



Human Fraternity as Responsibility The Exemplary Case of Safeguarding

La fraternidad humana como responsabilidad El caso ejemplar del safeguarding

Alessandra Campo
Pontificia Università Gregoriana
E-mail: a.campo@unigre.it
ORCID:

Abstract

Starting from Pope Francis' documents on the theme of fraternity, this contribution aims to show how the ethical call for the healing of the world can find in fraternity a founding element to the extent that it is recognisable at a global level, and therefore regardless any cultural and religious differences. To this end, an attempt will be made to think of human fraternity in the light of a paradigm that can be accepted beyond these same differences. Through reference to some contemporary philosophical reflections (with particular reference to Hannah Arendt's contribution), this paradigm will be identified in the essentially relational form of human existence. Starting from here, in particular by referring to the thought of Hans Jonas and Emmanuel Lévinas, the concept of fraternity will be thought of in the light of original human responsibility, and conceived as an original attitude in which the person cannot fail to recognise themselves in order to fully realise their identity. Finally, the efficacy of this paradigm will be shown in the exemplary case of the prevention of sexual and other forms of abuse (Safeguarding): only by thinking the abusive act in the light of the relational and contextual dimension in which it occurs, it is possible to understand the socio-cultural attitudes that, in a given context, favour it or at least do not inhibit it, in order to be able to intervene at a preventive level.

Keywords anthropology, fraternity, human beings, human existence, relations, Safeguarding.

Resumen

A la luz de los documentos del Papa Francisco sobre el tema de la fraternidad, esta contribución muestra cómo la llamada ética a la sanación del mundo puede encontrar en la fraternidad un elemento fundacional en la medida en que sea reconocido a nivel mundial y, por tanto, independientemente de la pertenencia a diferentes culturas y religiones. Con este propósito, se intentará pensar la fraternidad humana a la luz de un paradigma que pueda ser aceptado más allá de estas diferencias. Haciendo referencia a algunas reflexiones filosóficas contemporáneas (con especial mención a la contribución de Hannah Arendt), se identificará este paradigma en una forma esencialmente relacional de la existencia humana. A partir de ahí, con particular referencia al pensamiento de Hans Jonas y Emmanuel Lévinas, se analizará el concepto de fraternidad en referencia a la responsabilidad humana, concibiéndolo como una actitud originaria en la que uno no puede dejar de reconocerse para una plena autorrealización. Por último, se mostrará la eficacia de este paradigma en el caso ejemplar de la prevención de los abusos sexuales y de otro tipo (Safeguarding): sólo pensando el acto abusivo en la dimensión relacional y contextual en la que se produce, es posible comprender las actitudes socioculturales que, en cada contexto, lo favorecen o, al menos, no lo inhiben, para poder intervenir a nivel preventivo. En este sentido, la fraternidad puede leerse como una llamada a una responsabilidad mutua y compartida, que determina formas de relacionarse sanas y seguras, reduciendo el riesgo de dinámicas abusivas.

Palabras clave: antropología, existencia humana, fraternidad, relaciones, Safeguarding, seres humanos

Introduction

Faced with a wounded world calling for healing at different levels, the reference to the concept of fraternity is not to be taken for granted. Yet it appears extremely topical in the light of two documents recently brought to global attention by Pope Francis. I refer to Human Fraternity. For World Peace and Living Together (signed together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in 2019), and the 2020 Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. On Fraternity and Social Friendship. These texts have had great resonance, even beyond the Catholic sphere. The former document, in particular, because of its evident political, as well as religious-spiritual, content.

The Pope's effort starts from a theological and religious assumption, and one of faith: that which sees in the shared creaturely dimension of the human person the root of the fraternity that binds each one of us to our fellow human beings.

A complex theme, like that of human fraternity, inevitably requires the effort to continue considering it in terms of a courageous confrontation with reality, or rather, the human realities in which it is called to be declined. These are multiple and do not all contain the same value and/or religious assumptions.

How the paradigm of fraternity can be translated into concrete strategies that can be accepted by a globalised world in which such diverse cultural and religious realities coexist, requires us to think about it in the light of the actual challenges with which the world itself is confronted. It is an effort already present in the papal Encyclical, which has the undeniable merit of not invoking fraternity in the abstract, but in a close confrontation with the most cogent current threats.

By its very nature, the Encyclical starts from an idea of fraternity that is based on the assumption of faith. We are sisters and brothers because we are children of the one Creator God. A presupposition, moreover, shared by the Grand Imam in the 2019 Document.

In wishing to hold together, and thus understand the connection that binds the three concepts that have emerged so far (the world, its healing, the fraternity), from the point of view of critical analysis, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by these three terms, which are only apparently immediately transparent. The present essay does not set out to contrast, nor does it claim to be exhaustive, but rather represents an effort to make a possible contribution to common reflection on such pressing issues.

