

# Rethinking Vulnerability in the Age of Anthropocene

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## INTRODUCTION

Violence in the form of mass shootings in the U.S. is a modern marker of human corporal vulnerability in formal educational settings. In response to such existential risks, many schools in the U.S. have deployed heightened security measures, including arming school personnel and free gun training for teachers, to protect vulnerable student populations. Yet human existential vulnerability persists in schools and beyond. Beyond security concerns, modern schools attend to the special needs of various vulnerable student populations. In order to pursue equity in education, most public schools also make compensatory efforts to ameliorate their differential vulnerability. Above all, there have been persistent efforts to bridge “achievement gaps” between the academically vulnerable and invulnerable student populations so that all students can “survive” and “flourish” in the credential society. In higher education settings, research projects involving the designated vulnerable populations predictably call for a full review by an Institutional Review Board. Still, the designated vulnerable populations remain vulnerable.

While modern schools as responsive social institutions have made concerted efforts to attend to human vulnerability, modern schools appear to be indifferent to the ongoing ecological decline, particularly climate change, that elevates human existential vulnerability. Yet if the utilization of the paternalistic protection of vulnerable populations has failed to address and redress the etiological roots of varied forms of violence against the designated vulnerable populations, how might modern schools articulate ethical responsibilities and engender responsive action for mitigating the global human vulnerability ensuing from ecological decline? In view of the precariousness human existence, might human invulnerability simply be an unattainable goal, and all protective and preventive efforts Sisyphean in nature? Further, might such Sisyphean efforts

simply maximize fear and render us even more vulnerable? Must we avow our common vulnerability? On what grounds can we discern or even measure differential human vulnerability across temporal and spatial boundaries? How? At what cost?

In response to the above questions, I first attempt to unravel ambiguities surrounding the conceptualization of vulnerability. I point out that, to a large extent, human vulnerability is coterminous with the increasingly more vulnerable glocal ecological systems in the age of anthropocene. Next, I examine the framing of existential, ontological, and social vulnerability in educational discourse. Instead of perpetuating the vulnerable pursuit of invulnerability in formal educational institutions, I argue that modern schooling must embrace and engage ecological and human vulnerability in order to assume ethical responsibilities for mitigating the ongoing ecological decline.

#### PARADOXES IN THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF VULNERABILITY

The academic discourse on vulnerability appears to focus on human vulnerability, and more or less overlooks the presumably external environments that could be susceptible to human appropriation and exploitation.<sup>1</sup> Such an anthropocentric conception of vulnerability easily misguides us to conceptualize external harms as “natural disasters,” and overemphasizes the human intervention necessary in order to mitigate human vulnerability. The international advocacy of technical intervention to predict natural disasters and ameliorate their impact on human survivability in the 1970s epitomized this anthropocentric approach, which stresses the role of human agency in transforming the state of vulnerability into the state of security before and after natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the perceived “natural disasters” as external factors do not necessarily render humans vulnerable. Rather, people are vulnerable when they lack an internal coping capacity to make adjustments to the presumably external disasters. By emphasizing the role of human predispositions, natural disasters can be further regarded as anthropogenic “un-natural disasters.”<sup>3</sup> From this

standpoint, resilient people can minimize or even overcome their vulnerability by avoiding the creation of “un-natural” disasters. To effectively prevent anthropogenic disasters, it is crucial that we go beyond promoting post-disaster human resilience and adopt a preventative approach through which to identify and transform human activities that may induce “natural” hazard/disasters.

It is virtually impossible, however, to acquire the requisite and credible knowledge to predict and prevent all hazards, risks, and disasters. Above all, even resilient people may not have the capability to cope with large-scale disasters, when the formation of presumably “local disasters” can, to a large extent, be attributed to economic globalization that entails global poverty, urban density, climate change, and so on. Holding “vulnerable” populations accountable for their vulnerability appears to be victim blaming. As a result, international organizations, while recognizing the multifaceted nature of “vulnerability,” have not been able to attain a consensus on “vulnerability” as a scientific concept.<sup>4</sup> Instead of establishing an operational definition of “vulnerability,” the World Conference on Disaster Reduction proposed “Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015” in order to “develop systems of indicators of disaster risk and vulnerability at national and sub-national scales that will enable decision-makers to assess the impact of disasters on social, economic and environmental conditions and disseminate the results to decision makers, the public and populations at risk.”<sup>5</sup> This pragmatic approach is based on the assumption that risk indicators exist and can be identified or even measured, and that identifying risk indicators and assessing vulnerability is the key to mapping out effective and systematic strategies to minimize human vulnerability.<sup>6</sup>

