META: RESEARCH IN HERMENEUTICS, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY
VOL. XVII, NO. 1 / JUNE 2025: 210-229, ISSN 2067-3655, www.metajournal.org

The Hermeneutics of Weakness: The Case of Ethical and Political Discourse

Adriana Mickiewicz
Jagiellonian University of Krakow

Abstract

The article examines the concept of weakness within the framework of the phenomenological and hermeneutical approach. Two research questions are posed: 1. What is weakness as an experience of the subject? 2. How does our understanding of weakness influence our ethical and political conceptions? First, the article provides a characterization of the phenomenon of weakness, using phenomenological methods. The author explores how weakness can be understood and how it differs from other, related notions (e.g., vulnerability). Weakness will be defined as a lack or serious limitation in agency – in the ability to act. Next, the author investigates how the concept of weakness has been historically incorporated into European ethical and political theory, drawing on hermeneutic methodology. Writings from the history of European philosophy that are representative of their respective eras were analyzed, focusing on how they illustrate the relationship between weakness and agency, as well as the political and moral consequences of this connection. This incorporation occurred primarily through the notion of weakness of the will, and secondarily through the neoliberal discourse of empowerment, viewed as a means of overcoming one's own weakness. Judith Butler's writings are an important point of reference in this case. In conclusion, the article argues for the necessity of new ethical and political attitudes toward one's own weakness.

Keywords: weakness, phenomenology, hermeneutics, strength, power, vulnerability, will

Introduction

The experience of one's own weakness is one of the key aspects that define the human condition. Contemporary philosophy is devoting more and more attention to the analysis of phenomena such as vulnerability (Goodin 1986; Fineman 2008; Hutchings 2013; McKenzie, Rogers & Doods 2014),

fragility (Nussbaum 2001), and precariousness (Butler 2004; Butler 2009). However, an in-depth philosophical analysis of the category of weakness is still lacking. This article seeks to fill this gap. The category of weakness will be analyzed here using hermeneutic and phenomenological methodologies.

I intend to start from the experience of the subject who discovers their own weakness. The analysis of the many manifestations of this weakness will aim to capture the essential properties of this phenomenon. It should be noted, however, that in this work—although I draw much of my methodology from Husserl's work—I reject his belief in phenomenology as a purely descriptive field. This is due to the specificity of the very problem of the phenomenon of weakness: any attempt to conceptualize weakness immediately casts it into normative categories, describing it as something fundamentally negative, harmful, and even dangerous. While such phenomena (semantically close to weakness) as tenderness, vulnerability, and even transience and mortality can be presented in a neutral way and can even become objects of affirmation, weakness appears to consciousness as something inherently negative from the outset: something to be fought against. For this reason, the phenomenological study of this phenomenon cannot rely solely on the (impossible) descriptive and theoretical-cognitive approach but must take into account an important normative dimension.

At the same time, in this essay, I proceed from the hermeneutical conviction that any human experience remains largely conditioned by cultural forms and representations, such as language in the first place. The understanding of weakness (including the self-understanding of one's own weakness) will therefore always be culturally mediated, as well as normatively conditioned—primarily due to the number of negative cultural connotations associated with this concept. For this reason, I will allow my phenomenology to be somewhat contaminated by hermeneutic and genealogical methods, which will show the pedigree of European perceptions of weakness[1] .

The essay is divided into three main parts. In the first subsection, I intend to describe the category of weakness, taking inspirations from phenomenological methodology. This

will primarily allow me to define what weakness is and how it differs from other, similar phenomena. In the second part, I turn to the hermeneutical approach. I would like to show that European philosophy has privileged the category of strength at the expense of neglecting the category of weakness. The analysis aims to uncover something akin to a genealogy of the concept of weakness. As will be shown, it primarily emerges in the context of ethics (mainly due to its inherent connection with the concept of will). This tradition largely translates into what, according to Heideggerian hermeneutics, should be called the prejudices of the subject – the not always conscious, preliminary, unverified knowledge of the subject. In the final part, based on the concept of Judith Butler, I would like to consider the political implications, primarily related to the dominance of the liberal vision, and thus the strong and agentive subject. According to my main thesis, this rejection of weakness as one of the inherent and inalienable characteristics of the human subject's structure has contributed to the false vision of humanity. This has significant political and moral consequences.

