

# TRANSCENDING BODILY EXISTENCE AND VULNERABILITY

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## I Introduction

Since 9/11 in New York, Americans have learned in an unexpected and tragic way what it means to be vulnerable and perhaps this experience has allowed our country to come of age, so to speak. While vulnerability and dependence form part of human existence, few philosophical studies throughout the course of history have addressed these aspects of our fragile condition. Western moral philosophy, as Alasdair MacIntyre remarkably advances in *Dependent Rational Animals*, generally depicts moral agents as though they were always rational, healthy, and untroubled. To cite a case in point, MacIntyre refers to Adam Smith who, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, asserts that the "pleasures of wealth and greatness ... strike the imagination as something grand and beautiful," while in instances of illness and old age we are more apt to recognize the false illusions and deception to which such pleasures lead.<sup>1</sup> Rather than embrace a "splenetic philosophy," however, Smith concedes that the illusions about the acquisition of wealth and greatness fostered by the imagination of those in good health and humor are "economically beneficial illusions" and "keep in continual motion the industry of mankind."<sup>2</sup> So, rather than confront the transitory character of extrinsic goods, such as money and fame, and acknowledge the vulnerability and affliction which mark the human condition, we generally prefer to forego such considerations and thus continue to live by imagination and illusion—by that illusion that we are somehow self-sufficient and superior, as Aristotle's *megalopsychos*.<sup>3</sup>

Such a way of understanding ourselves is highly inadequate, since the experience of vulnerability, the capacity to be injured or harmed

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and to thus feel pain and suffering, can unveil to us a profound and essential dimension of human existence. In an essay titled "Self-Interpreting Animals," Charles Taylor devotes particular consideration to the experience of shame: we may be ashamed of wrong-doing, but shame can also be caused by the lack of certain properties which are essentially attributed to human persons. Because of this lack, I would say that we are vulnerable, afflicted, and thus pained. A man may, for example, be ashamed of his shrill voice or effeminate hands. According to Taylor, "[A] shrill voice is ... something unmanly, betokens hysteria, not something solid, strong, macho, self-contained. It does not radiate a sense of strength, capacity, superiority. Effeminate hands are effeminate. Both voice and hands clash with what I aspire to be, feel that my dignity demands that I be, as a person, a presence among others."<sup>4</sup> The experience of shame or humiliation thus shows us to have some degrading property, or to be base, dishonorable. The shameful or humiliating also refers to the way we see ourselves and to the way we are seen by others. As Taylor puts it: "Something only offends my dignity because it upsets or challenges the way I present, project or express myself in public space."<sup>5</sup> There is then in this sort of experience of the shameful an aspiration to dignity or excellence, to the quality of being worthy or honorable, but at the same time the experience of reproach and disapproval—disapproval either by others or by oneself. What produces shame or humiliation is opposed to the "grand and beautiful," of which Adam Smith speaks; shame is rather always concerned with the ugly.

The purpose of this paper will be first to consider the experience of vulnerability in reference to the beautiful and the ugly in their external and internal dimensions, and what such an experience can tell us about ourselves and about the meaning of different types of goods. Secondly, I will try to show that the vulnerability which is ours due to our bodily existence is surpassed by a vulnerability freely accepted for the sake of a greater good. This second type of vulnerability requires maturity in freedom and a recognition that fullness of life is not contingent on

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

what might be called "the wisdom of the world." To this type of wisdom, we will contrast "the wisdom of the cross." So, in the third instance, in this paper I will explore what light the Christian framework can shed on human vulnerability and suffering. In this part of the paper, I will take my cue from contemporary thinkers such as John Paul II, Jacques Maritain, and C. S. Lewis, as well as the wisdom of Thomas Aquinas. Lastly, while bodily vulnerability may lead to disapproval by others or even by oneself, just as we are able to distinguish higher goods and higher forms of life, and in fact speak of the highest good and the best life, so we can speak of a different type of approval or disapproval, of the only type of approval or disapproval that ultimately is of any account.