The World. What do we mean when we say that "our world is wounded"? That "our world needs to be healed", that it needs "care"? What is this world for which we are caring?

This is not the place to examine the history of a term that has always been a problem for philosophical attempts to define it¹. It may be useful to think of the "world" from the perspective assumed here, namely as a space shared by human beings, which human beings, by sharing, contribute to elaborating and modifying. Not only that, the world can be defined as a space - not only physical - that is shared and is in need of healing. Even more: that we can heal. Or at least that we feel called, or are called to, heal. We will address the problem of the foundation of this "call" to heal the world later. For now, it seems important to clarify why we can heal this something we call "world". We can do so because this world concerns us, it has to do with us as human beings. We cannot think of a world except in relation to that being who, in relation to it and in it, is a given. The world is not just a place, an object, a series of data. It is the space that human beings inhabit, dwell, and in which they act. It is therefore something in relation to which the human being is, as such. There is no human

¹ A reference must be made to the famous Heidegger concept of "Being-in-the-World" (Heidegger, 2006) and, even more so, to the notion of "dwelling" the world that characterizes much of the more mature Heidegger (Heidegger 2000). But the philosophical background of the arguments of this contribution consists above all in the understanding that philosophical Anthropology has given of the notion of the world in relation to the understanding of humanity, even in its various declinations. An interesting reconstruction of this is offered by Tedesco, 2008.

being without a world. The world in turn is not simply a planet, a mere astral object, but a space that can be formed, de-formed, and to which meanings can be attributed, because it is inhabited by human beings who act in it and who, by acting in it, shape its ever-changing meaningful horizons. It is not simply a container in which we are, but a network of actions and relations in a constant process of articulation.

In other words, paraphrasing the anthropological-philosophical reflection to which we will return later, the world is not simply, or not only, an environment (*Umwelt*) in which we exist and to which we biologically react in order to survive. To put it simply: if for the non-human animal, the instinctively coded reception and processing of environmental stimuli is a sufficient condition for guaranteeing its existence in the environment from which it receives these stimuli, for human beings a habitable environment is, and must rather be, a *Welt*, a world, which they contribute to construct and which they must actively process. They must in the sense that they cannot avoid to do so in order to inhabit it and ultimately to live in it².

The healing of the world could be thought of as a form of action peculiar to human beings, all the more necessary as it is essential to the existence of human beings as such. In other words, in order for human beings to be able to continue to inhabit the world in authentically human conditions, we cannot but care for and heal the world, where the latter appears to be compromised and, above all, where the world appears to be in need of healing because of the consequences of human acts.

In this sense, considering human fraternity as a necessary means for healing, requires identifying ways of fraternity that make everyone feel involved and that can be shared beyond socio-culturally and religious differences.

The fraternity that Pope Francis and the Imam invoke could be defined as a “fraternity of origin” (Viola, 2003, p. 146): as already mentioned, it arises from the idea of a common origin of human beings as children of the one Creator. The same document on Human Fraternity, however, proposes itself as “an invitation to reconciliation and fraternity among all believers, indeed among believers and non-believers, and among all people of good will”: a universalist aspiration that calls into play another type of fraternity, one “of result” (Viola, 2003, not guaranteed by a common faith, but which needs a foundation that can be shared by “all people of good will”. Whether we think of fraternity as founded in faith, or as a task to be achieved, in both cases we are dealing with a bond that goes beyond biological and blood ties, and which must find its root and justification elsewhere. As will be seen, this point opens up an exquisitely anthropological question to which we will attempt to respond with a specific proposal.

It remains a term: fraternity is invoked so that the world can be “healed”. So, healing. But from what evil? From social evils? Political? From wars? Famines? Health and disease? Or, extending the need for healing beyond human beings, considering animals, plants, nature, or the climate: is the world to be healed from ecological evil? It is clear that our present is confronted with all these challenges and many others. But for fraternity to show its universal desirability as a healing strategy, it is not possible to think of a solution that risks becoming generalist.

Here we will try to articulate a comparison with a specific challenge: that of sexual and other forms of abuse of minors and so-called “vulnerable” persons, reading the category of fraternity in the light of that of Safeguarding, as a specific preventive attitude. Let us assume for now this expression to be inevitably vague and susceptible to clarification. That is to say, the concrete case of abuse prevention will allow us to think of healing the world not so much, or not only, as a form of reparation for damage, but above all, as an attitude that allows human beings to build and dwell in a world, if not free from violence and abusive dynamics, at least less exposed to the risk of their occurrence.