1. Polyphony of weaknesses

Classical phenomenology – especially Husserlian phenomenology – has often been criticized for privileging the perspective of the agentive, active subject, capable of directing their will, realizing their will, using their body as a tool, and assigning meanings. This viewpoint increasingly faces opposition, even from within phenomenology itself (see Levinas 1971; Caputo 1993). More and more authors recognize the necessity of turning toward the other side of subjectivity – toward passivity, fragility, mortality. However, most studies seem to focus on the category of vulnerability (Levinas 1971; Godin 1986; Ricouer 2001 and 2009), which – as I will show in this subsection – differs from weakness. There is little discussion of weakness within phenomenology. A notable exception is the work of John D. Caputo, associated with Christian theology and the philosophy of religion, written from a phenomenological perspective. Caputo explores the possibility of moving away from the vision of an all-powerful absolute

toward a weak God. The image of this new vision of divinity is Jesus on the cross – a figure that reveals human passivity, loneliness, physical suffering, and powerlessness. According to Caputo, the figure of Jesus also unveils the intertwining of strength and weakness – the exhausted body of Jesus possesses a unique ability to impose a moral obligation. Confronting weakness becomes, for the theologian, the main impulse for the subject to take responsibility for the Other. In this chapter, I am, perhaps, somewhat influenced by Caputo's reading (especially in his attempt to overcome the binarity between weakness and strength); however, I would like to develop a secular vision of weakness, primarily experienced from the perspective of the first-person lived experience.

When considering the category of weakness, it is important to first note the vast range of contexts in which this concept is incorporated. Weakness can be understood as physical frailty (for example, when one is unable to lift a certain weight), as a lack of energy to act (for example, when enduring an illness). At the same time, it can also refer to political and social situations (such as a lack of authority), as well as to an individual and volitional context (weakness of will, weakness of character). This notion can express contempt (as in the patriarchal and oppressive expression "weak gender") or pity and mercy (as in the moral imperative to care for the weak). In many languages (for example, in French or Polish), weakness can be linked to the feeling of falling in love (e.g., "*mieć słabość do*" in Polish, "*avoir un faible pour*" in French), associated with a strong and involuntary attraction to someone. All these contexts reveal the phenomenon of weakness from different perspectives: embodied, affective, normative, and political.

The phenomenon of weakness can be examined from both an objective and a social perspective. In the first case, we focus on general determinants and criteria, which are also visible from a third-person perspective. A doctor might observe that a patient is weak and interpret this as a symptom of a larger problem. A trainer might identify who is capable of completing more demanding exercises requiring strength, and who needs gentler exercises. On the other hand, weakness can also be viewed from the perspective of social constructivism.

Here, we can observe that certain social groups (such as women, children, and people with disabilities) are considered weak, while others (particularly men) are expected to be strong. Weakness can therefore be an important category for critical theories. While both perspectives are valid and legitimate, phenomenological methods allow us to focus on the more relevant dimension of the individual: the experience of one's own weakness.

Weakness manifests itself to the subject primarily as a feeling of lack, associated with a deep sense of impotence and powerlessness. Conceived in this way, weakness necessarily involves thinking about its opposite, that is, strength. Weakness represents precisely a certain breach in the sense of one's own strength; it is a breakdown of strength. This breach leads to an inability to realize one's own will: one's decisions and desires. I feel the weakness of my body when I am unable to lift the weight of the barbell I would like to lift. I feel the weakness of will when I can't keep the New Year's resolution I made. The weakness of a political organization (e.g., a political party) comes from its inability to put its program into practice. Examples could be multiplied. It is worth noting that weakness remains a relational category and depends strictly on our positioning in relation to other objects (for example, a barbell), people, or political institutions. Even the case of weak will, seemingly purely immanent, remains entangled in the space of the world in which, ultimately, this will is realized. The will is formed in the midst of and in relation to society. Similarly, power, authority, and self-mastery can also be considered relationally.