## II Kinds of Goods and Beings, Kinds of Beauty and Ugliness

Although Aristotle does speak of a hierarchy of goods, it is interesting to note how according to him certain aspects of external goods produce a sort of beauty of happiness, since they make a person pleasing in the eyes of others, and to be seen as pleasing belongs to the meaning of beauty. Aquinas comments on this point by saying that to be deprived of certain external goods defiles happiness, since it makes a man somewhat contemptible in the eyes of others; such is the case of the man who lacks nobility, or good offspring, or even bodily beauty. A man is not fully happy who presents an ugly appearance, since by this fact he is made despicable in the eyes of others.<sup>6</sup> While a pleasing appearance is a good thing to possess, we would be mistaken to be so captivated by attractiveness that we would undervalue the qualities of a person who presented an ugly or horrifying appearance. And it is just such a case which MacIntyre presents to us in *Dependent Rational Animals*: a person with a disfigured face is someone from whom we can learn, provided that we are able to separate ourselves from and to stand in judgment of our feelings of dislike or disgust. As MacIntyre says: "What blinds us to our own defects in self-knowledge may also blind us as to qualities of others. So those captivated by appearance and presentation may not be able to identify, let alone understand, examples of the courage and gracefulness of spirit that can be hard-

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Ethics* I, lect. 13, nn. 159, 163.

won responses to afflictions of disfigurement and disablement."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, in this instance, if we separate ourselves from feelings of disgust before a horrifying appearance, we are better able to recognize the limits of attractiveness, of external goods, and the importance of goods of the soul, internal goods, such as the virtues; the person with the disfigured face may thus provide us with the opportunity to learn about our own good and the good of others. Our awareness of the human good is then closely connected to the proper evaluation and alignment of our feelings.

In our contact with those who are vulnerable, we can learn not only to distinguish between external and internal goods, but also to understand ourselves as having demands made on us which are often incompatible with those of desire or feeling. An example of such self-understanding is given by Taylor in the above-mentioned essay. When we come upon someone in trouble, a wounded man, for example, as in the Good Samaritan parable, we may or may not feel any desire to help the man, but we do feel called upon to help him. We feel called upon *qua* rational beings, or moral beings, or creatures made in the image of God, capable of responding as He does, out of love.<sup>8</sup> We are thus "called upon to act. And we are called upon in virtue of being a certain kind of creature. Even though we may not be very sure in virtue of what we are called on, we know that the obligation lies on us, not on animals, stones, or idiots."<sup>9</sup> We are then being called to act out of a higher standpoint, because we recognize that we are a higher sort of being; as such, certain reactions, certain motivations, will not be fitting to us, and we know this because we are capable of judging and discriminating motivations as higher or lower. To this effect, Taylor says: " ... spite, revenge, returning evil for evil, is something we are prone to, but there is a higher way of seeing our relations to others; which is higher not just in producing happier consequences—less strife, pain, bad blood—but also in that it enables us to see ourselves and others more broadly, more objectively, more truly. One is a bigger person, with a broader,

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<sup>7</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

more serene vision, when one can act out of this higher standpoint."<sup>10</sup> So, to return to the experience of the person who sees a wounded man lying in the road and has a sense of being called on to help, a sense quite different from the desire to help, the demand made on the person is in virtue of the type of subject that he is, that is, an autonomous moral subject, who can respond to the call of what is truly good or worthy.<sup>11</sup> He is thus capable of acting from a higher standpoint, of seeing his relations to others in a higher way.

