Vulnerability & Pluralism: Universal Ethics for a Fractured World (Revised Edition)

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Author's Note

This essay is the output of field study and research that was born not from theory alone, but from the lived experience of participating in real-time dialogue—where worldviews collide, identities surface, and moral frameworks are tested under pressure. The conversations with academia and industry I have analysed were unscripted, emotionally charged at moments, and profoundly revealing. They demonstrated that ethical reasoning does not occur in a vacuum; it unfolds in the friction between people who see the world differently, carry different histories, and interpret harm through different lenses.

Throughout the exchanges, one pattern became impossible to ignore: when moral arguments were grounded in agency, innocence, doctrinal authority, or rigid identity, they fractured under the complexity of real-world scenarios. When they were grounded in vulnerability and pluralism, they held.

This study convinced me that we need a more resilient ethical baseline—one that protects those most exposed to harm and allows diverse communities to coexist without coercion. The Vulnerability–Pluralism Model presented in the annex is my attempt to offer such a framework. It is not a final answer, but a contribution shaped by dialogue, critique, and the willingness to revise my own assumptions.

I am grateful to all participants in the debate—anonymous here not to erase their contributions, but to honour the arguments themselves rather than the personalities behind them. Their insights, tensions, disagreements, and moments of clarity form the real substance of this paper.

My hope is that this work encourages others to examine ethical reasoning not as static doctrine but as a living process—one that grows sharper, more humane, and more universally grounded when tested in the presence of others.

If this study has a purpose, it is to show that intellectual humility and moral seriousness are not opposing forces. They are the twin conditions under which honest ethical progress becomes possible.

While earlier versions of this research referenced Peter Singer for his historical role in spotlighting non-human suffering, the VPM fundamentally diverges from Singer's position. Singer grounds moral standing in cognitive capacity; the VPM explicitly rejects capacity-based models in favor of a universal vulnerability baseline. This shift was strengthened by critiques raised during the discourse.

A Note on the Evolution of the Model.

During ongoing discourse that informed this research, one critic (anonymized here as Participant W) offered an important refinement: the concept of innocence—often used as a moral threshold—is anthropocentric, theologically loaded, and unstable as a universal category. Their critique helped crystallize the shift toward vulnerability as the more inclusive and coherent baseline. This insight strengthened the VPM by removing residual dependencies on innocence hierarchies and grounding moral concern in a property all sentient beings share: the capacity to be harmed.

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1. Introduction

In the moral, political, and geopolitical arenas of the 21st century, one deeply entrenched assumption continues to generate confusion, inconsistency, and conflict: the belief that moral protection belongs primarily—or exclusively—to beings capable of intentional action. This view, which we might call Agency-Based Moral Protection, holds that full moral status is reserved for those who can form intentions, make choices, and act deliberately. On the surface, this framework seems natural and fair—after all, our legal systems distinguish intentional harm from negligence or accident, and we routinely hold agents accountable for their choices. However, as global events and philosophical critiques reveal, this agency-centered approach to ethics is fundamentally flawed. It fails to account for the reality of suffering experienced by countless beings who cannot form intentions or defend themselves. From the realm of animal rights to the tragedies of war, an ethics focused narrowly on agency misses the moral forest for the trees. Recent conflicts around the world starkly illustrate this point: civilians "bear the brunt" of violence, and it is often "the poorest, and those enduring discrimination, who suffer most" in wars and disasters[1]. Suffering, in other words, is not confined to those who wield power or agency; it is frequently heaviest upon those with the least capacity to influence their fate.

This essay argues that vulnerability, not agency, is the only coherent foundation for a truly universal ethics. Making vulnerability central means recognizing moral claims wherever suffering occurs – beyond species boundaries, beyond cognitive capacity, beyond political or religious identity, and beyond even human psychology. A vulnerability-based ethics starts from a simple premise: harm is harm, and it matters morally because it is harm, not because of who the victim is or what they are capable of. Such a framework acknowledges the lived reality that injury and injustice are experienced directly by beings who often cannot articulate grievances or fight back.

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[1] https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/conflict-and-crisis-reveal-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-the-world-s-vulnerable-face-in-accessing-their-right-to-health

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Infants, the cognitively disabled, non-human animals, and entire civilian populations in conflict zones – these and other vulnerable beings represent the true moral center of any ethical system that hopes to call itself universal.

The discussion proceeds in four stages. First, we expose the structural contradictions inherent in Agency-Based Moral Protection, showing how it collapses under its own selectivity. Second, we advance vulnerability as a superior ethical baseline and explore why it provides consistency and inclusivity that agency-based models lack. Third, we demonstrate how speciesism – the prejudice that favors one's own species – reveals the failures of agency-based ethics at the most fundamental level, undermining its claim to rational coherence. Fourth, we turn to geopolitics and show how real-world conflicts, especially those with asymmetrical power dynamics, cannot be morally evaluated through agency alone. In these complex situations, focusing on vulnerability and harm offers a clearer moral map than assigning simplistic blame. We then consider the political implications: if vulnerability is the moral baseline, pluralism emerges as a necessary condition for just governance. Finally, the essay concludes by arguing that pluralism – the peaceful coexistence of diverse worldviews – is the minimum baseline for legitimate state law. In contrast, theocratic or ideologically uniform regimes, which elevate a single worldview above all others, inevitably suppress the vulnerable and sow the seeds of conflict. Throughout, we integrate insights from philosophy and geopolitics to strengthen the argument that a new ethical architecture is needed – one built not on the shifting sands of agency, but on the solid ground of shared vulnerability.

Special Note of Gratitude: This work would not be complete without beginning with a special note of thanks to Domino Francis — whose fire, clarity, and unwavering commitment to human dignity have been a source of profound inspiration.

Domino's decades of service in restorative justice, peacebuilding, and community transformation — reflected in his public academic profile and lived practice — embody the very principles at the heart of this manifesto: love as strength, compassion as courage, and vulnerability as the deepest foundation of ethical life. His willingness to meet the world's hardest edges with tenderness and truth has stimulated, challenged, and illuminated the moral imagination that shaped these pages.

His reflections, his lived example, and the generous conversations we shared contributed not only to the refinement of the Vulnerability–Pluralism Model, but also to the emotional architecture. He is among those rare individuals who live the ethic the rest of us are still struggling to articulate — and his encouragement, insight, and fierce compassion have helped carry this work further than it could have gone alone.

For the fire of his conviction, for the depth of his humanity, and for the inspiration he continues to offer, I offer my sincere gratitude.

Domino Francis — thank you for reminding us that even in the darkest systems, love remains a revolutionary force.

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2. The Failure of Agency-Based Moral Protection

Agency-Based Moral Protection asserts that full moral status belongs only to those beings capable of intention, choice, and rational deliberation – in other words, those who can be moral agents. This view has a long pedigree in Western thought. Immanuel Kant, for example, famously argued that autonomy and the capacity for moral judgment are what endow a being with intrinsic value[2]. In Kant's framework, beings that lack a rational will (such as non-human animals) are excluded from the realm of ends and exist merely as means. Earlier, Aristotle and Aquinas had drawn a "natural hierarchy" in which beings lacking reason (animals, and by extension those humans without rational capacity) exist to serve those with higher faculties (Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals) Modern legal systems echo this focus on agency: we distinguish intentional murder from negligent manslaughter, assign responsibility only where an agent's choice is involved, and often sideline those who cannot be responsible (children, the insane) as having diminished legal agency. On the face of it, holding moral agents accountable for their intentions seems logical and just.

Yet this approach collapses the moment we apply it consistently. If moral protection and full rights are restricted to those capable of intentional agency, then vast categories of human beings suddenly fall outside the circle of moral concern. Consider the following classes of individuals, who by definition lack or have diminished agency:

- Infants and young children – Newborns and toddlers cannot form complex intentions or understand the moral consequences of their actions. They are not moral agents in the Kantian sense. (Indeed, philosophers routinely cite infants as examples of humans who are not "rational persons".)[3]
- People with severe cognitive disabilities – Individuals with significant intellectual impairments may never develop the capacity for moral agency as defined by high-level reasoning or autonomy[4].
- Elderly individuals with advanced dementia – A person suffering from late-stage dementia can lose the ability to make reasoned choices or recognize the consequences of actions. Their agency is profoundly impaired.
- The unconscious or comatose – A patient in a coma or persistent vegetative state has no agency; they cannot act or form intentions at all.
- Others with impaired agency due to illness or trauma – For example, someone in a temporary psychotic break, or suffering extreme trauma, may not be capable of deliberate moral action during that period.

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[2] https://iep.utm.edu/animals-and-ethics/#

[3] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/#

[4] https://www.hhrjournal.org/2021/12/08/shifting-the-moral-burden-expanding-moral-status-and-moral-agency/#

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Under a strictly agency-based ethic, one would have to conclude that these individuals deserve less moral protection than adults with full cognitive abilities. <u>**But that conclusion is absurd – indeed, repugnant**</u>. Our deepest moral intuitions, as well as our social and legal practices, tell us the opposite: the vulnerable deserve more protection, not less. Infants and children are afforded extra safeguards because of their weakness. The disabled are given accommodations and rights, not denied them, precisely because they cannot advocate for themselves. Far from withholding moral concern from the comatose or demented, we feel a greater duty of care toward them. As one philosopher notes, Kant's criterion of "personhood" (rational agency) as the basis of moral worth runs into a "serious problem" – namely that "many humans are not persons" in the required sense, including "infants, children, [and] people in comas." If personhood were required for moral status, "many beings whose positive moral value we have deeply held intuitions about…will be excluded", an utterly counter-intuitive result[5]. In short, agency cannot be the basis of universal ethics if it excludes those who need protection most. This is sometimes referred to as the problem of marginal cases: any criterion (like rationality) that is used to deny rights to all non-human animals will end up denying rights to some humans as well, unless we make an arbitrary exception for our own species[6].

Moreover, agency is irrelevant to the measurement of harm. Suffering is not less painful or tragic because the sufferer lacks intent or understanding. A toddler's agony in a burning building is not somehow morally less important than an adult's, simply because the child cannot comprehend why she is in pain. A person with a cognitive disability feels hunger, fear, and loneliness as acutely as any "rational" person. Harm is experienced directly by the vulnerable individual, not mediated by their capacity for choice. Therefore, tying moral worth to the victim's agency fundamentally misunderstands what moral protection is about – it's about preventing and alleviating suffering, wherever that suffering occurs.