² On the distinction between *Welt* and *Umwelt* it is worth referring to Uexküll 2013, and especially the philosophical anthropological twist given by Gehlen, 2009.

The present contribution, therefore, proposes to sound out the call to fraternity as a means to heal the world, trying to offer an anthropological-philosophical perspective that, far from being in conflict with the documents cited, attempts to offer further tools for critique and analysis, and, finally, for action.

To this end, the discussion stages of the work will be as follows:

- 1) A critical analysis of the notion of fraternity;
- 2) An anthropological-philosophical digression preparatory to a rethinking of the concept of fraternity;
- 3) The proposal of an anthropological-philosophical paradigm that can correspond to said concept;
- 4) The comparison with a possible declination of this paradigm as a means for understanding a specific phenomenon, that of sexual abuse and other forms of abuse of minors and so-called “vulnerable persons”, trying to identify in Safeguarding, as a specific form of prevention, a possible declination of the very concept of fraternity.

1.

The most famous socio-political moment in the history of the concept of fraternity is the one that appears in the French revolutionary triad *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. However, it is interesting that in the political and legal history of these three concepts, the first two have been much more successful than the third. In “the famous triad, liberty and equality have attained full dignity as ethical-political concepts, while fraternity, having resisted every attempt at secularisation, was soon cast aside” (Viola, 2003, p. 160).

Basing itself on the idea of an extra-biological bond among human beings - that is, beyond the bond of blood - it has been difficult to justify the idea that “all people are sisters and brothers” in contexts that did not recognise an original foundation common to human beings, which, no longer limited to the family bond, found in a common creative act at the origin of human existence - and of existence as a whole - the only sharable foundation. Sharable, however, only within communities that admit this original divine paternity.

In other words, without a transcendent foundation, fraternity and its ethical and political implications, does not seem to hold up and cannot be a candidate as a concept of sharing for common actions to protect and care for the world. Only the foundation on the bond of blood seems to remain, which too easily lends itself to interpretations that can be instrumentalised in a racial sense, as history has sadly shown.

If fraternity is lost, the ethical and political bond that demands respect for the other two concepts - freedom and equality - appears to be lost too. Or rather, without the support of fraternity, freedom and equality risk taking on distorted forms that actually deny them – as has occurred. From a strictly theoretical point of view, the fragility of these notions has been identified in having conceived them within the modern subjective paradigm (Foucault, 1977), to which much of the criticism of contemporary thought is addressed.

If these concepts seem to be based on the idea of a hypostatized, unbreakable and dominant subject, conceived in the light of the optimal and winning performance (Butler, 1997; Gilson 2014), which is capable of elaborating a world from itself. This way, both freedom and equality become distorted projections of a performance of power in which it is the subject who holds this power that univocally establishes the limits and modalities of freedom and the criteria of equality, which instead of becoming respect for differences, result in their flattening to a univocal criterion of equality that does not accept differences (the forms of colonialist domination are an obvious historical-political

example), or in which diversity is regarded as a minus with respect to the standard set by the subject itself (and here one can trace one of the paternalistic elements of 20th Century totalitarianisms). On closer inspection, what is at issue here is the philosophical perspective underpinning the very concept of fraternity, which is inseparable from the anthropological one. Thinking of fraternity outside of the modern subjective paradigm, means ipso facto rethinking it in the light of a concept of the human being that is drawn outside of subjective limitations themselves. This is not a new theme for anthropological-philosophical reflection. Indeed, in a sense it is precisely on this ridge that it arises in the history of contemporary thought.

This is not the place to retrace the philosophical parabola of this path. What is of interest here is to draw from it the most significant insights for the purpose of the present discussion. The following paragraph is, in fact, dedicated to this point.

2.

Although philosophical Anthropology and a large part of 20th Century reflection on the nature of the human being have not come to unequivocal conclusions on such a complex issue, the various contributions that still benefit contemporary thought have attempted to shift our gaze from a static and hypostatised view of human nature to an understanding of it that takes into account the dimension that Aristotle defined as “social”.

Considering the human person as a being that is primarily relational, means placing oneself in the perspective outlined above, when the meaning of “world” taken into consideration by the present contribution was introduced. Within a biological understanding that considers the animal-environment relationship on the model of the “stimulus-response” relationship, human beings represent something peculiar and unprecedented. As we have seen, they are not only bound to an Umwelt, but to a Welt, which not only represents an objective, biologically determined space, in relation to which the human animal in turn determines itself. The specific difference between human beings and animals would be the fact that the former are not constituted in relation to an environment by which they are determined and conditioned for their own survival. They are essentially bound to a “world” (see above) that they in turn help to construct and to which they give meaning. The prius here is no longer the Cartesian subject, the only certainty in the face of an objectivity that is always under the mortgage of gnoseological doubt, nor is it the Kantian subject, especially of the First Critique, which understands the world according to its own intellectual categories. Shifting the understanding of the living being, and of the human being in particular, from an understanding of their relationship with the environment (and with the other, we would add here) means giving primacy to this relationship, to the very fact of being in relationship (Plessner, 1928, 1961). It is interesting that from here, not only anthropological perspectives strongly linked to a biologist approach have been developed, but also investigations that have offered an understanding of the spiritual, and not only biologically determined, dimension of the human being (Jonas, 2001).