As mentioned above, states of vulnerability can lead us to a recognition of different types of goods—lower and higher goods—and also to the realization that we ourselves are a higher type of being, unlike animals or stones, for whom agency cannot be reduced simply to desire or feeling. Now the state of vulnerability which is present in disfigurement in the example given by MacIntyre can give rise to shame, since the person suffering the disfigurement is deprived of a good due to her had she not undergone burns or an illness producing an ugly appearance. But it is important here to distinguish between external and internal ugliness, just as we distinguish two kinds of beauty. On the one hand, there is spiritual beauty, which consists in a due order and abundance of spiritual goods. By contrast, anything that manifests internal disorder or that proceeds from a lack of spiritual good is ugly. On the other hand, there is external beauty, which consists in a well-proportioned body, in its due ordering, and in an abundance of external things which are related to the body, whereas ugliness is associated with disorder of the body or with a lack of temporal things. Just as internal and external beauty delight and give rise to desire, ugliness arouses shame in both its internal and external dimensions. As Aquinas says: "... a person is ashamed of the fact that he is a pauper, or that he has a deformed body, or that he is ignorant, or that he performs disorderly actions. Therefore, since interior ugliness must always be held in contempt, everything that involves shame

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

arising from this kind of ugliness must be disapproved."<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, as we saw above, it is possible that the person with a disfigured face—disfigurement here being an example of external ugliness—and with a high degree of virtue, that is, spiritual beauty, might still be disapproved, because our disordered feelings would not let us see beyond the immediate appearance. If our feelings were, however, properly aligned, we could, as stated previously, learn from the afflicted person about the human good.

### III Vulnerability, Perfection, and Wisdom

Now, while most of us would not want to be deprived of certain external goods and thus be afflicted or vulnerable, it is possible that for a higher good a person might assume such vulnerability. To this effect, Aquinas provides us with an interesting example: while even holy men will despise the lack, or ugliness, of external things, yet, with a view to perfection and for the sake of Christ, it may be freely assumed by them. Therefore, the man who is ashamed of this sort of ugliness is not to be disapproved, but rather to be greatly praised, should he adopt it because of humility. As Aquinas says, "to beg has a certain shame associated with it on the basis of this second kind of ugliness, for every beggar shows himself as a pauper and sometimes he lowers himself to the man from whom he begs and this pertains to external deficiency. Hence, mendicancy adopted for Christ's sake is not only not to be disapproved, it should be praised greatly."<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, Aquinas reiterates that mendicancy involves a certain abasement, and that although activity and governance are naturally superior to receptivity and obedience, there are circumstances that may alter this natural ranking: "To suffer," Aquinas says, "is more ignoble than to act, to receive than to give, and to be ruled and to obey than to govern and command; however, on account of the addition of some added circumstance, the appraisal can be reversed."<sup>14</sup> For Aquinas, there may

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Against the Attackers of the Religious Life*, chap. 7, reply to obj. 9, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, in *The Pocket Aquinas*, ed. V. J. Bourke (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), p. 268.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, chap. 135.

be circumstances where sacrificing certain natural goods or enduring certain evils is a way of attaining a greater good. So, virtuous humiliation is not therefore an unthinking acceptance of any deprivation. According to Aquinas, the counsels (which, more generally, could simply be called virtues)—that is, the adoption of voluntary poverty, chastity, and obedience—are not for the weak, but rather for those who, trusting in divine power and providence, freely choose to "cast aside" other things for the sake of the highest Good.<sup>15</sup>

Since the way to the perfect good, as Aristotle called happiness,<sup>16</sup> does not reside in external goods nor in goods of the body, but rather in perfect virtue, in order to arrive at such perfection, Aquinas tells us that a free mind is a necessary condition.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, he counsels voluntary poverty: "that a man's mind, being withdrawn from earthly cares, may be more at liberty to give itself to God;" and elsewhere he says: "poverty frees a man from that which hinders him from being intent on spiritual things." And, "man's greatest good is that he adhere with his mind to God and divine things."<sup>18</sup>

In order therefore to assume the vulnerability implicit in poverty, man's life cannot be seen simply in terms of self-preservation—the preservation of bodily existence. The whole purpose for which the human person, being rational in nature, exists is to contemplate the truth, which is divine activity, and so, to be taken into the life of God, our minds must be free of earthly attachments and creatures. In describing the perfect good, the state of happiness, Aquinas says: "... man's mind will be united to God by one, continual, everlasting operation. But, in the present life, in as far as we fall short of the unity and continuity of that operation, so do we fall short of perfect happiness."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 7, a. 2, ad. 3. See also Thomas S. Hibbs, *Virtue's Splendor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), p. 193.