The inadequacy of agency-based ethics becomes even clearer when we consider deliberate harms inflicted on those without agency. Imagine a cruel person who whips a severely brain-damaged child or sets fire to a cat or rapes a woman in a coma. In each case, the victim cannot understand or intend anything; they are not agents. Does that make the act any less wrong? Of course not. These actions horrify us because of the harm to the vulnerable victim, not because of any property of the victim as an agent. As commentators have pointed out, an ethical theory that said the wrongness of such abuse lies only in how it "damages the perpetrator's humanity" or violates some indirect duty would be grossly unsatisfying. The real, independent wrong being done is to the suffering being themselves. In Kant's own writings, he infamously argued that we have no direct duties to animals or other "non-persons," only indirect duties (cruelty to animals, for instance, is wrong inasmuch as it "damages" our humanity or could lead to cruelty to persons) (Gruen L. a., The Moral Status of Animals, 2024). But this misses the mark: when someone tortures an animal or an unconscious person, they are wronging that individual, not

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[5] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/#

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument_from_marginal_cases#

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merely betraying a principle. The harm does not evaporate just because the victim isn't an agent capable of reciprocity.

Thus, the foundation of Agency-Based Moral Protection is structurally flawed. It creates selective and inconsistent outcomes – protecting the competent adult but not the helpless infant, the rational but not the vulnerable – which is the opposite of what a truly ethical system should do. It's no wonder that philosophers who examine this issue conclude that we must either abandon strict agency-based status or accept morally grotesque conclusions. As one ethicist succinctly put it, "whatever kind and level of rationality is selected as justifying superior moral status for humans will either be lacking in some humans or present in some animals…. If we base moral superiority on such capacities, won't we have to exclude many humans?"[7]. The only way out of that inconsistency is to drop the assumption that moral protection hinges on being an agent. Indeed, some thinkers (like Carl Cohen) bite the bullet and openly embrace species-based double standards – Cohen argues that humans as a kind have special status, even if some individual humans lack the qualifying capacities, and admits "I am a speciesist"[8]. But this move merely trades one arbitrary criterion (agency) for another (species membership), as we will discuss later. Either way, an ethics that limits moral concern to those with agency fails to capture our considered moral judgments and the demands of justice. It leaves our most vulnerable fellow-beings out in the cold.

In summary, agency may be highly relevant for assigning responsibility (we rightly distinguish an accidental harm from a premeditated one by examining the agent's intent), but agency is useless as a measure of moral worth or protection. A coherent universal ethics cannot start from the premise of excluding the very beings who most need ethical consideration. The failure of agency-based morality is that it does exactly this – drawing the circle of moral concern in ways that privilege the powerful and competent, while marginalizing the weak and voiceless. We need a different starting point.

3. Vulnerability as the Only Coherent Universal Baseline

If agency fails as a universal foundation for ethics, what should replace it? The answer is vulnerability. By vulnerability, we mean the capacity to be harmed – to suffer physical pain, emotional distress, social oppression, or existential harm. Unlike agency, vulnerability is a property that all living beings share to varying degrees. It is the common denominator across humans and non-humans, adults and children, the powerful and the powerless. To be alive is to be susceptible to harm. As one formulation puts it, "Vulnerability is the shared, fundamental condition of being susceptible to harm, and ethics guide our response to this reality."[9] In philosophical terms, a vulnerability-based ethics posits that our moral obligations arise from the

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[7] https://www.hhrjournal.org/2021/12/08/shifting-the-moral-burden-expanding-moral-status-and-moral-agency/#

[8] https://www.hhrjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2//2021/12/johnson.pdf

[9] https://lifestyle.sustainability-directory.com/term/vulnerability-ethics/#

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fragile and dependent nature of living beings. Rather than asking "Is this being rational or autonomous enough to merit my consideration?", we ask "Can this being suffer? Can it be harmed by my actions or by forces within my power to mitigate?"

This perspective turns the focus of ethics squarely onto suffering and well-being as the primary moral facts. It resonates strongly with utilitarian and humanitarian intuitions. For example, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously wrote, "The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but Can they suffer?", emphasizing that the capacity to suffer (a form of vulnerability) is what entitles a being to moral consideration. In modern philosophy, thinkers have argued along similar lines that the capacity for suffering (or sentience) is the essential criterion for membership in the moral community, precisely because suffering is the irreducible harm ethics seeks to prevent[10]. On a broader front, feminist ethics and the ethics of care have long criticized the "autonomous individual" model of morality (which underpins agency-based views) and instead highlighted relationality, dependency, and care as fundamental ethical concepts. We are all vulnerable and interdependent – from the infant who cannot survive without caregivers, to the elderly person reliant on social support, to each of us in the face of illness, accident, or natural disaster. As one ethicist notes, "All people are born into a state of extreme vulnerability. They cannot grow up without the love and care of others… [even] grownups, as much as minors, can be harmed either by natural events or by actions of other people."[11]. This universal fragility is the moral starting point; invulnerability is an illusion.

Grounding ethics in vulnerability immediately solves the contradictions we saw in agency-based frameworks. It draws the moral circle to include any being that can be harmed – which is to say, all humans (regardless of their rational capacities) and, as we shall see, many non-humans as well. The vulnerable now form the moral center of concern, rather than hovering at the margins. Paradoxically, this is more in line with our intuitions about justice: the smaller and weaker a child is, the more carefully we believe society should guard their welfare. We pity and protect a wounded animal precisely because it cannot defend itself. Vulnerability, in this sense, demands a response of care, empathy, and protection. It presents what ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre called a moral claim upon us – the claim of the dependent other who needs our help (MacIntyre emphasized how dependent humans are at early and late stages of life and argued for virtues of acknowledged dependence). When we see a being in pain, the question of "did they bring it on themselves?" or "are they rational agents?" is secondary or irrelevant; what matters first is that here is suffering that can be lessened or avoided.

By adopting vulnerability as the baseline, we avoid the arbitrary exclusions of agency-based morality. No longer do infants or disabled persons fall into moral limbo – their vulnerability is obvious and thus their moral claim on us is strong. No longer do we face a conundrum about the moral status of a comatose patient; their well-being matters because someone capable of being harmed is being harmed if we mistreat them. In a vulnerability-centered view, it becomes clear

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[10] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument_from_marginal_cases#

[11] https://christelfricke.no/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/project_muse_950909-1.pdf#

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that moral patients (those who can be affected by our actions) are as morally significant as moral agents. Philosopher Alastair Norcross makes this point forcefully: "That animals can't be moral agents doesn't seem to be relevant to their status as moral patients…. Many humans are both moral agents and patients. Most, perhaps all, animals are only moral patients. Why would the lack of moral agency give them diminished status as moral patients? Full status as a moral patient is not some kind of reward for moral agency."[12] In other words, being capable of suffering (moral patienthood) is its own title to moral protection; one does not have to earn the right not to be harmed by possessing agency. This approach cleanly explains why "marginal" humans matter morally and why we have direct obligations to them, without resorting to special pleading or arbitrary bias. It also, as Norcross notes, dismantles the rationale for speciesist exclusion of animals, since many non-human animals share the relevant vulnerability that some humans have.

It's worth clarifying that centering ethics on vulnerability does not mean moral agents are off the hook – quite the opposite. It enlarges the scope of who counts morally, thereby increasing the responsibilities of anyone capable of acting. Vulnerability ethics is, as one description puts it, a "normative framework that posits universal susceptibility as the fundamental condition of all living entities, giving rise to moral obligations of care and justice." This framework "challenges classical liberal theories centered on the autonomous, invulnerable subject by re-centering the human and non-human animal as fundamentally relational, embodied, and dependent."[13] In practical terms, this means our social, political, and economic institutions should be evaluated by how well they protect the vulnerable and mitigate harm, rather than by how well they uphold the freedom of the already powerful. It is a shift from a retributive or agent-focused morality (concerned with punishing wrongdoers or rewarding doers of good) to a preventive and care-focused morality (concerned first with preventing suffering and meeting needs).

To illustrate the difference, consider a concrete scenario: A natural disaster strikes a town, trapping two individuals under rubble – one is a child, the other an adult civic leader. An agency-based perspective might (in its extreme form) note that neither the child nor the injured leader caused the harm intentionally; they are "innocent victims." But beyond that, agency doesn't provide much moral guidance – the situation calls primarily for humanitarian concern. A vulnerability-based ethic zeroes in immediately on the fact that these are vulnerable persons in need of rescue, regardless of their roles or capacities. Or take a less dire example: providing healthcare or education. In a society guided by vulnerability ethics, one would justify caring for the disabled or educating children not in terms of charity or indirect social benefits, but as a direct moral imperative arising from those individuals' vulnerability and our capacity to help. Notably, this perspective aligns with many existing humanitarian principles. For instance, medical ethics and human research ethics often invoke special protections for vulnerable populations such as children, prisoners, or those with cognitive impairments – acknowledging that because

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[12] https://www.hhrjournal.org/2021/12/08/shifting-the-moral-burden-expanding-moral-status-and-moral-agency/

[13] https://lifestyle.sustainability-directory.com/term/vulnerability-ethics/#

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these individuals are more at risk of harm or exploitation, extra moral duties apply in dealing with them[14]. Far from being a radical new idea, the primacy of protecting the vulnerable underlies many of our best moral intuitions and practices; making it explicit simply brings coherence to what we already deeply believe.

In summary, vulnerability provides a consistent, inclusive, and morally intuitive baseline for universal ethics. It avoids the contradictions of agency-based systems (since every being that experiences harm is included by default). It aligns with humanitarian law and human rights principles that stress the dignity and worth of all persons "without distinction"[15]. And it reframes ethical life not as a cold calculus of blame or desert, but as a shared human (and indeed interspecies) condition of precariousness that we must navigate together. As one academic commentary on vulnerability ethics notes, recognizing universal susceptibility leads to an emphasis on care and on designing institutions to "support the inherent vulnerabilities that define existence."[16] Instead of asking who is entitled to moral concern, we ask where the need for moral action is greatest. The logical outcome is an expansion of the "moral circle" to all sentient beings – all who can feel pain or be disadvantaged – and a sharpening of our focus on preventing and alleviating suffering as the first order of moral business.