As discussed above, the notion of “human vulnerability” in the context of disaster risk reduction and prevention has been circumscribed by a fluid, binary system grounded in the dynamic interactions between human agency and physical, social, and environmental conditions. To a large extent, such fluid binary thinking facilitates the recognition that vulnerability and resilience are not opposite ends of the spectrum. At the same time, it is evident that resilience is to be reckoned with positive affirmation, while human vulnerability is to be annulled or mitigated. While resilience is not necessarily the flip-side

of invulnerability, such binary thinking, which emphasizes undelimited human agency, readily leads to the pursuit of invulnerability.

### VULNERABLE PURSUIT OF INVULNERABILITY IN MODERN SCHOOLS

In spite of the widespread recognition of the interrelations between schools and society, there has been a tendency to romanticize schools as safe havens immune from social ills. Hence, school shootings can still appear to be an “unthinkable” crisis in spite of their frequency.<sup>7</sup> In the face of the seemingly unstoppable and “unthinkable” crises, from the Columbine High School massacre to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, legislators have endeavored to introduce and enact legislative acts to arm school personnel so schools can assume greater responsibility for the protection of their vulnerable student populations.<sup>8</sup> It is evident that the aforementioned legislative and political efforts center on transforming vulnerable schools into invulnerable fortresses for vulnerable students. Such efforts have not proven to be effective, however. After all, violence in schools has roots that cannot be confined within schools. The Interdisciplinary Group On Preventing School and Community Violence cogently states that: “[T]he Connecticut tragedy is referred to as a school shooting, but it is better described as a shooting that took place in a school.”<sup>9</sup> Expecting and training teachers as first responders to carry guns not only adds superfluous responsibilities to teachers but also overshadows their primary professional responsibilities in facilitating students’ well-rounded development, which includes civic engagement in addressing and redressing gun violence.

Furthermore, the educational research literature appears to center on preventing, or at least mitigating, violence in schools by profiling perpetrators versus victims.<sup>10</sup> The polarization of perpetrators and victims erases the common vulnerability between them. While adequate mental health supports are essential for facilitating students’ well-rounded development, it should be noted that the preventative and/or precautionary actions within schools do not necessarily focus on educating violence-prone perpetrators. Instead, formal

educational institutions readily accept the presupposition that law enforcement and mental illness prevention and treatment are responsible for either incarcerating or healing the perpetrators outside schools. Consequently, violence-prone students ceased to be members of the “vulnerable” student population and the perpetrators emerge as the invulnerable. The existence of the school-to-prison pipeline implies, to a certain degree, that schools are for the vulnerable and prisons are for the invulnerable.

But why are perpetrators prone to undertaking violent action? Can we assume that victims are immune from undertaking violent action? Might profiling victims solidify or even enhance their vulnerability? Judith Butler points out that: “[T]he struggle against violence accepts that violence is one’s own possibility. If that acceptance were not there, if one postured rather as a beautiful soul, as someone by definition without violent aggression, there could be no ethical quandary, no struggle, and no problem.”<sup>11</sup> From this standpoint, both perpetrators and victims are vulnerable to violence. The polarization between the potential perpetrators and potential victims does not necessarily prevent violence. It only obliterates the common humanity (essentially, the common vulnerability) between people and fosters fear and hatred between them. Thus, Mahatma Gandhi notes: “violence does not mean emancipation from fear, but discovering the means of combating the cause of fear. Nonviolence, on the other hand, has no cause for fear. The votary of nonviolence has to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear.”<sup>12</sup> Violence begets violence. Clearly, building a fortress-like school for vulnerable students does not free students from fear that might entail more violence.