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 2, ad. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, chap. 132.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, chap. 130.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 2, ad. 4.

Of course, this is not the wisdom that many of our contemporaries want to hear; for this reason, they will disapprove of virtues such as the counsels and of a notion of happiness that emphasizes the goods of the soul over the accumulation of external goods, over offspring when and however they are wanted, and over the affirmation of one's will or over the will to power. To assume vulnerability by "casting aside" riches, for example, cannot be understood simply from the goal of a natural perfection. As Aquinas tells us, when the forfeit of external things is adopted for the sake of Christ because of humility, then it is not to be disapproved, but rather to "be praised greatly." To become vulnerable to the eyes of the world, for the sake of Christ, requires a larger vision of things than that afforded by the wisdom of the world or the wisdom of the wise.

We need a new sort of humanism, a new sort of wisdom, to enter into that vision. Maritain, in *The Twilight of Civilization*, speaks of a "humanism of the Incarnation," of an "integral humanism," "which considers man in the integrality of his natural and supernatural being and which sets no *a priori* limits to the descent of the divine into man."<sup>20</sup> It is just this sort of humanism which, I believe, John Paul II has in mind when he says in different ways throughout his writings that man can only understand himself in Christ. As the former Pope puts it in *Fides et Ratio*: "The fundamental conviction of the 'philosophy' found in the Bible is that the world and human life do have a meaning and look towards their fulfillment, which comes in Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Incarnation will always remain the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God himself."<sup>21</sup>

The Word of Wisdom, the wisdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ, provides us with a new sort of logic, based on both truth and love, in order to understand human vulnerability, suffering, and the meaning of life. In assuming human nature, the Divine Word also freely assumes

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<sup>20</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), p. 118, no. 80, par. 3.

human vulnerability. For love of perfection, Christ frees Himself of riches and human affection so that, in perfect freedom and obedience, He unites His will to the will of God the Father. The *kenosis* or self-emptying of God is radical: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (*Philippians* 2: 7-8). Aquinas argues that no one should doubt as to the pain truly experienced by Christ: "for true bodily pain are required bodily hurt and the sense of hurt. Now Christ's body was able to be hurt, since it was passible and mortal; neither was the sense of hurt wanting to it, since Christ's soul possessed perfectly all natural powers."<sup>22</sup> To this effect, Aquinas relies on Scriptural authority: "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows."<sup>23</sup> Christ, Beauty itself—the splendor of the Father—is stripped of all glory in His passion and death on the cross; He willingly takes on disfigurement; as Isaiah graphically writes: "... there is no beauty in Him, nor comeliness: and we have seen Him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of Him: Despised, and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity; and His look was as it were hidden and despised, whereupon we esteemed Him not" (*Isaiah* 53: 2-3). There is no external beauty in this description of "the suffering servant," of Christ; we are told that His appearance arouses no desire; He is rather despised and has been put to shame.

This is certainly not the beauty that the "wisdom of the world" exalts, and yet, despite the external aspect of a body deformed by affliction, Aquinas tells us that Christ had a certain divinity and thus beauty which shone from His face.<sup>24</sup> The internal beauty which radiates outward cannot be seen by everyone—not everyone sees the beauty of self-abasement and obedience, of that complete submission of the Son to the Father. A crucified God certainly inverts our ordinary

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 15, a. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, sed contra.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Jordan, "The Evidence of the Transcendentals and the Place of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. XXIX, no. 4, issue 116 (December 1989): 407.