However, a further step in this direction is needed, so that this original relational human dimension can support a proposal of fraternity capable of acting in the direction of care and healing of the world.

It is no coincidence that this further step requires a shift in the political sense (in the original and “lofty” sense of the term, which refers back to the communitarian concept of the polis) of the anthropological reflection, an exemplary declination of which is represented by the thought of Hannah Arendt.

According to Arendt, any claim to define human nature in an essentialist sense is impossible, not because such a nature (in a properly ontological sense) does not exist, but because as such it would only be knowable by a god and not by human beings. We can observe and define the human “condition”. Interestingly, following Arendt, the claim to define human nature in an absolute

sense would, “the first prerequisite would be [being] able to speak about a ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what’” (Arendt, 1958, p. 10). In other words, by elaborating the claim to define human nature ends up hypostatizing the “defining” subject, thinking of humans as holders of power such that they can objectify humanity in order to make it, precisely, the object of knowledge. Not only, but in the very act of defining the human being, this subject would impose itself as the criterion and measure of this very definition. Arendt, on the other hand, proposes a perspective in which a correct and effective (and this effectiveness, in particular, interests us here) understanding of what the human dimension means, understanding its condition, the manner of its being in, and in relation to, the world. This condition is of a being that appears in the world under the sign of plurality: “Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth” (Arendt, 1981, p. 19). While a subject thought of in absolute terms, capable of understanding human nature in a universal sense, would in this way rise to the pretence of determining the criteria on the basis of which only the human subject can think of itself as authentic and therefore recognised and legitimised, thinking of humanity as essentially plural and, with Arendt, acting in the world, allows that original relationality mentioned above to be reinforced in a fundamental ethical-political key.

In other words, human beings already constitute themselves always in relation to the world, they can indeed only be understood insofar as they are not only bound to an environment that biologically determines them, but precisely insofar as they are already always acting in a world, an essentially relational space in which humanity exists as plural. The Heideggerian “Being-in-the-world”, in the Arendtian view still imprisoned by subjective fetters, can be rethought in terms of acting in the world, insofar as being always in relation with others, as existing in a plurality. To be-in-the-world, in short, means for human beings essentially to act. Even renouncing to act is still a mode of being in this inalienable plurality.

We must leave here the Arendtian contribution, which then continues in complex and elaborate ways in the declared sense of a political philosophy.

Let’s bring with us, however, the fundamental idea that human beings are those beings who, by existing, inhabit a world in relation to which they give themselves, defining its meanings, and thus inhabiting it in an active manner, that is made possible by its being always plural. The mode through which human beings exist in this active relationship constructs, modifies and profiles the world in which they develop.

Going back to our starting point, that is, the challenge of thinking of a concept of fraternity that can be accepted in a plural sense and is capable of effectively healing the world, what has been argued so far could be reframed as follows: fraternity can be thought of as a universal trait of humanity and acceptable as by considering a shared dimension between human beings that goes beyond the theoretical imposition of an abstract universal subject, and that is based on the essential and relational plurality of human beings, who exist insofar as they inhabit the world in an active way in relation to each other. Not a Person, but People, inhabit this planet: they act in and on the world, by virtue of the very fact that they share it in the sign of plurality.

In other words, fraternity can be rethought as the original relationality of human beings, who, by acting, determine the world in which they live and thus also the human plurality in it. This requires neither blood ties nor a common faith, but is compatible with the incredible socio-cultural variety in which human pluralities exist.

But is this enough to make this fraternity a bond for the care and healing of the world?

It is clear that this bond, or at least the call to plural action that has positive effects on and in the world, requires a further step.

This paradigm can indeed raise the call to care for the world when fraternity so understood

is no longer thought of or felt as one possibility among many, but as an act of full human realisation, the denial of which would mean denying humanity as such.

3.

Two 20th Century authors who, albeit from very different perspectives, thought of this relational dimension of human beings not only as an extrinsic duty but as the full realisation of what it means to be human, are Emmanuel Lévinas and Hans Jonas. These two authors can be of help in the continuation of this work because, despite their undeniable differences, they have made an important contribution to this reflection by taking on a category that appears decisive here – that of responsibility.