It can be seen, however, that the essence of weakness remains the feeling of loss (or at least a significant limitation) of one's agency—the inability to act. Thus, vulnerability remains distinct from the related phenomena of fragility and precariousness. Vulnerability (from the Latin *vulnus* – wound) means being exposed to the possibility of harm, and therefore it is rather related to the impact of external factors over which I have no control (Huthings 2013, 25; Doods 2014, 182; Goodin 1986, 112). Weakness, meanwhile, can result from internal factors as well. Moreover, weakness does not necessarily

(though it can) involve experiencing harm. Fragility, on the other hand, like vulnerability, is not related to will but concerns the possibility of being broken. Fragility can be attributed to more than just beings with a will (it can describe, for example, objects) and can be seen as positive. It can be associated with some conceptions of beauty as something fragile and unstable (for example, in the case of porcelain). Precariousness, on the other hand, I understand, following Judith Butler, as a characteristic of the human condition that indicates our social interdependence from each other. Precariousness means that "life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as life" (Butler, 2009, 14).

The conceptualization of weakness as the inability to carry out one's own will also affects the understanding of the concepts opposing it. Phenomena in opposition to weakness are primarily strength, power and autonomy. In the first case, strength refers to the ability to resist external factors, as seen in the example of a strongman who can hold a heavy object despite the resistance of gravity, or in the case of a person with strong character, who is able to withstand a tragedy without breaking down. If strength draws attention to external factors, the category of autonomy focuses on intra-subjective factors. This is because autonomy is primarily the ability to manage oneself and does not refer to the ability to manage others. Moreover, as we will see in the next chapter, autonomy in the history of philosophy has been strongly associated with the inner life of the subject and means primarily the ability to manage oneself, to make free decisions. Power, on the other hand, I understand after Hannah Pitkin as "something-anything-that makes somebody able to do, capable of doing something." (1972, 276). In this sense, power seems to be the most complete opposite of weakness. This is because the concept of power refers both to my inner life and ability to manage myself, as well as to my relationship with non-subjective reality. Equally important is the emphasis on the category of action, which, as has already been shown, is also the fundamental for thinking about weakness.

It is precisely this strong connection between weakness and action that has led to the phenomenon of weakness being

linked to normative thinking, including, above all, ethical thinking. For while weakness has been valorised negatively, its opposites – power, agency, strength, autonomy – have been (with minor exceptions[2]) valorised decidedly positively in the history of European culture.

2. Weakness in ethical tradition

A similar perspective was already present in classical Greek philosophy. The ancient discourse on morality, though varied, praises the human ability to control one's own passions, exercise self-control and consciously cultivate virtues. Man is seen as an agent, capable of shaping his own destiny. The possibility of self-governess is surprisingly linked to the idea of fate, another key element of the Greek worldview. In a world determined by the whims of the gods, how can man defend his agency? This theme, addressed primarily in Greek poetry and dramatic works, was perhaps most effectively explored by Plato. In *The Republic,* the philosopher presents his own myth: the story of Er, a simple soldier who was given a glimpse of the afterlife. The climax of the story occures just before reincarnation, when the souls are confronted by the Moirai, particularly by Lachesis – the personification of necessity. At this moment, the dead are given the opportunity to choose their future fate from among an infinite number of scenarios. Their decision will determine the course of their lives in the next incarnation. Before the souls embark on this task, however, they hear a piercing warning:

Hear the word of Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity. Mortal souls, behold a new cycle of life and mortality. Your genius will not be allotted to you, but you choose your genius; and let him who draws the first lot have the first choice, and the life which he chooses shall be his destiny. Virtue is free, and as a man honors or dishonors her he will have more or less of her; the responsibility is with the chooser-God is justified. (Plato 2012, X, 617E)

The Myth of Er confronts people with their own agency. They are the ones who must decide and consciously choose their future fate. They become almost fully responsible for what will happen to them after they are reborn. The gods, fate, necessity

and the Moirai spinning the threads of human life – none of them are to blame, only man can be held accountable. Plato seems to intertwine warning with hope here. The one who loves virtue enough and makes it the basis of his choice can hope for a good and peaceful life. However, if he is blinded by the passions, if he forgets virtue and mindlessly throws himself at a seemingly favourable fate, he will be punished. As the prophet proclaims:

Even for the last comer, if he chooses wisely and will live diligently, there is appointed a happy and not undesirable existence. Let not him who chooses first be careless and let not the last despair. (2012, X, 619B)