Before moving on, it's important to note that a vulnerability-based ethic does not imply a simplistic or uniform approach to all moral problems. It does not mean, for example, that only vulnerability matters and concepts like intention, consent, or responsibility have no role. Rather, it establishes vulnerability as the baseline: any coherent universal ethic must start by ensuring that those who can suffer harm are protected from unnecessary suffering. Within that broad mandate, we still sort out questions of who is responsible for causing or preventing harm (agency is relevant there), and we still value other properties (like autonomy or integrity) as important aspects of well-being. But those values are pursued within the overarching commitment to reducing harm. Autonomy, for instance, is precious largely because violating it causes harm (psychological or social) to persons; it's not an absolute that trumps basic welfare. A vulnerability ethic thus naturally balances various moral considerations by reference to how they affect the vulnerable. It is inclusive and empirically grounded (in the sense that it looks at real outcomes of pain or deprivation), rather than abstract and potentially exclusionary.

4. Speciesism as a Case Study in Ethical Inconsistency

Note to the Reader: The following discussion references Peter Singer not as a philosophical foundation for this paper, but as a historical figure whose work significantly expanded public

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[14] https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2322821121

[15] https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/conflict-and-crisis-reveal-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-the-world-s-vulnerable-face-in-accessing-their-right-to-health#

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awareness of non-human suffering. Singer is included here only to acknowledge his role in challenging speciesist assumptions and opening discourse on animal moral status.

However, the ethical model advanced in this paper diverges sharply from Singer's capacity-based framework. We introduce Singer's work in this section purely for context within the broader ethical landscape and to clarify why a vulnerability-based ethics provides a more consistent, inclusive, and universal foundation.

In the broader landscape of ethical literature, we acknowledge the contributions of thinkers such as Peter Singer, whose work on animal liberation expanded public awareness of non-human suffering and challenged longstanding speciesist assumptions. Singer's influence opened intellectual space for questioning the dominance of agency and cognitive capacity as the sole criteria for moral consideration.

However, the model advanced in this paper represents a necessary evolution beyond those frameworks.

Where Singer grounds moral status in cognitive capacity, the Vulnerability–Pluralism Model grounds it in vulnerability itself—a more inclusive, coherent, and ethically resilient foundation for the 21st century and beyond. As global crises, technological acceleration, and interspecies entanglement intensify, ethical intelligence must evolve.

Vulnerability ethics, therefore, offers a more sophisticated and future-oriented approach—one capable of integrating human rights, animal welfare, geopolitical analysis, and structural injustice within a single universal framework.

One of the clearest demonstrations of the failure of agency-based ethics – and of the power of a vulnerability approach – comes from examining our treatment of non-human animals. Speciesism is the term coined by Richard Ryder (and popularized by Peter Singer) to denote the unjustified bias of giving preferential moral status to one's own species over others (Gruen L. a., The Moral Status of Animals, 2024). In practice, speciesism is the view that moral protection belongs primarily to humans (and only to humans in the strongest form of the view). Non-human animals, on this view, either have no moral status or a greatly diminished one, usually because they are seen as lacking some critical capacity – typically, the capacity for moral agency or rationality that we have been discussing. This is essentially an extension of Agency-Based Moral Protection: it assumes that since animals are not moral agents (they cannot reflect on right and wrong or act from moral principles), they are outside the sphere of full moral concern. They might be objects of charity or compassion, but not justice.

However, when we scrutinize this stance, it reveals itself to be a web of inconsistencies and arbitrariness. First, consider the argument from marginal cases introduced earlier. If we say that rationality or moral agency is the criterion that grants humans a superior moral status to animals, we immediately face the uncomfortable fact that many humans lack those exact capacities. A cow or a pig may not have the reasoning skills of a normal adult human – but neither does a newborn baby, nor a human with a severe intellectual disability, nor a patient

with advanced Alzheimer's. To consistently uphold the agency criterion, one would have to say those humans likewise have lower moral status or can be treated as mere means to others' ends. As philosopher Alastair Norcross put it, any trait that is proposed to justify human superiority "will either be lacking in some humans or present in some animals…. many humans are incapable of engaging in moral reflection... If we base our claims for the moral superiority of humans on such capacities, won't we have to exclude many humans (from full moral status)? (Johnson, Shifting the Moral Burden: Expanding Moral Status and Moral Agency, 2021,)". This is precisely the reductio ad absurdum that the marginal cases argument employs: it shows that you cannot coherently believe both that all humans deserve robust moral protection and that all non-humans do not, if your reason for excluding animals is a capacity that some humans also lack[17]. Unless one is willing to bite the bullet and say those "marginal" humans don't count either (a move very few are willing to make), the only consistent way out is to admit that the capacity to be harmed (which infants and animals share) is more morally relevant than the capacity to make moral choices (which infants and many animals both lack). In short, speciesism based on agency criteria is philosophically indefensible without also dehumanizing vulnerable humans.

Historically, defenders of human-only moral status have sometimes tried to avoid this dilemma by invoking an implicit species membership criterion (as Carl Cohen did, essentially arguing that being human – having the normal potential for moral agency – is enough to confer status even if an individual human isn't currently rational). But species membership by itself is not a morally relevant trait – it's as arbitrary as basing rights on skin color or gender. Singer famously compared speciesism to racism: "The racist violates the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of his own race… Similarly, the speciesist allows the interests of his own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is the same in each case." (Gruen L. a., The Moral Status of Animals, 2024) in both racism and speciesism, an irrelevant factor (race or species) is used to favor one group's interests over another's, even when the other's interests (like not suffering pain) are more gravely at stake. Discrimination on such grounds is deemed prejudice because these traits (race, species) have no bearing on what really matters for moral treatment, which is the capacity to have interests, to suffer, to flourish, etc. Modern defenders of animals point out that species membership is morally irrelevant in the same way as birth nationality is – it's a matter of luck, not a just basis to deny someone consideration (Gruen L. a., The Moral Status of Animals, 2024)

Now, consider the facts of animal life. Virtually all scientific and observational evidence indicates that many non-human animals are sentient – they can feel pain and pleasure, experience fear and stress, form social bonds, and value their lives in their own way. Mammals and birds, in particular, have complex nervous systems and behaviors that strongly suggest they are conscious sufferers. Even if animals are not "rational agents" in the human sense, they are most certainly moral patients – beings who can be morally wronged or harmed. A laboratory dog that is

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[17] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument_from_marginal_cases#

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subjected to electric shocks or a factory-farmed pig confined in misery suffers a harm that matters to it. The dog's pain or the pig's distress are not philosophically trivial phenomena; they are as real as any human child's pain. The agency-based ethic, however, would relegate these harms to a secondary status. At best, an orthodox Kantian might say we shouldn't be cruel to animals because it indirectly might make us cruel to humans – but not because of the animals' own moral claims. This is deeply unsatisfactory. As ethicist Christine Korsgaard has argued (from a broadly Kantian perspective), when we demand recognition of our own needs and interests as moral agents, we are in fact demanding respect for things rooted in our natural, vulnerable side – our desire to avoid pain, our interest in living and thriving. Those "natural concerns" are not unique to rational beings; they spring from our animal nature. Thus, if we value them in ourselves, we must also value them in other creatures who share those basic interests.

Speciesism, in practice, has led to enormous suffering. Each year, billions of sentient animals are reared in industrial farms under horrific conditions, subjected to painful procedures and slaughter, simply because they are deemed outside the moral community except insofar as humans might have duties of charity. If we applied a vulnerability ethic, this status quo would be untenable. The animals' vulnerability – their total powerlessness under human control and their capacity to suffer – would demand robust moral consideration. We would no longer be able to write off their suffering as morally irrelevant on the grounds that "they're just animals." In fact, many legal systems already implicitly accept some aspects of this: animal cruelty laws acknowledge that animals can be victims of unjustified harm (even though animals can't reciprocate duties or claim rights as agents). This is a nod towards a vulnerability-based mindset. But the inconsistency remains in how we treat different species and contexts.

To underscore the inconsistency: note that even agency-based ethicists are forced to treat certain non-agents as worthy of protection when those non-agents are human. We protect the cognitively disabled human or the infant human, despite their lack of agency, because we recognize their vulnerability and sentience. Yet the very same capacities (or lack thereof) in a pig or chimpanzee are brushed aside. The only difference is species. This is as illogical as saying that abuse is abhorrent when done to our children, but of no consequence if done to someone else's children – simply because they are not "ours." In moral reasoning, one must eliminate such arbitrary one-step differences and identify the deeper principle. The deeper principle that justifies our intuition to protect "marginal" humans is not membership in Homo sapiens (a concept with fuzzy edges and no intrinsic moral weight), but the fact that those humans can be harmed, feel pain, and have lives that can go better or worse for them. Once we zero in on that, we see it applies to many non-humans as well. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes, there is a significant overlap in the capacities of some nonhuman animals and some less-developed or impaired humans – any sharp line we try to draw will run afoul of these overlaps, making a purely species-based boundary morally indefensible.

A vulnerability-based ethic thus eliminates the inconsistency by treating like cases alike. If a being can suffer harm, that harm counts morally, period. Non-human animals, being capable of suffering, become part of the moral community in the sense that we have direct obligations toward them not to cause unnecessary harm. This doesn't mean that all beings are equal in

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every respect – there may still be reasons to give stronger weight to certain human interests (for example, because of relational duties or greater self-awareness). But it does mean that we cannot simply ignore or discount the harms done to animals if we consider similar harms to humans unacceptable. As Oscar Horta and other scholars note, speciesism is not only an individual bias but a "collective phenomenon", an ideology ingrained in institutions that allows systemic mistreatment of animals. Recognizing vulnerability as the baseline unmasks speciesism as a prejudice and aligns our ethics with a broader principle of compassion. It expands what philosopher Tom Regan called "the subjects-of-a-life" criterion – any being who has perceptions, feelings, memories, and an individual welfare that matters to them has inherent value and must be viewed as more than a mere resource (Regan, "The Case for Animal Rights", in Peter Singer (ed.), In Defense of Animals, 1985) Regan's formulation captures the spirit of vulnerability ethics: such beings "prefer things, feel things, recall and expect things… including pleasure and pain, enjoyment and suffering… and as the same is true of animals, they too must be viewed as experiencing subjects of a life, with inherent value of their own."

