



ABOUT... Corine Pelluchon

Full Professor at the University of Franche-Comté
corine-pelluchon.fr

After I finished my dissertation on Leo Strauss, in which I discuss the contribution of modern “Enlightenment” thinkers and extend this analysis to the crisis of liberalism in today’s society, I began to focus on medical practices and technology because they pose a challenge to political liberalism. Our difficulty in proposing constructive solutions to the environmental crisis and in taking the animal condition into consideration, in our lives as well in politics, is the other starting point for my work.

I work essentially in the area of political philosophy: how to deliberate on subjects that go far beyond the problem of the peaceful coexistence of freedoms and even that of the equitable distribution of resources? In thinking about the changes in democratic institutions and political culture that could put ecology and the animal question at the heart of the Republic and allow for greater citizen participation in debates on bioethical issues, I am trying to redraft the social contract. The issue of justice for dependent persons, future generations, and other species must be rethought; the point is to ground the social contract in a conception of humanity different from the one characterizing modern and contemporary political theories. This conception is based on a primary philosophy.

The second aspect of this research thus involves ontology, in that it questions subjectivity, which is no longer defined only by freedom, but presupposes a rigorously defined relationship among three cardinal concepts of what I call an ethics of vulnerability: autonomy, responsibility, and vulnerability. These categories, which have been reconfigured, require changing the way we think of ourselves and our relationship to others, including other living beings. However, unlike Anglo-American animal and environmental ethics, which focus on the moral and even legal status of non-human entities to assess the legitimacy or illegitimacy of our use of them, my ethics of vulnerability focuses on the subject more than on the object of responsibility. It therefore involves revamping humanism.

The ethics of vulnerability first arose from thinking about the identity of patients suffering from degenerative diseases of the nervous system, but it goes beyond the framework of medical ethics. It not only treats of other fields of applied ethics, it also includes the philosophy of the subject. Drawing heavily on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, it is distinct from the ethics of care, even though both challenge the abstract, idealized conception of autonomy proper to liberalism with a relational definition of identity. This definition goes hand in hand with awareness of our fragility, as well as with the affirmation that responsibility—the ability we have to be concerned about others—is central to vulnerability. It is this conception of vulnerability as both fragility and strength, and the attempt to promote the integration of individuals in situations of vulnerability by effectuating a shift from ethics to justice, that distinguishes the ethics of vulnerability from the ethics of care and from social philosophies that are more concerned with the issue of domination.

This work seeks to replace the philosophy of the subject underlying contemporary contractualism with another philosophy. The ethics of vulnerability, which emphasized the category of passivity, is the first phase in this philosophy of corporality, supplemented today by a philosophy of “living from,” which takes the materiality of our existence seriously: hunger, oikos, space and time, place, and enjoyment. Based on a radical phenomenology of sensations, it takes inspiration from the French philosophers who were able to suggest an alternative to Heidegger’s ontology of concern, such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Ricœur. Going beyond the dualism between nature and culture, subject and object, this phenomenology of nourishments aims to determine the existential structures that break with Heidegger’s ontology of concern and philosophies of freedom that still serve as a foundation for liberal political theory.

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