Plato's vision is an attempt to reconcile the idea of fate with human agency. However, his myth is not just a reflection on the human condition. It is, first and foremost, a moralizing story, urging one to lead a rational and ethical life, the most important determinant of which will be the love of ethical courage – virtue. It is virtue that becomes the foundation for making the right choice. The one who sufficiently loves moral courage, who recognizes its true value – this one will be able to live virtuously. It seems that action in Plato's view is indeed, to some extent, determined, but not by the Moirai or fate; rather, it is determined by the individual, capable of choosing between virtue and passion. This is how human strength manifests itself in Greek philosophy: as the ability to choose a virtuous life. Weakness will primarily be seen as the inability to achieve a good life, as an internal powerlessness to control one's own will. It is something pitiable, something that must be overcome.

Conscious choice is also a key element in Aristotle's philosophy. According to *Nicomachean Ethics,* morality concerns those acts that are dependent on the will – that is, actions in which man is the cause of movement: the cause of action and change in the world. Acts independent of the will can at most evoke pity, but never moral condemnation. Therefore, at the center of ethical reflection is human causation and decision-making. Aristotle argued that the object of moral evaluation should be the very moment of making a choice—*prohairesis*. It should be emphasized that *prohairesis* is strongly linked to both reason and action. The moral choice,

according to the Greek philosopher, must always be preceded by a process of rational thought ("A rational man is at the same time a man of good character" (Aristotle 2004, 1152a)), focused on choosing a valuable goal that motivates human conduct. At the same time, *prohairesis* is the moment of finalizing this thought process, the ultimate decision about what means I will use to achieve my superior goal. A person may not always have control over how their resolve will translate into actual events in the empirical world, when our choice is exposed to other external factors beyond our control. However, the decision itself is a sufficient expression of my freedom and agency. Oedipus had no control over the consequences of his choices; he could not know all the circumstances, but he chose, nonetheless.

In Greek philosophy, man's strength is attested to by his permanent ability to choose virtue, and, another important theme of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* his ability to self-construct his moral character. Aristotle (2004) described virtue in terms of a permanent disposition, *hexis.* To act virtuously on a regular basis was to develop a permanent disposition that allows an individual to make good, i.e. ethical, choices in later life. However, one who acted immorally developed a predisposition to act against morality. Man is, in a way, guilty of his own character. His strength and agency are thus directed towards the inner life. Even if, in external life, we cannot fully control the consequences of our actions, at least we have the ability to master our weaknesses and train virtue[3].

> Now if it is in our power to do noble and shameful actions, and the same goes for not doing them, and if, as we saw, being good and bad consists in this, then it is in our power to be good or bad. (2004, 1113b)

Man is powerful because he can reasonably shape his moral character and rise to goodness. The thought of weakness appears here primarily in the context of evildoers, uncontrollable individuals who succumb to their passions and emotions (gr. *pathos*). These individuals remain afflicted by weakness of will, *akrasia*, which leads them to act against their own reason. Although a person with a weak will is able to make a rational thought and choose a resolution in accordance with his virtue, he is unable to act in accordance with his own choice.

Although at the level of rational thought he knows what he should do, at another – practical – level, emotions overshadow the truths of reason. Aristotle recognizes the paradox of the human soul, which can simultaneously know and not know, choose reasonably and unintelligently.

> Again, human beings can have knowledge in another way besides those that have been mentioned. In the case of having knowledge without using it we see a different kind of having, so that one can in a sense both have and not have it – for example, if one is asleep, mad or drunk. Now this is the condition of people under the influence of the ways they are affected; for spirited feelings, sexual appetites, and some other such things clearly alter our bodily condition as well, and in some people even produce attacks of madness. (2004, 1147)

Emotions become a factor that weakens human strength and the ability to master, denying the power of the human mind. Man, deprived of his *rationale*, approaches the condition of an animal, determined by his own nature and the forces of biology. He resembles a drunken or insane person, who possesses, to some extent, a darkened consciousness and blended self-awareness. Hence, the discourse on force often looks suspiciously at the affective sphere, finding here the cause of enslavement and guilt, and in extreme cases even seeing in emotions an element that threatens humanity itself.