In sum, speciesism serves as a case study in how agency-based (or other arbitrary) restrictions of moral concern led to untenable contradictions. It shows vividly that if we truly care about vulnerability in humans, we must extend that caring logic outward to other sentient beings. By doing so, we shed inherited biases and move toward a more universal, coherent ethic. We stop asking "Is this creature one of us (human, rational, etc.)?" and start asking "What does this creature experience, and how can my actions affect it?" That shift in perspective is precisely what a vulnerability-centric morality demands – and it is increasingly supported by our growing knowledge of animal cognition and emotion, which continually blurs any sharp line between "us" and "them" (Goodall, The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior, 1986) The moral community, properly understood, is a continuum of vulnerable beings, not a fortress guarded by the gatekeeper of agency.

5. Geopolitical Ethics: The Limits of Agency in Real Conflict

If agency-based morality falters on the personal and philosophical level, its shortcomings are even more evident on the geopolitical stage. Real-world conflicts – especially those marked by asymmetric power dynamics, protracted histories, and complex webs of causation – defy simplistic moral narratives of good guys and bad guys, or sole agents of blame. Yet much popular discourse and even policy-making remains stuck in an agency framework: we search for the party "who started it," we debate which side has the rightful intent or claim, and we often reduce crises to the clashing wills of leaders or nations. While questions of responsibility are important, an agency-focused view often fails to account for the bulk of suffering and moral tragedy that occurs in war. A vulnerability-based perspective, by contrast, directs our attention to the human cost of conflict – the actual harms experienced by people – and thereby offers a more humane and arguably more accurate moral analysis of geopolitical events.

Consider a contemporary conflict (any number of examples sadly present themselves: Syria, Yemen, Israel-Palestine, Ukraine, etc.). From an agency perspective, one might try to identify clear aggressors and victims based on who intended what. But modern wars are rarely that tidy.

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They involve entrenched asymmetries of power, historical grievances going back generations, structural injustices like occupation or colonial legacy, cycles of retaliation ("you killed my civilians, so I'll kill yours"), propaganda that dehumanizes the other side, proxy interventions by outside powers, and so forth. In such a landscape, the notion of moral agency fragments into a thousand pieces. There is no single homo economicus making a sovereign decision in a vacuum; there are bureaucracies, militant factions, populaces driven by fear and fury, chance events spiraling into crises, and leaders constrained by external and internal pressures.

Agency-based morality might tell us, for instance, to strictly differentiate intended harm from incidental harm. International law does this to an extent: combatants vs. noncombatants are distinguished, with the principle of noncombatant immunity forbidding intentional targeting of civilians, and the principle of proportionality aiming to limit "collateral damage" (unintended civilian harm) (Gross, Civilian vulnerability in asymmetric conflict: Lessons from the Second Lebanon and Gaza Wars, 2012) These are important rules. But in practice, asymmetric warfare has made these principles hard to uphold. In conflicts where one side is a non-state actor blending in with the civilian population, and the other side is a state military, civilians inevitably suffer. As a military ethics analysis observes, "during asymmetric war between a large state army and a smaller guerrilla force, two phenomena weaken these principles. First, noncombatants are indistinguishable from guerrillas in their midst, leading state armies to inevitably subject civilians to unnecessary and disproportionate harm… Second, state armies may begin redefining the status of civilians who indirectly support the enemy, attacking these 'associated' civilian structures directly." (Gross, Civilian vulnerability in asymmetric conflict : Lessons from the Second Lebanon and Gaza Wars. Civilians and Modern War: Armed Conflict and the Ideology of Violence. Taylor and Francis, 2012). The result is a grim reality: "During war, civilians are subject to collateral and direct harm." Despite laws of war, the lines blur and the vulnerable get caught in the crossfire. Insurgents may intentionally use civilian areas as cover (thus cynically weaponizing the enemy's concern for noncombatants), or may themselves target civilians through terror tactics. State actors may claim no intent to harm civilians, yet their bombardments and blockades inflict massive suffering on the populace. Each side, from its agency-focused viewpoint, points to the other's intentions as the chief wrongdoing: "They deliberately hide among civilians, causing the deaths"; "They deliberately bomb and starve our people." From a vulnerability perspective, however, what emerges is that civilians on all sides are enduring horrific harms, no matter what the stated intentions were. The moral center of gravity shifts from finger-pointing to compassion and urgent concern for those innocents.[18]

Geopolitical ethics, when grounded in vulnerability, asks different questions from those of traditional statecraft. Instead of only, "Who has the right to retaliate under just war principles?" or "What level of force is legally permissible for this goal?", we ask, "What course of action will minimize the suffering of the most vulnerable – the children, the ordinary families, the

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[18] https://cris.haifa.ac.il/en/publications/civilian-vulnerability-in-asymmetric-conflict-lessons-from-the-se-2/#

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marginalized communities – who have the least power in this situation?" In many cases, this perspective reveals moral truths that agency-blinkered views obscure. For example, consider the concept of collective punishment. An official might justify a harsh blockade or bombardment by arguing that it's aimed at weakening a hostile regime's capacity (an agent-oriented rationale). But if that policy is causing widespread malnutrition or death among the civilian population, a vulnerability ethic highlights the gross disproportionality and injustice of making the vulnerable pay the price for the misdeeds or goals of their leaders. Similarly, in counterinsurgency, an occupier might claim the intent to "win hearts and minds," yet if their presence engenders constant humiliation or sporadic violence against locals, the everyday suffering may outweigh any positive intent.

The point is not that intentions are irrelevant – certainly, there is a great difference between deliberately targeting a school and accidentally hitting one despite precautions. But even when precautions are taken, if the end result is that many innocents lie dead or traumatized, a purely intention-based exculpation ("we didn't mean to, therefore it's acceptable") rings hollow. From a moral standpoint centered on vulnerability, those outcomes demand redress, aid, and re-thinking of strategy, regardless of the purity of intentions. Indeed, international humanitarian law, in its emphasis on protecting civilians and prohibiting indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks, can be seen as a codification of vulnerability ethics on the global stage. It implicitly says: even in war (where by definition agents are in violent conflict), there are vulnerable parties who must be shielded as much as possible. Unfortunately, in modern asymmetric conflicts, these safeguards are often eroded. As one analysis of recent wars notes, "neither the inability to readily distinguish combatants from noncombatants nor the [military] necessity of disabling civilian-associated targets relieves state armies from their duty to mitigate the suffering of civilians (Gross, Civilian vulnerability in asymmetric conflict: Lessons from the Second Lebanon and Gaza Wars. Civilians and Modern War: Armed Conflict and the Ideology of Violence. Taylor and Francis, 2012) In other words, even if the situation is complex, the ethical baseline doesn't shift: the suffering of noncombatants must be minimized. That is vulnerability ethics peeking through the fog of war.

Focusing on vulnerability also broadens the lens beyond immediate violence to structural violence and long-term harm. Agency-focused narratives might isolate a particular atrocity ("Side X bombed a hospital, which is evil"; "Side Y hides weapons in hospitals, which is evil"). A vulnerability approach would include those points but also encompass the less visible harms: the children who die from lack of medicine due to a blockade, the families impoverished and malnourished by the destruction of infrastructure, the psychological trauma that will haunt a generation, and the way these vulnerabilities can perpetuate conflict. As the World Health Organization observed in late 2023, in various conflicts around the globe "far too many people have needlessly died or suffered catastrophic physical harm" and health systems have been devastated[19]. Furthermore, "civilians bear the brunt [of war], and inevitably, it is the poorest,

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[19] https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/conflict-and-crisis-reveal-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-the-world-s-vulnerable-face-in-accessing-their-right-to-health#

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and those enduring discrimination, who suffer most. Poverty, discrimination and other factors make people more vulnerable to disasters – and they make societies more likely to ignite in violence.". This insight underscores that vulnerability is both a cause and effect of conflict: oppressed, poor, or marginalized groups are both more likely to be harmed in conflicts and the very existence of such untreated vulnerability (systemic poverty, inequality) can fuel future violence. A moral analysis that only tallies who intentionally did what to whom in a given battle misses this bigger picture – the "iceberg" of suffering beneath the surface, and the way unaddressed harm leads to new cycles of violence.[20]

By re-centering on vulnerability, geopolitical ethics begins to resemble a humanitarian viewpoint rather than a prosecutorial one. It does not make all actors morally equal or let wrongdoers off the hook; rather, it acknowledges a distribution of moral responsibility corresponding to the distribution of harm. Those who inflict the greatest suffering on the vulnerable carry the greatest blame, even if their rhetoric claims noble intentions. Conversely, those who alleviate suffering – be it through ceasefires to get aid in, evacuation corridors, or addressing grievances that make populations vulnerable to demagogues – earn moral credibility. This approach avoids the trap of whataboutery (endless arguments of "but they did X first, so we can do Y") because it holds all sides to the same baseline criterion: Are you or are you not causing severe harm to vulnerable people? If you are, it must stop or be justified by truly dire necessity; if you are reducing harm, you are on the morally right track.

A poignant example is the global reaction to the use of certain weapons or tactics that cause indiscriminate harm. Chemical weapons, cluster munitions, nuclear bombs – the horror of these is not just that they violate some rule set by agents, but that they unleash suffering massively and uncontrollably on vulnerable populations. The taboo and legal bans on them stem from an implicit recognition that some methods of war so grossly violate the baseline protection of vulnerability that no claimed intention can excuse their use. Similarly, when we see images of bombed-out hospitals or refugee columns, our moral judgment isn't primarily about who to blame (agency) at first, but about the sheer human misery in front of us. That recognition is the spark of a vulnerability-based ethic operating in our hearts.