It is not possible here to go over the complexity of the philosophical thought of these two authors, so we will limit ourselves to some essential conclusions.

In Jonas, there is a remarkable philosophical effort to rethink the Heideggerian Being-in-the-World outside the Thrownness of which Heidegger remains a prisoner, by proposing an ethical interpretation of the way in which life, and human life in particular, is given, which alone can justify and ground - so says Jonas - the moral duty we have towards it. Regardless of the complex passages that lead Jonas from his philosophical Biology to Ethics (Piccolella, 2006 and Pulcini, 2009), it is particularly significant that for Jonas, in the face of the human capacity to destroy life on earth through the unbridled technical and technological progress of the last two centuries, it is precisely the relational nature of humanity (which, especially the mature Jonas calls “Mittelbarkeit”, “mediacy”) that grounds (here is the key term) its responsibility for life itself. And to human life in particular. We could even say more and state that the very fact that human beings are such by virtue of their original relationship to the world and to others grounds their duty to assume responsibility.

But a responsibility that is not to be understood in a strictly juridical sense. It is not so much, or not only, a question of assuming responsibility a posteriori for damage caused. Responsibility “concerns not the ex post facto account for what has been done, but the forward determination of what is to be done” (Jonas, 1984, p. 117). By combining this approach, which permeates and determines the entire ethical foundation proposed by the volume *The Imperative of Responsibility*, with a later reflection by the same author, it is possible to clarify if not the cause, then at least the essential stimulus and determination that inform this peculiarly human possibility - and duty - of understanding oneself as responsible: “Dennoch ist sie [die Verantwortung], außer für etwas, die Verantwortung vor etwas” (“Nevertheless, it [responsibility] is, except for something, the responsibility before something”, Jonas, 1992, p. 113).

The responsibility for something concerns the possible consequences of one’s actions. Understood in this way, the Jonasian interpretation would not differ from a Weberian one. Responsibility for something, on the other hand, is constituted not so much in view of some purpose, or to someone’s advantage, but always arises before an interpellating instance, in virtue of someone/something that calls it forth, or demands it.

A careful and articulate reading of Jonas’ thought would make it possible to identify, within his philosophy, the elements for recognising where this call comes from that originally determines me as responsible. There is a truly innovative element in the ethical reflection on responsibility for which we are indebted to the German-Jewish thinker. What makes me responsible is not so much a transcendent moral imperative: responsibility determines me as a human being in the face of the fragility and vulnerability of life, and of human existence on earth. The human power to destroy life (to injure, reduce and even annihilate it, at an individual level but, by now, also at a global level) brings out the fragility with which we always relate, the original vulnerability of the world and of the plurality in which we are (making use the terminology used in this contribution). It is in the face of this

unassailable vulnerability that the human being is and is as responsible³.

One last step is missing, namely, the one that allows us to identify in this original responsible constitution of the human being the root of a universal fraternity (plural, in the meaning assumed here). An idea of fraternity that can represent a universal and shared call to responsibility.

“It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign (and the epiphany of the face coincides with these two moments) that constitutes the original fact of fraternity” (Lévinas, 1991, p. 214): according to Lévinas the basis of subjectivity is the relation to the Other. This original experience is immediately an ethical one: the self experiences the Other not as an object that can be possessed, but as someone I am immediately responsible for. This is what originates fraternity. The faces of the Other - or rather, their being other than me – is the original fact of responsibility, and it is because human beings are such always and precisely insofar as in relation to another, that they can understand themselves as the other’s kin.

Putting together the theoretical passages that have brought us this far: the transcendent and ethically binding tie of fraternity is paradoxically but virtuously immanent to the human condition, which is originally relational and plural.

It is here that the notion of fraternity can rise to a universal category, without compromising the religious, socio-cultural, and historical specificity of each individual and each community. It is here that fraternity ceases to be a heteronomous mandate, and therefore in principle, a refutable value, but becomes something substantially undeniable. It is in fraternity that human beings recognise both themselves and the other, as human. Conversely, denying this would mean denying our own humanity, disowning it in the other who is the one who determines it.

To what extent this long digression is not just a philosophical artifice but the proposition of an attitude that is essential for the practical effects it can have in the healing of the world, as anticipated, will now be seen in the specific case of the prevention of abuse against children and all vulnerable people, namely, Safeguarding.

4.

Among the wounds that afflict the world and that we are called upon to heal, we examine here the wound of child abuse as well as sexual and other forms of abuse within relationships, in general. This topic is one to which the writer has been dedicated for several years, from the essential perspective of abuse prevention as conceived through the well-established term, Safeguarding.