The paradigm of thinking about morality in terms of force, already present in ancient Greece, finds its culmination in the Age of Enlightenment[4]. However, the Age of Reason makes some fundamental changes in the understanding of the main goal of the philosophy of morality. The ancient paradigm of thinking about virtue, which was eventually incorporated into Christian theology and marked the main development of ethics for centuries, is replaced here by an attempt to seek a universal moral law. This has its anthropological consequences. The model of a free man, consciously shaping his own virtues, is here transformed into the model of an autonomous subject, reasonably discovering a universal moral law. This conceptual change is not merely cosmetic. Freedom of decision-making becomes autonomy: the ability of reason to empower itself, to self-determine[5]. Instead, man is described as a subject: the ruler of the objectified world, the causal creator of his own perceptions. His mind is described in terms of the conditions of

possibility of the appearance of the external world, which in some cases even leads to idealism.

Enlightenment philosophy, contrary to repeated accusations, is as much a manifestation of human power as of human limitations, a belief in reason and scepticism about human cognitive capabilities. The problem is not that Enlightenment philosophy failed to recognize the limits of human reason, but rather that awareness of these limits was strangely combined here with a belief in power. This can be seen especially in the writings of Kant (1996a). Although the German author recognized the limitations of human reason (if only its lack of access to the thing itself), his scepticism disappears almost completely as soon as the author turns to ethical reflection. On the ground of the metaphysics of morality, Kant attempts to develop a pure ethical theory, devoid of any contamination that empirical reality might bring (1996a, 4:426). In a way, Kant repeats Aristotle's move. Two premises are relevant here: first, man cannot have full control over the external world and, second, he should not be held responsible for what he could not control. It follows that morality, or at any rate the discourse on obligation and guilt, must necessarily focus on the inner life.

> Hence everything empirical, as an addition1 to the principle of morality, is not only quite inept for this; it is also highly prejudicial to the purity of morals, where the proper worth of an absolutely good will – a worth raised above all price – consists just in the principle of action being free from all influences of contingent grounds, which only experience can furnish. (Kant 1996a, 4:426)

Kant will focus on describing human reason, capable of discovering a necessary and universal moral law, expressed in the form of an imperative. In place of virtue and the formation of one's character, there will be a logic of duty and an attitude of respect towards universal principles. I am particularly interested in the Kantian category of autonomy (Gr. *autós* – one's own, *nómos* – law), or the ability of reason to impose laws on itself. A moral subject retains its autonomy if its conduct remains guided by respect for the law that the subject has given itself, by the power of its reason. Any other motives relegate man to heteronomy, dependence of himself on external

influences. The subject of Kantian ethics is a subject isolated from the external world, which could disturb his freedom and induce him to act against reason.

> Autonomy of the will is the property" of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition). The principle of autonomy is, therefore: to choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choiceb are also included' as universal law in the same volition. (Kant 1996a, 4:440)

Here morality becomes even more firmly tied to the power and might of reason. One even becomes obliged to act solely out of respect for the rational moral law. Any additional motivations connected with the external world, but also with unintelligent inner experiences (emotions, passions) are presented almost in terms of an obstacle to a truly moral life. While an action coming out of motives other than pure duty to obey an imperative may be in accordance with duty and in this sense may be legitimate (as in the case of the merchant who does not cheat for the fear of punishment), it does not testify to the subject's true morality. This is because its strength becomes contaminated by the weaknesses of the soul.

Kant also mentions the weakness of the will on the ground of his considerations of radical evil (Vujošević 2019). He recognizes that in addition to persons who consciously deny moral obligation, there are also weak subjects. The weak subject, unlike the vice subject, wishes to act in accordance with the moral law and knows what action remains in accordance with the categorical imperative. Nevertheless, he does not find the moral law motivating enough to be the sole motivation for his action.

> the frailty (*fragilitas*) of human nature is expressed even in the complaint of an Apostle: "What I would, that I do not!". I incorporate the good (the law) into the maxim of my power of choice; but this good, which is an irresistible incentive objectively or ideally (*in thesi*), is subjectively (*in hypothesi)* the weaker (in comparison with inclination) whenever the maxim is to be followed. (Kant 1996b, 6:29)

The Enlightenment tradition represented another milestone in the development of ethics. Thinking in terms of causality and autonomy led to the emergence of another great European tradition – liberalism and, historically related to it,

utilitarianism. The belief in the autonomy of human reason was also imprinted by nihilists like Stirner and Nietzsche, who described man as capable of creating and demolishing values. All these currents placed the subject of causality at the centre of their reflection. Many of these positions even introduced a political and moral imperative to strive for empowerment. This imperative permeates European culture very strongly today.

