects into account. Then I ask, which are the theological resonances that are evoked by vulnerability and unfold those specific theological topics under the guiding