The English term, now customarily used by professionals and organisations who, in different cultural contexts, work for the protection of victims of abuse and for the prevention of abusive phenomena, does not find translations in other languages that fully render the idea it contains. It is interesting that (at least to my knowledge) there is no universally recognised and agreed-upon definition of Safeguarding. We therefore take the liberty of proposing one here, which does not claim to be exhaustive, but which is functional to the discourse we are pursuing. Safeguarding indicates the action and attitude of surveillance and vigilance (“guarding”) over a space and the people who inhabit it and in which they relate, so that this space, these people and these relationships, are safe.

By Safeguarding, we mean here the set of attitudes and measures aimed at taking care of a given context (institutions, organisations, social and relational contexts..) in such a way that the people who relate within it can do so in conditions of safety, and that in the relationships established in that context, even in conditions of power asymmetries, the dignity, identity, psychological and physical health of those who enter into those relationships are always protected.

This way of understanding abuse prevention has as its primary objective not the abusive

³ A very interesting contribution to this topic is offered by Pulcini, 2009. See also Gilson, 2014.

act or dynamic in itself, but the environmental and relational conditions that make it possible. This approach implies looking at Safeguarding, not by focusing exclusively on the dual aggressor-victim paradigm. Finkelhor's research and fundamental studies on child sexual abuse, which especially in the 1980s focused on the risk factors of the victims and the characteristics of the abusers (Finkelhor, 1980, 1984), already demonstrated how abuse cannot be understood without taking into consideration the environmental conditions that make it possible. The motivation of the abuser and the fragility of the victim alone neither explain, nor are sufficient, to make the abuse possible, which due to its specific relational and dynamic characteristics, can take place if the conditions of the environment, the organisation, the system in which it takes place, make it possible. "Sexual offending emerges from a network of relationships between individuals and their local habitats and niches, and is not simply the consequence of individual psychopathology" (Ward and Beech, 2006, 53)⁴.

This observation can also be applied to other forms of abuse, like spiritual abuse, as significantly indicated by texts such as Butenkemper, 2023.

From the philosophical point of view proposed in the previous paragraphs, to consider abuse outside the relational network within which it occurs would mean reducing the understanding of the abuser's and victim's actions to that subjective paradigm which, as we have seen, fails to account for a mode of existence that would allow an attitude of fraternity to be justified in the sense mentioned above. In other words, it would mean thinking of the abusive act as something that can only be accounted for through a psychological diagnosis of the abuser or with respect (and this point is particularly critical) to a fragility and vulnerability intrinsic to the victim.

This way of looking at abuse reflects the broader perspective that interprets the power relationship in terms of an action completely in the hands of the abuser, endowed with power as such, with respect to which the victim is defined by virtue of an intrinsically deficient character, because they are fragile, vulnerable.

This perspective entails at least two critical consequences: firstly, it reduces responsibility for the abusive act to the alleged psychopathology of the abuser, completely de-emphasising the context that allowed them to translate it into action. We are not proposing that abuse is never an act resulting from pathology, nor that the responsibility for the crime cannot be attributed to the abuser. The need to recognise the responsibility (and guilt) of the abuser for the abuse remains incontrovertible and by no means reducible. However, from an abuse prevention point of view, reducing the understanding of, and intervention in, the abuse to the profile of the abuser alone does not allow any kind of intervention other than a posteriori – namely, that of imprisonment, sentencing (and possibly treatment) of the abuser once the abuse has occurred. In other words, this approach drastically reduces the possibility of intervention in order to reduce the possibility of the abuse actually taking place. This attitude does not allow considering what conditions favourable to abuse (and violence in general) the institution, organisation, or general context, has neglected or even enabled. On the contrary, it encourages the covering-up attitude that all too often characterises the attitude that institutions have taken and unfortunately still take towards the abuse that has occurred in them, in order to protect their own image⁵. The second consequence is equally if not more serious: the victim is considered in terms of the fragility - vulnerability - that exposed them to the abuse.

⁴ ⁴ We must bear in mind that, as the WHO has pointed out, sexual abuse – but studies on other forms of abuse allow to extend this consideration to them – always occurs "within the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power" (apps. who.int/violence-info/child-maltreatment/). Now, every socio-cultural context is conditioned by values, beliefs and mentalities that determine the way in which responsibility, trust and power are perceived – and put into practice – and thus determine the relationship conditions in which abuse can occur. The implications of this will be shown later.

⁵ ⁵ The phenomenon of the Catholic Church's covering-up is, moreover, the great "scandal in the scandal" in the painful experience of this institution: not only the fact in itself of the abuse that has taken place there, but that the ecclesiastical authorities have obscured the events and even protected the abusers. It is a dynamic that not only characterizes the action of the Church – as the #MeToo movement has demonstrated – but that questions the Church in a significant way and has shaken its credibility. On the issue of abuse in the Church, it is worth mentioning, among the many contributions, Zollner, 2022.