Probably, I could list many more ethical currents, in which the power of human reason becomes the basis for setting the rules of good, moral behaviour. However, I will stop here. A story about the history of philosophy always puts in the limelight what particularly shaped the thinking of its author. This says more about me than about the history itself. For my argumentation, it is crucial to recognize that in classical European philosophy, the category of weakness was primarily related to the internal life of the subject, and to a lesser extent, to the influence of the external world. This primarily concerned situations where the moral subject is unable to direct their will appropriately or is unable to act in accordance with their own good will. Ethics, in various forms, aimed to increase the control of the individual over their own will. Naturally, discoveries such as the unconscious, the influence of power, or historical forces shaping our will complicate this framework and challenge the possibility of exercising full control over oneself. Nevertheless, ethical theories continue to focus on the potential for expanding this domain. From European thought emerges the moral imperative to combat one's own weakness.

The second important space inextricably linked to thinking about agency and action remains political thought. In the next section, I will proceed to discuss this aspect based on Judith Butler's critique of neoliberal discourse. The choice of this author is because her philosophy perfectly demonstrates the social consequences of the rejection of vulnerability in European culture.

3. Judith Butler and weakness in political discourse

If ethical discourse has withdrawn its focus on the interior as a space over which control can be exercised, so political-social discourse, by its very nature, has had to turn to

the possibility of controlling external factors. If in ethics, power is expressed as resistance to extrinsic factors that could potentially undermine one's will, so political discourse turns to social relations. A similar understanding of power was expressed by Max Weber in his definition of power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (Weber 1978, 53). Power in this context therefore refers to the practical realization of chosen goals. In this context, empowerment will mean the process of strengthening social groups by providing them with tools, a political environment aimed at increasing their ability to achieve individual goals. This demand has become particularly relevant to liberal thought, with a particular focus on liberal feminism.

The focus on agency and power that accompanies European culture conceals a particular vision of the human condition and, perhaps even more interestingly, the human psychology. Judith Butler, drawing on the tools of psychoanalysis, described this phenomenon through the mechanism of denial and displacement. According to the American philosopher, a person does not want to accept the haunting thoughts of his own weakness, vulnerability to injury, his own mortality. All these elements are repressed, pushed into the unconscious, into what we do not want to accept. The mind, defending itself against the awareness of impending illness and death, not only rejects its own weakness, but even projects it onto others as part of the projection mechanism (Butler 2009, 178). The effect of displacement is a falsified vision of my strong, causal Self and the weak, wounded and mortal other. Butler brilliantly shows the political consequences of adopting such a division, which are irresistibly linked to the vision of human (and perhaps interspecies) relations. This is because the philosopher shows the tendency to essentialize the victim, to view him solely through the prism of his essence, or weakness (Butler 2009, 179). Cultural patterns show the victim as helpless, incapable of defence, but at the same time as morally pure, innocent, incapable of sin. This makes the discriminated lose the right to resist – they are literally stripped of their weapons. On the other hand, all traces

of abuse of violence as a gesture of defence are somehow justified by the very sanctity of the victim.

There is an apparent paradox here of weakness, understood as the inability to realize one's own will. In classical ethical discourse, weakness appears primarily as a weakness of character and is conceptualized as in the first rank an obstacle to the realization of virtue or moral law. On political grounds, on the other hand, weakness remains primarily associated with belonging to an oppressed group, deprived of political rights and the possibility of equal participation in social life. This state is admittedly undesirable, but at the same time allows one to achieve a kind of status of sanctity and purity.