Moreover, instead of taking a stand on easy access to guns/lethal weapons, professional educators have delimited their professional responsibilities even further to transmitting “accountable” knowledge. As a result, invulnerable schools fail to provide vulnerable students with learning opportunities to unveil and decipher the hidden curriculum and null curriculum concerning pervasive and permissible violence and their vulnerability. Confining vulnerable students to fortress-like schools may reinforce their vulnerability and hinder their ability to envision a society free from fear and violence. In short, the commitment to

building “safe” schools entails a de-politicization of the education profession, and disempowers professional educators to cultivate an educated and engaged citizenry that might dare to construct a culture of non-violence.

In addition, it is crucial that we attend to the manifestation of differential social vulnerability in schools. Born as vulnerable infants, humans’ survival depends on others, especially their primary caretakers. While our social relations might enable us to cope with our corporal vulnerability, our social relations could also be sources of vulnerability. Exploitive social relations can easily deprive us of life, liberty, and dignity. In particular, we can easily discern varying degrees of social vulnerability among individuals and their affiliated groups. As mentioned before, while the heightened security measures in schools suggest that all students are vulnerable in the violence-prone society, such security measures also reflect the recognition that some of the presumably vulnerable students can be violent perpetrators who prey on even more vulnerable students, especially students with disabilities. In recognition of students’ differential vulnerabilities, formal educational institutions assume more paternalistic responsibilities to “protect” more vulnerable students. However, legal protection of students with disabilities is, to a large extent, based on a medical model that tends to stabilize students’ disabilities. The medicalization of disabilities can deprive students with disabilities of their rights to shape their identity formation and learning process. In response, the field of critical disabilities studies has recently generated a more inclusive understanding of vulnerability as a socially constructed condition.<sup>13</sup> From this standpoint, it is social conditions rather than disabilities that make students with disabilities vulnerable. Instead of stabilizing students’ vulnerability, education of students with disabilities should instigate a transformation of oneself in relation to others and the society as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, higher educational institutions mandate that research that involves “vulnerable” human subjects must provide them with extra protection.<sup>15</sup> While the intent of *The Belmont Report*<sup>16</sup> is to protect the aforementioned vulnerable groups from “unjust” research, the paternalistic protection of ethnic minorities not only highlights the marginality of ethnic minorities but also perpetuates stereotypes of vulnerable populations.<sup>17</sup> In particular, *The Belmont*

*Report* mandates soliciting informed consent from vulnerable populations, which is grounded in the principle of respect for autonomy, but this may not reflect the ethnic/racial minorities' cultural values. In particular, underprivileged and underserved ethnic minorities tend to have limited or even non-existent autonomy.

To sum up, educational discourse on human vulnerability appears to be simplistic and contradictory. To gain a better understanding of the multifaceted nature of human vulnerability, it is critical to attend to the fact that modern schools in both developed and developing nations more or less aim to steer individuals "away from their natural environment and pass them through a social womb in which they are formed sufficiently to fit into everyday life."<sup>18</sup> Modern schools' severing of the organic connections between humans and nature contributes to the construction and maintenance of our homogenized and one-dimensional cultural, political, and economic systems that are seen as in opposition to biophysical ecological systems. Deliberate construction of fortress-like schools does not necessarily prepare vulnerable students to flourish in a vulnerable society, however. In view of the futile pursuit of invulnerability in schools, it is helpful to restore the organic connections between vulnerable individuals and the vulnerable living universe. As Richard Borden points out, the "study of ecology leads to changes of identity and psychological perspective, and can provide the foundations for an 'ecological identity' — a reframing of a person's point of view which restructures values, reorganizes perceptions and alters the individual's self-directed, social, and environmentally directed actions."<sup>19</sup> Instead of building fortress-like schools, it is critical to consider cultivating the formation of ecological identities in modern schools and beyond.

## ENGAGING VULNERABILITY AND ECOLOGIZING EDUCATION

To inquire into modern schools' disparate attention to both mass shootings and ecological decline, it is critical to examine modern schools' inclination to endorse and promote disembodied human existence, especially in the age of accountability. The fluid binary account of vulnerable conditions/situations and active human agency is based on an assumption that human agency is not