Vulnerability becomes an almost ontological characteristic of the victim, who is no longer thought of - and educated to think of themselves - as a person capable of being proactive within the relationship, but as belonging to a category that, by virtue of this intrinsic deficiency, lack and fragility, can at most be protected, in the sense of being confined within a space that is pretended to be safe. The victim of abuse is thought of in this way as essentially deficient, i.e. characterised by a minus and lacking the resources to be able to assert themselves positively. In terms of treatment, this reduces the healing space of the victim, whose possibility of empowerment is limited, keeping them in a condition of dependency which is the same as that underlying the abuse itself.

Examples of this kind are there for all to see, often without being recognised. This is what happens when one thinks of solving the problem of violence against women by limiting their possibility of going out or deciding on their clothing, in fact reiterating forms of submission and control, instead of promoting their emancipation. When one limits the education of children and young people on topics considered uncomfortable (such as sexuality), thus depriving them of the awareness needed to recognise dangerous behaviour. Or when disabled people or migrants are managed through institutionalised and paternalistic control systems that, instead of promoting a secure capacity for self-determination, restrict their freedom under the aegis of a vaunted "protection".

From this point of view, if the abuse takes place, the risk is to place the responsibility on the victim, who supposedly overstepped those limits imposed on them by virtue of their intrinsic vulnerability. This is what happens in the phenomenon of victim blaming: the tendency to make victims responsible for the abuse they have suffered, and which actually translates into the guilt felt by the victims themselves: "I did not know how to rebel", "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time", "I attracted the abuser's attention", "I asked for it".

"When vulnerability is conceived negatively as oppositional and fixed, those who are vulnerable must appeal to, or comply with, those who occupy the role of invulnerable saviour, those who are not weak but strong, not passive but active, not pathetic but admirable" (Gilson, 2016).

In other words, thinking of abuse only as a possible act performed by a subject on an object by virtue of the latter's fragility, risks degenerating into a perspective in which the victim is perceived, if not as the cause, at least as a condition of possibility of the abusive act. Which is one of the mechanisms underlying the cognitive distortions by which abusers themselves tend to justify, if not legitimise, the abuse committed (Joulain, 2018).

On the other hand, as we have seen, by entirely shifting the perspective to the abuser, in preventive terms this would risk reducing possible intervention to action on the abuser's limitation of power, in fact reiterating the same paradigm underlying the abuse itself. Undoubtedly, direct intervention on the abuser, through psychological screening, due legal process and appropriate sentencing, is essential. However, limiting the fight against abuse and the overcoming of violence in relationships in these terms, fails to understand the fundamental elements of the abuser dynamic, which has strictly to do with the mode of existence of human plurality mentioned above: the abusive power dynamic takes place, as it is, within a relationship of responsibility, trust and power - ultimately, within the inescapable relational network in which we all find ourselves as human beings. Understanding the motivations and the process means not only diagnosing and prosecuting the criminal act, nor even less simply making up for an alleged fragility of the victim, but understanding the relationship itself within the cultural, socio-anthropological and relational conditions that made it possible.

Conclusion

Reconstructing the discussion process that has brought us this far: individuals define themselves as such from an original relationship, by virtue of which they always exist in a plurality. Before the face of the other, the self recognises itself in response to the recognition of the other, and

by the other. This recognition immediately recalls the responsibility that determines me in relation to the other, insofar as we define ourselves in our mutual response to each other.

This original and founding commonality is how something like a fraternity, a mutual belonging, can be recognised and shared. Responsibility is not an externally imposed duty, but the recognition of my - and our - humanity.

Preventing abuse means, first of all, assuming this original condition on a cultural, social and institutional level. In practical terms this implies:

1) From a cultural point of view: promoting a critical understanding of those cultural categories that may facilitate abusive relational forms, and courageously undertaking a path of reflection in this regard. Questions such as: How is obedience conceived in this particular cultural context? How much space is given to self-determination and autonomous ethical choices in cases of power asymmetries (family relations, parent-child, superior-subordinate)? Are there cultural taboos, for example, regarding issues like affectivity, sexuality, or power, that inhibit the promotion of open dialogue and awareness of personal dignity in any relational context, regardless of gender, age, cultural and religious affiliation?

2) From a social point of view: the answers to the above questions, which are deeply rooted in different cultural traditions, have obvious and immediate social repercussions and inform the relationship between genders, generations, different social strata and categories in any given cultural context. Issues like children's rights, women's rights, the relationship between the more and lesser privileged classes, the rights of disable persons... are inextricably linked to the cultural categories of a given social environment, and profoundly condition the power dynamics by which relationships between people are structured. Do children receive adequate training to be able to recognise harmful behaviour towards them? Do women have space for self-determination within society? Is there a shared common sense that can promote attitudes of fairness and recognition towards persons with disabilities?