Butler aimed the blade of her critique first at the neoliberal theories that have formed contemporary political discourses. It is in this philosophy that recognition of the power of human reason takes on political significance. Liberalism sees human weakness and vulnerability as a problem to be solved by resorting to various strategies of empowerment of the subject. It looks for rational means by which people could increase their autonomy, freedom and self-reliance. This is particularly evident when liberal politicians and politicians begin to refer to the issue of discrimination and emancipation. Their solutions usually include the so-called provision of development opportunities. Behind this is the belief that a rational subject will be able to manage his or her own life and take full responsibility for his or her fate, as long as he or she is not hindered by an undemocratic legal system. In the liberal sense, a just society means a system in which people are free to make decisions about their own lives to the extent that this does not infringe on the freedom of others. Liberal discourse, on the other hand, completely ignores the issue of interdependence that inevitably exists between people and also between non-human entities. The scheme of this philosophy becomes almost Kantian: dependence on Others is a threat to autonomy, considered the highest value. Therefore, it is necessary to get rid of this dependence, reject it, throw it into the trash garbage can of the unconscious.

Psychoanalysis teaches, however, that what is unconscious does not thereby become less real. Thus, rejecting

one's weakness, vulnerability and dependence does not mean that one will automatically become stronger, more powerful and freer. Sooner or later, weakness and what, following Butler, can be called precariousness will haunt us, and we – unprepared – will have no mechanisms to deal with it. I am referring to both the more obvious political and social mechanisms and the less obvious psychological mechanisms. Thinking in terms of strength, independence and autonomy makes a person fully responsible for his situation, including his material situation. Poverty is thus a punishment for insufficiently rational financial decisions – a punishment that is deserved and therefore does not require the support of systemic, public welfare. At the same time, it can lead to a psychologically dangerous blaming of oneself for all supposed failures. The problem is that the world remains much more complex. My situation depends both on my decisions and on things over which I had no or only minor influence (see Butler 2009, 30-31). The weakness I am so eager to reject can remind me of its existence at any moment: through illness, an unfortunate accident, a minor mistake...

4. Conclusion: beyond the binary scheme

Repeating somewhat the themes of the introductory chapter, weakness means the inability to practically realize one's will in the world. The opposite of weakness is, in the first place, power, and the similar categories of strength and autonomy. European culture has defined weakness as an originally negative phenomenon, an obstacle to be overcome. Especially today, in the neoliberal reality, the subject is influenced by the imperative to strive for em-*power*-ment, to enhance oneself and gain full control over one's own life. The rigid, binary opposition between fundamentally bad weakness and desirable strength has the effect of imposing challenges on the individual that he can never fully meet. In some cases, this can even lead to serious psychopathological problems associated with a lack of acceptance of one's own limitations (see Bizarri 2023, 52). What we need, therefore, is an anthropological theory that allows us to accept weakness as an indispensable part of the human condition, without falling into its affirmation.

Ethical and political theories that abandon thinking in terms of individual agency and autonomy risk falling into the other extreme – into a paternalistic attitude (see Conoly 2013). It is impossible to agree on a concept that would deprive human beings of the ability to take conscious actions and take responsibility for their own decisions.

Instead, a certain solution could be the conceptualization of man as a being interdependent on Others and on external reality. For the error of the concepts discussed so far lies not in the mere affirmation of human agency through strategies of empowerment and autonomy (for these are necessary), but rather in the conceptualization of power and weakness in an extremely individualistic manner. Weakness, meanwhile, remains a relational category, closely linked to our location in a network of relations with other entities. If weakness consists in the inability to realize one's own will, then we can see that the conditions for realizing and even shaping this will often have a social and institutional nature. This does not entail extreme determinism, but only the observation that autonomous decisions are made and then enacted in an actual world filled with relationships. Hence, the quest for a real increase in human strength, autonomy and real empowerment of the subject first requires recognition of our dependence on the network of relationships. Only by accepting our weakness as a part of the human condition will it be possible to think through institutional, political, educational and social solutions to reduce the subject's weakness where needed or beneficial.

NOTES

[1] The present research could certainly be expanded to include comparative comparisons of the image of weakness in other cultures, with particular emphasis on Far Eastern culture. However, due to a lack of relevant expertise, I limit myself to European writings.