necessarily bound with embodied existence. Rather, human agency resides in “disembedded and disembodied selves”<sup>20</sup> who are capable of striving to transform the external state of vulnerability. In reality, the formation of human agency has always resided in particular bodies. Above all, it is as embodied moral agents passing through varied “social wombs” (including modern schooling) that students learn to undertake or forsake transformative action. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir points out that “the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation; it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects.”<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir’s recognition of the ambiguous co-existence of immanence and transcendence within one’s body demystifies disembodied rationalistic human agency. To Beauvoir, if “reasonableness” is the universal form of humanness, then reasonableness must be constituted through the particularity of an individual’s “lived experiences” in varied cultural contexts in flux. Beauvoir wrote: “man is man only through situations whose singularity is precisely a universal fact.”<sup>22</sup> Although Beauvoir cast doubt on an *a priori* assumption of de-contextualized reasonableness, her view on the singularity of an individual’s “lived experiences” does not reject reciprocity. In her words: “[A]n ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents can, at the same time, be found to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all.”<sup>23</sup> Beauvoir notes that “separation does not exclude relation, nor vice versa.”<sup>24</sup> From her standpoint, the constitution of an individual’s subjectivity is based, to a large extent, on an individual’s “relation to the world and other individuals.”<sup>25</sup> In line with Beauvoir’s recognition of the oscillation of individual subjectivity and universal humanity, the universalist conception of human vulnerability does not necessarily negate the particularity of vulnerability as experienced by embodied individuals.

As the vulnerable society has been conterminous with nature - the surrounding bio-physical ecological environment - it is critical to ecogize education so the context and process of education are coterminous with the vicissitudes of “nature.” In point of fact, the concept of “nature” has played a key role in shaping the development of an environmental education that aims to re-affirm the organic connections between humans and nature.<sup>26</sup>



Notably, there has been a tendency to romanticize “nature” in the process of ecologizing education. For instance, the recent advocacy of biomimicry and ecological design is based, to a certain degree, on an assumption that humans ought to learn from nature. In the same vein, many contemporary environmental ethicists and activists have attributed the ongoing global ecological decline to human dominion over nature. As ecological crisis has become a recurring issue in the industrial age, proponents of non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, such as Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess, have made a further effort to acknowledge the intrinsic values of nature. However, J.B. Callicott notes that “there can be no value apart from an evaluator ... all value is as it were in the eye of the beholder. The value that is attributed to the ecosystem, therefore, is humanly dependent or at least dependent upon some variety of morally and aesthetically sensitive consciousness.”<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, human ethical reasoning cannot be excluded from the constitution of the intrinsic values of nature, such as “integrity,” “diversity,” “stability,” and “beauty,” as suggested by Leopold and Naess. Also, it is human beings who construct scientific disciplines, such as ecology, to articulate the “objective” facts about nature. Furthermore, the intrinsic values of nature, grounded in objectivity, do not necessarily lead us to recognize and undertake ethically appropriate actions. For instance, we might think that “diversity” and “stability,” as intrinsic and objective values of nature, are self-revealing and unequivocal because various living and non-living entities actually co-exist in an ecosystem; but it is human beings who need to ponder whether we want to make a deliberate effort to protect an endangered species or commit ourselves to the non-intervention in face of a “natural” fire in the US National Parks.

In particular, there are potential and actual conflicts between the perceived intrinsic and objective values of natural objects and nature as a whole. The perceived “objective” values of nature do not automatically prescribe specific corresponding ethical actions. Rather, human moral consciousness has to be involved in clarifying and resolving value conflicts. Above all, our moral reasoning regarding ecological issues, to a large extent, has grown out of how we interact with other human beings.<sup>28</sup> It is not surprising that the perceived

intrinsic values of nature such as “bio-diversity” could overlap with human values such as “cultural diversity.”

The conundrum many non-anthropocentric environmentalists or bio-ethicists experience reveals human ethical vulnerability, i.e., humans as moral agents are susceptible to imposing, misrecognizing, or misinterpreting the presumably intrinsic values of nature. At the same time, while the inevitability of anthropocentric reasoning might cultivate our moral commitment to addressing the ecological decline, human-centered ethical reasoning could sustain destructive human dominion over nature in the anthropocene. Thus, it is essential to recognize the coterminous coexistence of human vulnerability and ecological vulnerability in order to avoid re-establishing a human-nature binary system in the process of ecologizing education. Instead of pursuing invulnerability, it is helpful to embrace and engage vulnerability when we conduct ethical inquiries into the interconnections between ecological issues and inter-human affairs. War, class exploitation, poverty, and animal experimentation need not be regarded as peripheral to the other ecological issues such as air/water pollution, oil spills, and the extinction of wilderness and wildlife.