3) From the institutional point of view: the political, community and even religious institutions and organisations in which every society is organised, in turn assimilate the cultural, discursive and social substratum in which they are grafted and structure themselves accordingly. So, how much awareness exists in institutions - starting with the family - of how the relational model they reiterate may or may not enable abusive and violent dynamics? At the organisational and political level, are hierarchies and the power and authority relationships, which are functional to the organisations themselves, aware or even willing to become aware of their role in promoting safe and healthy environments? Is this awareness translated into policies, codes of conduct and guidelines consistent with what we have termed "Safeguarding"?

As we can see, numerous questions emerge here, all legitimised by the common and hopefully trans-cultural recognition of a plurality that is foundational and essentially responsible for our humanity. A common trait - a way of thinking of a fraternity that does not erase socio-cultural differences or spiritual and religious sensitivities, but which challenges them all, at the different levels of the complexity of human reality, and which represents an appeal for every context to be able to rethink and reorganise itself in order to promote socio-relational and, ultimately, anthropological, healthy and safe ways of being.

Referencias

- Arendt, H. (1981), *The life of the mind*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Arendt, H. (1998), *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press.
- Butenkemper, S. (2023), *Toxische Gemeinschaften. Geistlichen und emotionalen Missbrauch erkennen, verhindern und heilen*, Verlag Herder.
- Butler, J. (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press
- Finkelhor, D. (1984), *Child Sexual Abuse: New Theory and Research*, Free Press.
- Finkelhor, D. (1980), Risk Factors in the Sexual Victimization of Children, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 4, 265-273.
- Gehlen, A. (2009), *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* Klostermann.
- Gilson, E. C. (2014), *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, Routledge.
- Gilson, E. C. (2016), Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*
- Heidegger, M. (2000), *Bauen Wohnen Denken in Vorträge und Aufsätze*, in Gesamtausgabe, 7, Vittorio Klostermann, 145-164.
- Heidegger, M. (2006), *Sein und Zeit*, De Gruyter.
- Jonas H. (1992), *Philosophische Untersuchungen und Metaphysische Vermutungen*, Insel Verlag.
- Jonas, H. (1984), *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, University Chicago Press.
- Jonas, H. (2001) *The Phenomenon of life. Towards a Philosophical Biology*, Northwestern University Press (Original work published 1966).
- Joulain, S (2018), *Combattre l'abus sexuel des enfants: Qui abuse? Pourquoi? Comment soigner?*, Desclée De Brouwer.
- Lévinas, E. (1991), *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (A. Lingis. Trad. 3th Ed), Kluwer Academic Publishers. (Original work published 1961).
- Piccolella, P. (2006), *Il limite di Prometeo. Pensare Uomo, Natura e Dio con Hans Jonas*, Lithos.
- Plessner, H. (1928), *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, De Gruyter.
- Plessner, H. (1976), *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana: Aufsätze zur philosophischen Anthropologie*, Suhrkamp Verlag (Original work 1961).
- Pope Francis (2020), *Fratelli Tutti. On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html
- Pope Francis, Al-Tayyeb, A. (2019), *Human Fraternity. For World Peace and Living Together*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html
- Pulcini, E. (2009), *La cura del mondo. Paura e responsabilità nell'età globale*, Bollati Boringhieri.
- Tedesco, S. (2008) *Forme Viventi. Antropologia ed estetica dell'espressione*, Mimesis.
- Uexküll, von J.J. (2013), *Theoretische Biologie*, Springer.
- Viola F. (2003) La fraternità nel bene comune. *Revista de fundamentación de las Instituciones Jurídicas y de Derechos Humanos*, 49, 141-161.
- Ward, T., Beech, A., (2006), An integrated theory of sexual offending. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 11, 44-63.
- World Health Organization, Child Maltreatment, <https://apps.who.int/violence-info/child-maltreatment/>
- Zollner, H. (2022), *Die Verantwortung der katholischen Kirche. Die Schaffung einer Kultur des Safeguarding ist integraler Bestandteil kirchlicher Mission*, in Die Sternsinger. Kindermissionswerk (Ed.), *Dossier Kinderschutz*, (pp. 50-59). Aachen
- Zollner, H. (2022), *Faithful and True? The History of Mentalities and the Catholic Church's Response to the Sexual Abuse Crises*, in Attard S. M, Berry J. A. (Ed.), *Fidelis et Verax. Essays in honour of His Grace Mgr Charles J. Scicluna on the tenth anniversary of his episcopal ordination* (pp. 601-620). Kite.