In sum, geopolitical conflicts illustrate the limits of agency-based moral analysis. They are complex systems in which suffering is dispersed and multiplied in ways no single agent fully controls. A narrow focus on agents' intentions or culpabilities often leads to fruitless blame games and tit-for-tat escalations, with each side claiming the moral high ground while the humanitarian ground literally burns beneath everyone's feet. A vulnerability-focused inquiry, by contrast, asks how we can protect people (often on both sides of a conflict) who are being harmed and have no power to stop it. It calls out actions that systematically hurt innocents, whether by commission or omission, as morally paramount issues. This perspective pushes for conflict resolution, justice, and peace-building strategies that prioritize healing and protecting

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[20] https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/conflict-and-crisis-reveal-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-the-world-s-vulnerable-face-in-accessing-their-right-to-health#

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populations rather than vindicating abstract notions of honor or dominance. It also provides a clearer moral compass for international responses: the worst conflicts are those creating the most victims, and the urgency of response should correlate to the urgency of suffering. While agency-based thinking might argue over which conflict is more "just" or which side has legitimate rights, vulnerability thinking cares first about where the greatest suffering is and how to alleviate it. In a world still rife with war and oppression, that shift in priorities could literally save lives and break cycles of revenge.

6. The Dangers of Theocratic or Ideologically Uniform Regimes

Ethical foundations have political ramifications. If we accept vulnerability as the baseline for universal ethics, this has direct implications for how societies and states should be organized. In particular, it casts a critical light on regimes that reject pluralism – that is, regimes which insist on a single approved ideology, religion, or worldview for all of society. Whether in the form of a theocracy (rule by religious doctrine) or a rigid one-party ideology (such as extreme communist or fascist states), ideologically uniform regimes pose grave dangers to the vulnerable. By their very nature, such systems elevate a particular set of beliefs or a particular group into absolute power, and in doing so, they nearly always end up suppressing those who dissent or who simply "believe differently." History and current events both testify that when a state demands ideological conformity, it is the minorities, the dissenters, and indeed anyone who doesn't fit the official mold who suffer most.

Why is pluralism so important from a vulnerability perspective? Pluralism – the acceptance and coexistence of diverse values, beliefs, and identities – acts as a societal safeguard for the vulnerable by preventing any one group from monopolizing power and defining others out of the circle of concern. In a pluralistic, liberal society (in the broad philosophical sense), laws and institutions are designed to protect individual rights regardless of one's religion, ethnicity, or opinion. There is space for multiple voices, and ideally, a system of checks and balances prevents the tyranny of the majority or of a single faction. Political theorist Isaiah Berlin, a strong advocate of value pluralism, urged understanding others in their own terms and warned against the temptation of "refusing to recognize others as legitimate." Pluralism, he argued, encourages "good faith dialogue" and shuns extremism that elevates one value to the exclusion of all else[21]. This ethos inherently protects minorities: by acknowledging that no one has a monopoly on truth or virtue, society commits to tolerating and hearing out differing perspectives. It also institutionalizes remedies for grievances – through free press, opposition parties, judicial recourse – so that if someone or some group is being harmed, their voice can be heard, and corrective action can be taken.

Now consider the opposite: a theocracy or an ideological one-party state. In a theocracy, the state is governed by a particular religious law or doctrine claimed to be the will of a divine authority. Dissent from that doctrine is not merely a political disagreement, it's heresy or

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21 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pluralism_(political_philosophy)#

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apostasy. As the ThoughtCo. definition notes, "with their laws based on religious codes, the governments of theocracies serve their divine leader(s) rather than the citizens. As a result, theocracies are often oppressive in function, with strict rules and harsh punishments for rule-breakers.". In such a system, there is by definition no equal room for other worldviews – "there is no separation of church and state…and the open practice of only the prevailing religion is allowed."[22]Those who do not subscribe to the state religion (whether they be religious minorities or secular individuals) become second-class at best, or enemies of the state at worst. The vulnerable in these contexts are anyone who cannot or will not conform religious minorities, women who seek roles not sanctioned by clerical authorities, LGBTQ individuals if the doctrine forbids their identity, intellectuals or free thinkers who question dogma, and often even different sects of the same religion that aren't in power.[23] Theocratic governance tends to come with "strict rules and harsh punishment" because enforcing uniformity on naturally diverse human populations requires a heavy hand of repression. Dissent is not tolerated; typically, "those who disagree with or fail to abide by the official religion's dictates are repressed and persecuted.". We have seen this pattern from the European wars of religion to the witch hunts, to modern examples theocratic regimes and their imposition of religious-based laws.

A stark contemporary example is the Islamic Republic of Iran. After 1979, Iran became a theocratic state under Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of governance by Islamic jurists. As numerous human rights reports and scholars have noted, this ushered in a regime of strict ideological control with severe consequences for the vulnerable. Women and religious/ethnic minorities have borne the brunt of these policies. In Iran, the state's morality police enforce dress codes and conduct, and violators face draconian punishment. In one notorious case, a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, was arrested by the morality police for allegedly breaching hijab rules and later died in custody – widely believed to have been beaten to death. Her fate sparked mass protests and drew global attention to the regime's oppression. As a policy analyst summarized, Khomeini's system "emphasiz[ed] rigid adherence to Islamic law, usher[Ing] in a repressed, censorious environment with limited freedom for women and ethnic minorities"[24]. The religious doctrine was effectively weaponized as a tool of state power. Under this model, "religious doctrine [is] invoked to justify rigid social policies against women and minorities," severely curtailing their freedom and autonomy. Minority religious groups like the Bahá'ís, and ethnic minorities like the Kurds (to which Amini belonged), have faced systemic persecution – from being denied rights and education to outright imprisonment and violence – simply because they don't fit the ruling ideology's definition of acceptable citizens. In Khomeini's Iran, as one scholar noted, the regime "institutionalize[d] the repression of minorities and dissenters, cast[ing] them

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[22] https://www.thoughtco.com/definition-of-theocracy-721626#

[23] https://www.thoughtco.com/definition-of-theocracy-721626#

[24] https://yipinstitute.org/capstone/theocracy-perils-iran#

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as 'outsiders' against the 'insiders' who fulfill the regime's religious expectations."[25] This language of insiders vs. outsiders is telling: it's exactly how an illiberal, uniform regime views the world – those who fully comply are within the moral community, those who do not are outside it and unprotected.

The consequences of such exclusion are dire. "Outsiders" in a theocracy often lose legal protections. They may be unable to seek justice if harmed, their suffering is dismissed as deserved or as a non-issue. For instance, under Taliban rule in Afghanistan or ISIS control in parts of Iraq/Syria, we saw that women who were beaten for dress code infractions or minorities who were violently attacked had little to no recourse; the state itself was the oppressor. Even aside from overt violence, there is the psychological harm and loss of agency inflicted on those forced to live under an alien creed. In Iran, women have been jailed or flogged for acts as simple as singing in public or protesting for their rights; young people are surveilled and harassed for expressing anything deemed "un-Islamic." The vulnerability of these populations is extreme – they are at the mercy of moralizing enforcers who view them not as full persons with rights, but as sinners or subversives to be corrected.

It is not only religious uniformity that causes this. Secular ideologies, when absolutized, can do the same. The Stalinist Soviet Union or Maoist China imposed rigid communist orthodoxy and persecuted dissidents, independent thinkers, or religious folks, branding them "class enemies" or "counter-revolutionaries." The effect was similarly to strip whole categories of people of protection. In Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge's extreme ideology, wearing glasses or speaking a foreign language could mark one as a target for execution – basically, being an intellectual or not fitting the peasant ideal meant death. In all these cases, a single ideological vision is used to justify dehumanizing the "other." The regime claims moral purity or historical destiny as a rationale, but from a vulnerability ethics standpoint, what's really happening is gross injustice: the most vulnerable (minorities, those without power) are sacrificed on the altar of an idea.

A universal ethics based on vulnerability insists that pluralism is the minimum condition for legitimacy in governance. If a state does not permit pluralism – that is, if it cannot accommodate a diversity of values and protect those who think differently – then that state will invariably create classes of vulnerable people whom it treats as expendable or dangerous. It violates the ethical baseline by exposing those people to systematic harm. A pluralistic society, on the other hand, by allowing multiple viewpoints, creates a built-in mechanism for feedback and self-correction: if one group's doctrine inadvertently causes harm to another group, the pluralistic system provides avenues for that harm to be recognized and rectified (through dialogue, courts, democratic elections, etc.). In a theocracy, there is no such mechanism; the official truth cannot be questioned without branding the questioner as immoral. As a result, the vulnerable have no voice.

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[25] https://yipinstitute.org/capstone/theocracy-perils-iran#

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The cycle of violence generated by ideologically uniform regimes is also notable. When people are oppressed for long periods, eventually resistance or unrest follows (as we see in Iran's persistent protests, or historically in revolutions against absolutist systems). The crackdowns that follow tend to be bloody, and sometimes revolution itself turns into a new form of tyranny if pluralism isn't embraced after the overthrow (consider how the French Revolution's idealistic start led to the Terror when it tried to impose virtue by force). Thus, a lack of pluralism undermines peace and stability. By contrast, societies that manage differences through pluralist democracy tend to have far less political violence internally, because discontent can be channeled into discourse and reform rather than rebellion.

In essence, theocratic or one-ideology regimes violate the principle of vulnerability ethics at multiple levels. They directly harm those who don't conform, often in brutal ways (violations of life, liberty, and dignity). They structurally enshrine inequality, making some lives count less than others (e.g., a heretic's life is worth less than a believer's, a political dissident's suffering doesn't matter like a loyalist's does). And they remove safeguards that would otherwise limit harm (no free press to report abuses, no independent judiciary to check wrongful imprisonment, etc.). By contrast, a government that respects pluralism is one that, by design, seeks to "distribute the burdens of care equitably", to borrow the language of vulnerability ethics[26]. It acknowledges that within a diverse population, different groups will be vulnerable in different ways, and it tries to balance those needs rather than stamp one vision onto everyone.

To put it succinctly: Pluralism is the political expression of a vulnerability-based ethics. It says no one group's claim to truth or righteousness can override the fundamental need to protect people from harm. The moment an ideology – religious or secular – starts justifying oppression or dismissal of some individuals' suffering, it loses moral credibility. A healthy pluralistic society instead operates under a kind of social contract: we may disagree deeply on many things, but we agree not to coercively impose a single creed, and we agree to uphold certain basic rights (like life, bodily integrity, freedom of conscience) for all. Those basic rights correlate precisely with safeguarding people's vital interests and vulnerabilities.