[2] What I have in mind here is first and foremost a particular tradition present in Christian theology and philosophy, which should be traced back to the writings of Litter (and the theology of the cross he promoted), which today is reflected, for example, in the theology of the weak god by John D. Caputo (2006). This current emphasizes and affirms God, revealed in the form of a weak, mortal body, dying on the cross. For authors working in this tradition, weakness is also a manifestation of strength. For example, the Other

appearing to me as weak has a special power to impose moral obligations on me. So this is an interesting example of thinking aimed at breaking down the binary opposition between weakness and strength.

[3] Martha Nussbaum in her classical book *The fragility of Goodness* has pointed out that Greek philosophers, including primary Aristotele and stoic tradition has spoken about the phenomenon of human fragility and the exposure on the moral luck. However they still claimed (inspired by Socrates) that the good person cannot be harmed meaning that all that matters for a good life – virtue – can not be destroyed by external factors. (2001, xiii-xxiv)

[4] The question of the will was obviously one of the critical theme for the middle age and early modern philosophy. In those eras, vast majority of European philosopher tried to elaborate the concept or the free will and virtue in the reference to both tradition: Greek philosophy and Christian religion. The concept of perfecting ones own character and streathen one's own will was therefore linked to the moral imperative of the obedience towards God. (For further examination of these topic see Saarinen 1994, 2011).

[5] For the genealogy of the notion of autonomy in modern philosophy see: Shneewind 1998. .

REFERENCES

Aristotle. 2004. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bizarri, V. 2023. "The Ontological and Ethical Value of Vulnerability: A Reflection Between Phenomenology and Psychopathology", In *The Vulnerability of the Human World: Well-being, Health, Technology and the Environment*, edited by Elodie Boublil and Susi Ferrarello, 43-55. Dordrecht: Springer Verlag.

Butler, J. 2004. *Precarious Life. The power of mourning and violence*. New York: Verso.

_____. 2009. *Frames of war. When is life grievable?* New York: Verso.

Caputo, J. D. 1993. *Against Ethics. Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

_____. 2006. *Weakness of God. A theology of the Event*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

McKenzie, Catriona, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Doods (eds.). 2014. *Vulnerability. New essays in ethics and feminist philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Conoly, S. 2013. *Against autonomy. Justifying Coercive Paternalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fineman, M. A. 2008. "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition." *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 20(1): 1-23.

Goodin. R. E. 1986. *Protecting the vulnerable: A Re-analysis of our Social Responsibilities*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Hutchings K. 2013. "A place of Greater Safety? Securing Judgments in International Ethics". In *The vulnerable subject. Beyond subjectivism in international relations,* edited by Amanda Russel Beattie and Kate Schick, 25-43. London: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996a. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor. [The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. 1996b. *Religion and Rational Theology*. Translated by Allen w. Wood and George di Giovanni. [The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levinas, E. 1971. *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. La Hague : Martinus Nijhoff.

Nussbaum, M. C. 2001. *The fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pitkin, H. 1972. *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Plato. 2012. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Duke Classics.

Ricouer P. 2001. « Autonomie et vulnérabilité » In *Le Juste 2*, 85–105. Paris : Esprit.

_____. 2009. *Philosophie de la volonté II. Finitude et culpabilité I :* L'Homme faillible. Paris : Aubier.

Saarinen R. 2011. *Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press.

_____. 1994. *Weakness of Will in Medieval Thought: From Augustine to Buridan*. Leiden: Brill.

Schneewind, J.D. 1998. *The invention of autonomy. A history of Modern Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vujošević, M. 2019. "Kant's account of moral weakness." *European Journal of Philosophy* 27(1): 40-54.

Weber, M. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Translated by Ephraim Fischoff. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Adriana Joanna Mickiewicz is a PhD student in Philosophy at Jagiellonian University, winner of the Ministerial Diamond Grant competition, and the Minister of Science and Higher Education Scholarship. She is author of a number of scientific publications on ethics and hermeneutic philosophy, as well as popular philosophical texts. Her research interests include contemporary ethics, feminist theory, and the problem ofsuffering. She is currently conducting research on the category of vulnerability and the phenomenology of physical pain, and is working on the moral philosophy of John D. Caputo. She is the author of the podcast Mówi Muher, dedicated to promoting the philosophy of women.

Address:
Uniwersytet Jagielloński
Instytut Filozofii
Grodzka 52,
31-044 Kraków, Poland
Email: adriana.mickiewicz@wp.pl