To engage vulnerability in the process of ecologizing education, I find Martha Albertson Fineman’s recognition of universal human vulnerability and her advocacy of allocating equitable assets and resources for “the vulnerable subjects” to be instructive and helpful. Fineman notes that “vulnerability is inherent in the human condition and inevitably descriptive of the institutions we build in response to that vulnerability, including the state.”<sup>29</sup> She further points out that while vulnerability must “initially be understood as universal and constant when considering the general human condition, vulnerability must be simultaneously understood as particular, varied, and unique on the individual level.”<sup>30</sup> To Fineman, “vulnerability on one level can be thought of as an heuristic device, forcing us to examine hidden assumptions and biases folded into legal, social, and cultural practices.”<sup>31</sup> In recognition of the co-existence of universal vulnerability and differentiated particular vulnerability, it is unrealistic and unreasonable to regard all adult citizens, as *liberal subjects*, as autonomous and independent, and thus as responsible for coping with their vulnerability. Instead, Fineman argues for a more active and responsive state that recognizes

the citizens as *vulnerable subjects* who are in need of adequate physical assets (e.g., material goods), human assets (e.g., material and cultural/social goods for facilitating human development), social assets (e.g., support from social networks of relationship), ecological assets (e.g., non-toxic bio-physical environments), and existential resources (e.g., religions) so they are capable of exercising their resilient agency in order to flourish even in vulnerable situations. Fineman's inclusive list of assets/resources demarcates the substantive dimension of human equality. As she further points out, "our experiences with asset-conferring institutions are often concurrent and interactive, but also can be sequential."<sup>32</sup> More specifically, "the failure of one system in a sequence, such as a failure to receive an adequate education, affects future prospects."<sup>33</sup> Although Fineman does not explicate how the deprivation of adequate ecological assets affects vulnerable subjects, she notes that the fetus and children are especially vulnerable to environmental hazards, which could hinder their balanced life-long development.

Critics of Fineman's theory argue that a responsive state can easily assume paternalistic power and reinforce human vulnerability.<sup>34</sup> But, are humans as vulnerable subjects inevitably "powerless" and unable to exercise their agency through individual and/or collective efficacy? On the one hand, Fineman's conception of "vulnerable subjects" simply acknowledges human interdependence. On the other hand, Fineman's recognition of human vulnerability and her call for a responsive state appear to aim at facilitating equitable distribution of indispensable assets and resources among vulnerable subjects. From this standpoint, vulnerable subjects are not necessarily passive recipients of assets and resources. Instead, they can serve as strong advocates for needed social re-construction at all levels. As Judith Butler points out, "vulnerability is not a subjective disposition. Rather, it characterizes a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way ... vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region ... where receptivity and responsiveness become the basis for mobilizing vulnerability rather than engaging in its destructive denial."<sup>35</sup> It follows that the vulnerable subjects and the responsive state are inseparable. The vulnerable subjects can engender both their receptivity of and responsiveness to address and redress the ongoing glocal ecological decline. At the same time, vulnerable subjects do

not necessarily share identical embodied experiences of ecological vulnerability. In the face of climate change, the residents of Trump Tower may not be capable of comprehending the fear of the people living in Tuvalu even though they share common human vulnerability. Hence, our common vulnerability does not necessarily mandate empathy or render mutual support. Nevertheless, vulnerable subjects could mobilize social movements to compel corresponding social institutions and the state to develop and implement equitable distribution or allocation of indispensable assets and resources for the flourishing of our ever-expanding ecological community.

### CONCLUSION

In recognition of the coterminous coexistence of human and ecological vulnerability, our efforts to ecologize education cannot simply rely upon adding “environmental education” as a set of courses/programs to formal schooling. Rather, ecologizing education must embrace and engage vulnerability in order to foster inter-subjective recognition of our moral responsibilities to our ecological community. It follows that ecologizing education is to stress vulnerable human moral agency in order to address the interrelated environmental issues.

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1 My examination of vulnerability initially also centered on human vulnerability. During the 2016 Educational Theory Summer Institute, Clarence Joldersma pointedly addressed how human action renders the global ecological and systems vulnerable. Here, my analysis reflects his critique of the anthropocentric conceptualization of vulnerability.

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