In conclusion of this section, the theocratic/ideologically uniform model is a test case for our overall thesis. Agency-based frameworks often falter here: a theocracy might claim the authority of a divine agent, or a one-party state the infallibility of the revolutionary vanguard – they are obsessed with the "rightness" of the ruling agents. But vulnerability ethics looks at the results: Are people suffering? Are voices silenced? Are certain individuals rendered defenseless victims of the system? If so, no appeal to authority or purity can wash away that moral stain. The Iranian example again is instructive: by 2022-23, the moral cry from Iranians on the streets and from observers worldwide was not about fine points of Sharia, but about the palpable injustice of a woman being killed over a dress code, of teenagers being shot for chanting freedom, of countless lives stunted by fear. As one commentary noted, Iran's experience "shows how

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[26] https://lifestyle.sustainability-directory.com/term/vulnerability-ethics/#

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merging religion with state power can act as an obstacle toward freedom and equality" and serves as a "stern warning" of the risks in mixing political authority with a singular moral doctrine. The lesson is clear: a just and universal ethics in governance requires pluralism, tolerance, and the protection of those who dissent or differ, which is to say, the protection of the vulnerable. Anything less inevitably degenerates into oppression and conflict.

7. Universal Ethics and the Path Forward

The challenges outlined in this essay – from inconsistencies in moral theory to the brutal realities of war and oppression – all point toward a common conclusion. The ethical paradigms of the past, especially those fixated on agency, autonomy, or exclusive in-group status, are not equipped to guide humanity through the 21st century and beyond. We need a new ethical architecture that is capacious enough to include all who suffer, flexible enough to navigate cultural and political complexities, and strong enough to resist the temptations of bias and fanaticism. Vulnerability offers the foundation for this architecture, and pluralism offers its blueprint in the realm of governance.

A truly universal ethics must begin with a simple commitment: where there is suffering, we will recognize a moral claim. This sounds straightforward, but in practice it is revolutionary. It means that a crying infant in a distant country, a dying whale in the ocean, a persecuted dissident, or a bombed-out family in a war zone all demand our moral attention. Their vulnerability obliges us to care, not because of who they are or what they might do, but because of what is being done to them or what might alleviate their plight. Such an ethics does not ask, "Is this being one of us? Does it meet our criteria of personhood or citizenship?" but rather "What is our responsibility to this being who can feel pain, who can be harmed or helped by our actions?"

This approach naturally fosters inclusivity. It widens the circle of moral concern to as far as sentience and need extend. In doing so, it hearkens back to some of the best impulses in human rights discourse. Recall that after the carnage of World War II, world leaders sought to enshrine a baseline of protection for every human being. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 explicitly proclaims the "fundamental rights of everyone, everywhere" as the "foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."[27] That document was a reaction to the fact that when vulnerability was ignored – in the Holocaust, in civilian bombings, in totalitarian persecutions – unimaginable suffering resulted. The UDHR's vision was inherently pluralistic and vulnerability-conscious: "everyone" has rights "without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition". In essence, it rejects agency-based qualifiers (such as belonging to a certain nation or faith or ideology) and insists on protection for each person's dignity and welfare simply by virtue of being human. Our argument builds on that but also suggests we should be prepared to extend concern even beyond the human where applicable

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[27] https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/conflict-and-crisis-reveal-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-the-world-s-vulnerable-face-in-accessing-their-right-to-health#

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(for example, in how we treat animals or ecosystems, acknowledging their capacity to suffer and our dependence on them).

What would it look like to reformulate ethics as a system for preventing suffering rather than primarily one of judging intentions or assigning blame? It would prioritize beneficence (doing good, relieving harm) and non-maleficence (not causing harm) as cardinal principles – as indeed the medical ethics tradition does. It would measure its success not by how well it punishes the wicked (though accountability has its place) but by how well it reduces the total sum of unnecessary pain and increases security and flourishing for those at risk. It would emphasize empathy, compassion, and care as virtues as much as, if not more than, the traditional virtues of autonomy and justice-as-retribution. This does not mean abandoning justice but reframing it: justice is achieved when the vulnerable are protected and when power is used to shield rather than to exploit.

Such an ethics must also be empirically grounded and complexity capable. By empirically grounded, I mean it doesn't rely on abstract categories (like "rational agent" or "saved soul") detached from the real-world experiences of beings. It looks at facts on the ground: where is there hunger, where is there pain, what policies alleviate those conditions? It treats ethical decisions a bit like public health decisions – based on evidence of what will minimize harm. By complexity capable, I mean it recognizes that moral problems in areas like geopolitics or animal welfare or social policy often have many contributing factors and feedback loops. A vulnerability ethic can handle this because it's not binary (good/bad agent) but scalar: it can weigh degrees of harm, probabilities of risk, and distribute responsibility among many actors. For example, climate change is a massive ethical problem involving future generations, ecosystems, rich and poor nations, etc. An agency-blame approach often stalls (who is to blame, who should act first?), whereas a vulnerability approach asks: who is most vulnerable to climate impacts, and how can we structure our response to protect those populations (human or animal) from harm? This tends to lead to more cooperative and forward-looking solutions, like focusing on resilience, adaptation, and equitable mitigation responsibilities.

In the political domain, a vulnerability ethics underpins the case for democratic pluralism, human rights, and the rule of law. These are the mechanisms by which societies can peacefully manage differences and center the protection of individuals. Pluralist democracy, for instance, is often justified on pragmatic grounds (it avoids tyranny) or on agency grounds (people have a right to self-govern). But it's equally justifiable on vulnerability grounds: a democracy that respects rights ensures that even those out of power retain protections and a voice. It acknowledges every person's potential vulnerability under government and so sets limits (constitutions, rights) to safeguard them. Isaiah Berlin's call for understanding others charitably, and James Madison's idea (in Federalist No. 10) that multiplying factions prevents any single one from oppressing the rest, both reflect a concern that no group should be able to impose wholesale harm on another. They are early recognitions that moral legitimacy in power comes from protecting the vulnerable, not from asserting the dominance of a particular sect or ideology.

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What about the global order? A universal ethics of vulnerability suggests that international law and institutions should likewise evolve to prioritize human security and well-being over narrow national or ideological interests. This is already seen in nascent form: the notion of a "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) in international relations, for example, holds that if a state is unwilling or unable to prevent mass atrocities against its population, the international community has a responsibility to step in to stop the harm. This is a controversial principle in practice, but it stems from the same core idea – sovereignty (an agent's privilege) is secondary to the prevention of egregious harm to people (the patients). Similarly, global efforts to fight poverty, ensure access to healthcare, and combat climate change all make sense under a vulnerability ethic: they are cooperative attempts to reduce the harm experienced by vulnerable populations worldwide. The WHO commentary referenced earlier highlights how poverty and inequality exacerbate vulnerability and thus threaten peace; it calls for a recommitment to ending poverty and placing human rights at the center of our social and economic decisions[28]. These are real-world policy echoes of the philosophy we've been outlining.

It is important to acknowledge that some may worry a vulnerability-based ethics could lead to paternalism or an overly "soft" moral stance. If we are always focusing on protecting the vulnerable, do we risk treating adults like children, or sacrificing other values like freedom or merit? This is a valid concern and points to the need for balance. A sophisticated vulnerability ethics does not infantilize those it protects; rather, it seeks to empower them. For example, protecting the vulnerable includes giving people education and resources to become less vulnerable where possible (think of it as akin to preventative medicine or capacity-building in development). It also doesn't mean criminals aren't held accountable or that harmful cultural practices get a pass – rather, it frames accountability itself as serving the protection of others (we restrain a criminal because potential victims are vulnerable, not because we relish punishment). And in terms of freedom: the freedom that matters most under this view is the freedom that allows individuals and communities to live without fear of undue harm. So freedom of belief, expression, and lifestyle remains vital – indeed more vital – because those are often the areas where people are attacked by rigid regimes. The difference is that freedom is not an end in itself but part of the ecosystem of human well-being. A society that is maximally free but allows the strong to exploit the weak (say, an unregulated market that tolerates dangerous child labor) would be condemned under vulnerability ethics, whereas a society that balances liberty with social safety nets and protections is applauded.

Resistance to ideological manipulation is another strength of this approach. If the baseline is "reduce suffering," it becomes harder to justify why increasing suffering would ever be morally necessary, except perhaps in tragic dilemma cases. Grand ideologies often ask people to endure or inflict great suffering now for some promised utopia later (think of Stalin's collectivization

[28] https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/conflict-and-crisis-reveal-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-the-world-s-vulnerable-face-in-accessing-their-right-to-health#

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famines or suicide bombers believing in heavenly reward). A vulnerability ethic is inherently skeptical of such reasoning – it holds leaders and ideologues to the question: are you sure that this harm you advocate is unavoidable and outweighed by prevention of greater harm? Often, the answer is no, and the ideology is just a cover for power ambitions or prejudice. By insisting on seeing the real harms, we puncture ideological bubbles. It forces moral justifications into the empirical, human plane: show that a policy actually helps people in tangible ways, or abandon it.

Finally, a vulnerability-based universalism is not a utopian fantasy but, arguably, a practical necessity in our interdependent world. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how the vulnerability of some can quickly become the vulnerability of all, if ignored. Likewise, climate change has taught us that the suffering of the global poor in climate disasters eventually touches the rich as well, through migration, economic disruption, and moral burden. Recognizing shared vulnerability can engender a shared sense of humanity. It is a narrative that transcends nation, religion, and class: we are all vulnerable creatures on this planet, and we flourish or perish together based on how we tend to each other's vulnerabilities. This echoes some spiritual traditions (like the compassion ideals of Buddhism or the social teachings of various religions), but it can also be entirely secular and grounded in our evolutionary understanding of human nature as a cooperative, empathetic species.

In practical terms, moving forward with this ethical framework might involve: increasing animal welfare protections (as sentient fellow beings); reorienting justice systems toward rehabilitation and victim support rather than sheer retribution; designing economic policies that prioritize the needs of the worst-off (as economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach suggests); strengthening international cooperative mechanisms for disaster relief and conflict mediation; and educating citizens in empathy and critical thinking to resist dehumanizing propaganda.

We should be candid that vulnerability ethics, like any approach, will have hard cases and debates (e.g., how to weigh the suffering of animals versus humans in a given context, or how to handle cases where reducing suffering for one group might increase it for another in the short term). But unlike agency-based morality, it doesn't exclude voices a priori. It puts all stakeholders on the moral ledger and demands creative solutions that strive to minimize total harm.