conceptions of the beautiful and challenges our way of seeing the world. In commenting on the obscurity or blindness which resulted from original sin, Aquinas says that man in his present state no longer sees God's radiance shining through the world; man is impeded as regards the vision of spiritual things "because he is distracted by and occupied with sensible things."<sup>25</sup> The wisdom of the cross and with it human vulnerability and suffering can take us out of that distraction and occupation, so as to make us realize that "the world is not the source of man's ultimate happiness"<sup>26</sup>—the world is precarious, vulnerable, subject to mortality and corruption, just as the human body is. That aspiration to wholeness or integrity, to the perfect good of happiness, cannot come from the world. It can only come to man from God. "This is why Christ speaks of God's love that expresses itself in the offering of His only Son, so that man 'might not perish but might have eternal life' (*John* 3:16). Eternal life can be given to man only by God; it can be only His gift. It cannot be given to man by the created world. Creation—and man together with it—is subject to 'futility'(cf. *Romans* 8:20)."<sup>27</sup>

#### IV The Human Person's Perfection and Approval

So, if to understand human life and happiness in terms of mere self-preservation or in terms of the "pleasures of wealth and greatness" is totally inadequate, because of the futility to which man and the world are subject, then understanding and seeing oneself in the Word of Wisdom not only completes the "wisdom of the wise," which recognizes the superiority of goods of the soul, but offers us something radically new. In referring to the way in which God creates and re-creates, that is, restores what He has created after sin, Aquinas uses an important analogy: that of the Divine Artist, His art, which is His Wisdom or Word or eternal concept, and His artifacts or creatures; as Aquinas puts it:

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 94, a. 1.

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[T]he Person of the Son, Who is the Word of God, has a common agreement with all creatures, because the word of the craftsman, i.e., his concept, is an exemplar likeness of whatever is made by him. Hence the Word of God, Who is His eternal concept, is the exemplar likeness of all creatures. And therefore as creatures are established in their proper species, though movably, by the participation of this likeness, so by the non-participated and personal union of the Word with a creature, it was fitting that the creature should be restored in order to its eternal and unchangeable perfection; for the craftsman by the intelligible form of his art, whereby he fashioned his handiwork, restores it when it has fallen into ruin. And hence man is perfected in wisdom (which is his proper perfection, as he is rational) by participating the Word of God, as the disciple is instructed by receiving the word of his master.... Hence it was fitting that by the Word of true knowledge man might be led back to God, having wandered from God through an inordinate thirst for knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

So, not only is the Word of God the exemplar of all creation, He is also the exemplar for man's re-creation, for his restoration. Man's perfection in wisdom thus requires an imitation of the exemplar. To be instructed in the Word of God means not only participation in the fullness of truth, but also in the fullness of love and beauty. Just as the Son is in total relation to the Father, surrendering His will to Him and loving the salvific will, so, too, man is called to do likewise. Since by sin man withdraws from the light of reason and of the Divine Law, then to return to the state prior to sin, it is necessary that man's will should have a movement contrary to the previous movement; man will need therefore to reunite himself to his ultimate principle through the path of humility and self-abasement which the Word of Wisdom delineates for us, contrary to the pride which is the beginning of every sin.<sup>29</sup>

In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II says: "Human perfection ... consists not simply in acquiring an abstract knowledge of the truth, but in a

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 3, a. 8.

<sup>29</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 86, a. 2, and I-II, q. 84, a. 2.

this life we often delude ourselves, we ultimately have to face the dreadful.<sup>34</sup> A vision of the beautiful, an encounter with the absolute fullness of good, can only come to us as a result of purification, self-surrender, and trust.<sup>35</sup> Illness, affliction, sober the soul, and sobriety of this kind belongs to the essence of purity. We can only be purified and transformed by experiencing the dreadful, just as we paradoxically save our life when we lose it.

If vulnerability and suffering are for the sake of perfection, for experiencing eternal life and gazing upon the face of the beautiful, then how we are seen by others in our affliction is of little or no importance—how we are seen by God is what matters, for it is His approval that we really seek. And, in facing Him, we will be known by Him and know that we are approved or disapproved. As C. S. Lewis so graphically puts it: "In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 19, a. 12, sed contra et resp.

<sup>36</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), p. 10.