Conclusion

The 21st century presents us with moral and political complexities that our traditional frameworks are struggling to address. We face humanitarian crises from wars that kill and maim civilians by the thousands, ethical dilemmas from biotechnology and artificial intelligence, global challenges like climate change that affect billions (especially those least equipped to adapt), and social upheavals as new movements demand recognition of long-marginalized groups. In this turbulent landscape, clinging to an ethics that primarily values agency – the capacity to intend and act – is not only outdated, it is dangerous. Agency-based morality was, in some ways, a product of simpler times – a world where clear lines could be drawn between persons and things, between responsible adults and dependents, between civilized insiders and "uncivilized"

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outsiders. That world, if it ever truly existed, is gone. We now know too much about the continuity of life's capacities and the interdependence of all people to take such simplistic views seriously.

This essay has argued that vulnerability must replace agency as the foundational criterion of any ethics that aspires to be truly universal. We saw that agency-based moral protection is riddled with contradictions: it cannot account for why we protect infants or the comatose; it falters on the question of animal welfare; it leads to neglect of systemic suffering in favor of blaming individuals. By contrast, a vulnerability-centric ethic is inclusive (all who suffer count), consistent (no special pleading for one species or group over another without a real difference in capacity), and empirically grounded (focused on actual harm and benefit). It also better captures the reality of moral experience: what moves us to call something wrong is usually the sight of a fellow being in pain or treated unfairly – that is, vulnerability unaddressed or exploited.

From this reorientation, many of our key principles gain clarity and strength. Human rights, for example, can be understood as codified protections for universal vulnerabilities (the right to life, to security, to health, to not be tortured, etc., all correspond to safeguarding people's vital needs). Humanitarian law's core impulse – protect civilians, treat prisoners humanely, aid the wounded – flows naturally from vulnerability ethics, as does the outrage we feel when those laws are violated. In philosophy, age-old debates about who is in the "moral community" dissolve when we focus on suffering: any being that can be wronged by our actions is in, by definition. In politics, the legitimacy of power hinges on how it treats the weakest under its dominion, not on the glory or authority it projects. Pluralism and the rule of law become not just liberal ideals, but ethical necessities to prevent the nightmare of unchecked dominance and persecution.

Of course, asserting a principle is one thing; realizing it in practice is another. But we can take heart that the arc of moral progress in history is often precisely the expansion of moral concern to those formerly ignored: the abolition of slavery, the movements for women's rights, child labor laws, disability rights, animal welfare improvements, indigenous rights, and so on – all these can be seen as victories of vulnerability over arbitrary power, instances where society decided the suffering of some group could no longer be dismissed. Each of these advances involved extending empathy and protection to those who were previously deemed "outside" the sphere of full respect. This suggests that, despite regresses and conflicts, the long-term trend is toward a more inclusive ethical view. Pushing that trend further is our responsibility.

By adopting vulnerability as our baseline, and pluralism as our political guideline, we also make our world more resilient. Societies built on human rights and care for the vulnerable are more stable and peaceful, as the WHO commentary noted: "Societies built on human rights are most likely to maintain peaceful relations and avoid escalation of conflict.". Conversely, gross violations of the vulnerable sow seeds for future strife. Thus, even from a prudential perspective, it is wiser to take care of one another.

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In a sentence: agency divides, vulnerability unites. Agency-based thinking privileges the strong (those who can act and assert); vulnerability-based thinking lifts up the weak (those who need support). Agency excludes (drawing circles around who qualifies); vulnerability includes (anyone who hurts deserves help). Agency often justifies hierarchy and dominance ("we are the rational, we rule"); vulnerability urges protection and solidarity ("they are hurting, we must help"). This is not to demonize agency altogether – autonomy and responsibility remain important – but to dethrone it as the king of moral value.

Ultimately, embracing vulnerability at the core of ethics is not a call to despair at our fragility, but a call to recognize our shared humanity (and animality) at the very point that makes ethics necessary: the fact that we can be harmed. It shifts the focus from celebrating the might of the few to caring for the plight of the many. And it is a philosophy backed by very practical expectations: if we systematically reduce suffering and protect the vulnerable, we will have a more just, stable, and compassionate world. That is a world capable of genuine justice, not the hollow justice of victor's courts or exclusionary dogmas.

In closing, we can return to the vivid image that opened this inquiry: a world riven by inconsistency and conflict because it held the wrong premise. By discarding the flawed premise (that only the intentional agents count) and adopting a sound one (that wherever a creature can be hurt, a duty arises), we align our moral theory with moral reality. The measure of any ethical system claiming universality is simple: does it secure protection for innocents regardless of power or status? Vulnerability-based ethics passes this test, where agency-based ethics does not. It survives context and complexity because it deals with fundamentals: life, death, harm, care. It resists ideological manipulation because it always asks, "What is happening to the least of us?" – a question that cuts through propaganda.

If we build on this foundation, perhaps future generations will look back and wonder why it took so long to center the obvious. Just as we look back at those who denied rights based on skin color or sex and shake our heads, they might shake their heads at a time when people seriously debated whether an unconscious patient had rights, or whether civilian casualties were regrettable but secondary, or whether animals felt pain worthy of moral note. They will see a pivot, which we are now advocating for: from the primacy of power to the primacy of compassion. That is the path forward – the only one worthy of being called a universal ethics.

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Annex A — The Vulnerability–Pluralism Model (VPM)

A Universal Ethical Framework for Complex, Multi-Context Decision-Making

1. Overview. The Vulnerability–Pluralism Model (VPM) offers a universal ethical baseline designed for decision-making in environments marked by moral conflict, cultural diversity, historical trauma, and systemic complexity. The model proposes two complementary foundations:

1. Vulnerability: the minimum moral baseline
2. Pluralism: the minimum legal and interpretive baseline

Together, these baselines provide a scalable framework capable of guiding ethical decisions across social, political, religious, and interspecies contexts.

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2. Tier One: Vulnerability as the Minimum Moral Baseline (VMB)

2.1 Definition. Vulnerability refers to a being's susceptibility to harm, independent of agency, innocence, cognitive capacity, or cultural status.

2.2 Rationale. Conventional models—agency-based ethics, innocence frameworks, utilitarian calculations, scriptural authority—struggle in situations involving:

- trauma, coercion, or impaired cognition
- children and the elderly
- non-human animals
- systems of structural violence
- conflict zones or humanitarian crises

Vulnerability remains universal where these models fail. It captures the moral claim of any being who can suffer, without requiring:

- rationality,
- consent,
- innocence,
- or doctrinal alignment.

2.3 Application. The VMB is applicable to:

- civilian protection in conflict
- animal welfare

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- disability ethics
- policymaking
- humanitarian law
- leadership decision-making
- education reform
- trauma-informed governance

2.4 Ethical Implication

Moral protection increases as vulnerability increases.
The more exposed, powerless, or harmed a being is, the stronger the ethical obligation toward them.

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3. Tier Two: Pluralism as the Minimum Legal Baseline (PLB)

3.1 Definition

Pluralism refers to the principled recognition that multiple worldviews, cultures, religions, identities, and epistemic frames coexist and must be treated with equal moral respect in shared civic spaces.

3.2 Rationale

Pluralism is necessary because:

- Theological absolutism creates rigidity.
- Agency-based ethics create hierarchies.
- Cultural imperialism invalidates lived experience.
- Universalism collapses without inclusive grounding.
- Public dialogue fails when one worldview dominates.

Pluralism protects the conditions under which moral evolution becomes possible.

3.3 Application

The PLB applies to:

- interfaith and intercultural dialogue
- constitutional design
- leadership training
- governance and public policy

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- conflict resolution
- educational systems

3.4 Legal Implication

Pluralism establishes:

- interpretive humility,
- cultural reciprocity,
- epistemic equality,
- and a shared civic floor on which diverse communities can coexist without coercion.

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4. Why VPM Outperforms Legacy Models

4.1 Compared to Agency-Based Ethics

Agency frameworks collapse in real-world stress contexts (trauma, coercion, disability).
Vulnerability remains stable.

4.2 Compared to Innocence Frameworks

Innocence is binary, culturally loaded, and human-only.
Vulnerability includes all beings who can suffer.

4.3 Compared to Utilitarianism

Utilitarian models can sacrifice the few for the many.
Vulnerability protects the exposed and marginalised.

4.4 Compared to Scriptural Absolutism

The VPM does not require divine universality or doctrinal consensus.
It is compatible with—but not dependent upon—religious beliefs.

4.5 Compared to Cultural Relativism

Pluralism protects difference while still allowing ethical critique.
It avoids collapse into moral confusion.

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5. Theoretical Strengths

5.1 Trauma-Informed. Recognizes how systemic harm, history, and coercion distort agency.

5.2 Context-Sensitive. Accounts for sociological, historical, and psychological complexity.

5.3 Universally Applicable. Applies across species, cultures, and capacities.

5.4 Ethically Robust. Provides a clear, consistent moral compass.

5.5 Practically Scalable

Operates in:

- boardrooms
- classrooms
- courtrooms
- conflict zones
- policy environments
- international relations

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6. Practical Implementation Framework

6.1 Step 1: Identify Vulnerability Map groups according to:

- exposure to harm
- lack of agency
- structural disadvantage
- psychological or physical fragility

6.2 Step 2: Reduce Harm: Prioritize decisions that decrease the vulnerability of

- civilians
- animals
- the disabled
- children
- traumatised communities
- marginalised groups

6.3 Step 3: Ensure Pluralistic Legitimacy. Confirm that the decision respects:

- multiple viewpoints
- cultural complexity

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- religious diversity
- epistemic humility

6.4 Step 4: Choose the Path that Protects the Most Vulnerable While Preserving Pluralistic Coexistence

<u>This yields the VPM decision.</u>

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7. Closing Note: The Vulnerability–Pluralism Model offers a unique synthesis of compassion and practicality. It is grounded in real-world complexity, tested through live debate, and informed by cross-disciplinary insight. This annex formalises the model for academic, policy, and leadership use, providing a rigorous ethical tool for a diverse and fragile world.

Appendix B — Practitioner Reflection on the Vulnerability–Pluralism Model (VPM)

A Restorative Justice Perspective from Corridors of Peace

B.1 Introduction:

Dominos Frank is the Founder of Corridors of Peace (https://corridorsofpeace.online) an internationally regarded restorative justice organisation working at the intersection of trauma, reconciliation, and conflict transformation. With more than two decades of experience facilitating restorative encounters between victims, offenders, families, and affected communities, Domino has developed a practice grounded in trauma-informed care, intercultural sensitivity, and deep ethical commitment to human dignity.

His work routinely involves cases of severe violence, including homicide and community-level conflict, where traditional punitive and agency-based models of justice often fail to produce healing or accountability. In these high-stakes contexts, Domino has consistently observed that transformative justice arises not from blame or innocence hierarchies, but from the recognition of shared vulnerability and the capacity for relational repair.

In response to an early draft of this paper, Domino provided a written reflection articulating how the Vulnerability–Pluralism Model (VPM) resonates with and clarifies the ethical foundations of his restorative work. His perspective offers applied validation from lived practice and demonstrates the relevance of the VPM beyond theoretical discourse.

The full reflection is reproduced below with permission.

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B.2 Reflection by Domino, Founder of Corridors of Peace

A Reflection on the Soil of Peace, Vulnerability as My Guide

"My work in Restorative Justice has always been a practice of the heart, but for years, I struggled to articulate its deepest philosophical roots. I felt the truth of it in the quiet, trembling moments within our circles—when a mother's grief met the stunned shame of the young man who caused her son's death. I knew we were touching something more profound than crime and punishment, but the language of "agency" and "accountability" felt insufficient. It was Richard Dobson's paper, "Beyond Agency-Based Morality," that gave me the vocabulary for what I have witnessed and what I believe. It named the very ground upon which I walk.

Dobson argues that our modern ethical and political systems are built upon a flawed foundation: the "able, autonomous, and rational agent." This is the "agent-based morality" that underpins our entire criminal legal system. It asks, "Who is to blame?" and prescribes a punitive transaction. I have seen the devastation of this model. It creates what I call "moral monologues," where people armor themselves in their own righteousness or guilt, never truly meeting. Dobson confirms this, stating that such a framework is not only limited but dangerous, as it ignores our fundamental and universal condition.

That condition is vulnerability. Dobson posits vulnerability not as a weakness, but as "the foundational source of our ethical obligations." He writes, "Our vulnerability... is not an accidental feature of our existence that can be overcome or ignored, but is constitutive of what it is to be human." This single sentence crystallized two decades of my work. In our Corridors, we do not meet as invulnerable agents, but as fragile beings. I recall a powerful circle where a man who had committed a violent assault finally broke down, not with an excuse, but with a confession: "I was so terrified of looking weak, that I became a monster." He wasn't defending his agency; he was exposing his vulnerability. His harm was a catastrophic failure to honor his own fragility and that of his victim. When the victim heard this, she later told me, "I saw a human being, not a monster. I still hate what he did, but I couldn't hate the broken person in front of me." This is the alchemy that vulnerability makes possible.

This leads me to the second pillar Dobson illuminates: pluralism. An agency-based morality seeks a single, universal standard of judgment. But a vulnerability-based ethics, as Dobson outlines, must necessarily embrace a "pluralism of forms of life." He argues that because our vulnerabilities are expressed and experienced through our specific cultures, histories, and identities, our paths to healing must be equally diverse. I have seen this truth play out repeatedly. I worked with two families from different cultural backgrounds navigating a homicide. One family needed a public apology and a communal ritual to feel that honor was restored. The other family needed quiet, private commitments to education and change. The old punitive model would have offered neither anything but a prison sentence. Our restorative process, rooted in this respect for pluralism, could honor both paths. We did not demand one story or one solution. As Dobson

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asserts, a universal ethics of vulnerability "does not require uniformity, but rather a commitment to a politics of negotiation and accommodation in the face of our shared precariousness."

This is the practical theology of Corridors of Peace. We are not in the business of judging autonomous agents. We are in the practice of tending to shared, precarious lives. Dobson's critique of the "fiction of the independent individual" gives me the theoretical evidence for what I have always felt: we heal in relationship, or we do not heal at all.

So, my mission is clear. I am not here to fix people. I am here to help build containers strong enough to hold our collective fragility. Dobson's work assures me that this is not a soft alternative to justice, but a more robust, honest, and human foundation for it. My lived experience in the Corridors is my proof. When we have the courage to meet there, in that sacred space of shared vulnerability, we don't just settle a case. We plant a seed of a different world, one where, as Dobson envisions, our universal ethics begins not with a rule, but with a recognition: the recognition of our own face in the face of the other, wounded and yearning for peace.

In solidarity and continued learning,

Dominos

Founder, Corridors of Peace"

B.3 Editorial Note: Domino's reflection offers compelling practitioner-based validation for the Vulnerability–Pluralism Model. His work demonstrates how grounding justice in vulnerability and pluralism produces outcomes that traditional punitive systems cannot achieve: relational truth, emotional repair, and sustainable peace. His contribution thus strengthens the empirical, ethical, and practical foundations of the VPM.

Appendix C — Scholarly Commentary and Reflections

C.1 Introduction to Contributor

Stephen J. Ternyik is an interdisciplinary scholar affiliated with Spiru Haret University (Bucharest, Romania), known for his contributions to evolutionary economics, technological ethics, and the socio-cultural foundations of human development. His work frequently examines how economic structures, ecological limits, and technological systems shape the moral and cognitive trajectories of societies. Ternyik's reflections carry particular weight in ethical, philosophical, and environmental discourse because of his ability to synthesise complex systems thinking with moral clarity and cultural insight.

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In the public academic forum Academia.edu, Ternyik not only engaged with 9 Billion People, 82 Billion Ghosts but also recommended the paper to other scholars, offering a thoughtful endorsement that situates the manifesto within broader debates about structural violence, speciesism, and the moral imagination required for planetary repair.

His commentary is reproduced below.

C.2 Commentary by Stephen J. Ternyik

Spiru Haret University, Bucharest

"This essay critically examines how systems like speciesism, capitalism, technological exploitation, and education reinforce each other to sustain violence against animals and the environment.
Using satirical and philosophical tones, it highlights how factory farming functions as a modern ritual of violence concealed behind labels, and how media and education numb moral awareness.
The piece explores the psychological repression of animal suffering, the rebranding of animal bodies to dissolve conscience, and the role of pharmaceutical corporations in perpetuating harm.
Ultimately, it urges awareness, moral imagination, and resistance to break free from collective denial and foster genuine change."

C.3 Editorial Note

Stephen Ternyik's reflection provides an interpretive lens through which the manifesto can be read as part of a wider intellectual movement—one that critiques the converging systems of economic optimisation, ideological conditioning, and normalised violence that collectively obscure the moral realities underlying modern consumption.

His analysis reinforces the manifesto's central thesis: that structural violence is not accidental but patterned, ritualised, and maintained through both psychological repression and institutional design. By emphasising the need for moral imagination and resistance, Ternyik positions the manifesto not merely as a call for awareness but as a call for ethical restructuring—a reconsideration of how societies conceptualise animals, the environment, and the human place within systems of extraction.

While earlier versions of this research referenced Peter Singer for his historical role in spotlighting non-human suffering, the VPM fundamentally diverges from Singer's position. Singer grounds moral standing in cognitive capacity; the VPM explicitly rejects capacity-based models in favor of a universal vulnerability baseline. This shift was strengthened by critiques raised during the discourse.

His contribution therefore strengthens the manifesto's academic resonance, offering readers a bridge between personal moral awakening and systemic critique, and signalling the text's relevance within contemporary ethical and socio-ecological scholarship.

Epilogue — The Strength of Love, Compassion, and Vulnerability

In the end, everything comes down to this: love, compassion, and vulnerability are not weaknesses in a violent world — they are the only forces strong enough to change it.

If our essay and 3 part manifesto has shown anything, it is that harm persists not because people are uniquely cruel, but because systems are designed to numb compassion, suppress imagination, and shield us from the vulnerability of others. Yet it is precisely this vulnerability — shared across species, across nations, across every boundary we invent — that reveals the truth of our moral condition.

- o   Vulnerability is not a flaw of life; it is the foundation of our obligations.
- o   It is what makes every being worthy of protection.
- o   It is what binds us into a single moral circle, whether we acknowledge it or not.
- o   To recognise vulnerability is to step into the heart of compassion.

And compassion, when lived as a practice rather than a feeling, becomes a form of strength. It disrupts the indifference that violence depends on. It refuses to let convenience or custom dictate conscience. It sees the fragile and does not turn away.

Love, too, is strength — not sentimentality, but the fierce insistence that the suffering of another is never irrelevant. This is the love that refuses to be domesticated into politeness or reduced to metaphor. It is a love that demands clarity, a love that sees the hidden places where harm is normalised and says, not in my name. The moral future will not be built by power alone, nor by outrage alone.

It will be built by those who are brave enough to feel —to allow the vulnerability of other beings to touch them, to let compassion unsettle them, to let love expand their horizon of responsibility.

This is not easy work.

But it is necessary work.

And it is work that every one of us can begin, wherever we stand. We may not be able to dismantle all the machinery of harm overnight, but we can begin by interrupting its logic, by choosing kindness where indifference is expected, by choosing attention where denial is convenient, by choosing love where cruelty has become habitual. If nine billion people chose even a fraction of that courage, the ghosts that haunt this world would begin to fade.

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- o Our systems would soften.
- o Our imaginations would widen.

And the moral landscape of the planet would shift. The truth is simple, though rarely spoken:

Violence thrives on the myth that vulnerability is dangerous. But life flourishes when vulnerability is honoured. To honour vulnerability — in ourselves, in one another, in every living being — is to reclaim the world from the forces that would reduce it to commodities and casualties. It is to insist that the fragile is sacred. It is to recognise that the smallest creature is not powerless, because its suffering has the power to awaken our own humanity.

So let this epilogue stand as a promise: that love will not retreat, that compassion will not be silenced, that vulnerability will not be dismissed as naive or weak.

For in the long arc of moral progress, only these forces endure.

And only these forces have ever truly changed the world.

May they change us too.

It is a commitment — to remember, to resist, and to love and to heal with compassion as our highest form of intelligence

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