OmegAlpha I:2 Autumn 2025, 103–137
ISSN 3067-1329 (Print), ISSN 3067-1337 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.63394/nhqe3e17
Original Paper
Received: 13 March 2025 | Accepted: 12 July 2025

Monarchical Interdependence: A Zizioulian Reappraisal of Vulnerability

Richard René

Abstract
This article examines the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability through the lens of John Zizioulas's theological anthropology. While Western thought, shaped by libertarian ideals, has habitually framed vulnerability as weakness, recent philosophers—especially Judith Butler and Erinn Gilson—have recast the concept as an openness to affect that enables both flourishing and harm. Yet, Butler and Gilson remain constrained by empiricism, and as such, struggle to reconcile human vulnerability with agency. Zizioulas's anthropological hermeneutic provides a way forward by interpreting vulnerability in light of his trinitarian theology. Specifically, his account of the monarchy of the Father as "inconceivable" without the Son and the Spirit provides a divine model for human vulnerability as both interdependent and free. In light of this model, Zizioulas reframes Butler and Gilson's reappraisal of vulnerability as a paradoxical tension between the "biological hypostasis" (the tragic inability to transcend our created nature subject to death), and free, loving interdependence with God in Christ through the

Richard René
Independent scholar
Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada
E-mail: richard.p.rene@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0391-6722

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

eucharistic communion of the Church (the "ecclesial hypostasis" or "communion in otherness"). Zizioulas's account also addresses the question of agency in vulnerability by proposing *kenosis* as a continual ascetic self-denial to receive the other and let the other truly *be* other.
Keywords: anthropology, vulnerability, eucharistic ontology, John Zizioulas, Judith Butler, Monarchy of the Father

Introduction

The past quarter century has thrown the undeniable fact of human vulnerability into sharp relief. Under the influence of ever-accelerating globalization, the global community has never been more aware of our susceptibility to the effects of war, economic crises, natural disasters, climate change, and communicable diseases. In response to this heightened awareness, philosophical, legal, and cultural discourses in the West have increasingly invoked the concept of vulnerability as the basis for political intervention in the lives of those seen as particularly susceptible to injustice, inequity, and others forms of harm.[1] Yet, Western culture has continued to treat vulnerability as nothing more than, "liability to injury, weakness, dependency, powerlessness, incapacity, deficiency, and passivity."[2] This pejorative view finds an unfortunate reinforcement in the etymology of the English word;[3] more importantly, it is underwritten by a philosophical and cultural construct of the ideal of human life rooted in what has been called "the liberal subject,"[4] but what may be more accurately termed the "*libertarian* subject," who exists and acts as an atomistic individual be-

[1] For a useful multidisciplinary survey, see Kate Brown, Kathryn Ecclestone, and Nick Emmel, "The Many Faces of Vulnerability," *Social Policy and Society* 16, no. 3 (July 2017), 497–510. See also Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–18.

[2] Mackenzie, et. all, *Vulnerability*, 5.

[3] Ca. 1600, from Late Latin *vulnerabilis* "wounding," from Latin *vulnerare* "to wound, hurt, injure, maim," from *vulnus* (genitive *vulneris*) "wound."

[4] Martha Albertson Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, no. 1 (July 2008), 10–12.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

ing, self-sufficient and self-reliant.[5] Set against this ideal, identifiably vulnerable groups (such as women and minorities) are "others" whose vulnerabilities are nothing more than weaknesses to be dominated, controlled, and exploited.[6]

Parallel to the popularization of vulnerability is an emerging field within anthropological philosophy that challenges the pejorative understanding of the concept, and affirms its constructive role in a flourishing human life.[7] Most notably, Judith Butler has taken decisive steps to reappraise the condition as more than a necessary affliction, but the potential for our responsiveness to the world.[8] Philosophers of vulnerability have since refined Butler's insights, distinguishing between inherent vulnerability and its situational forms, which can be exacerbated or mitigated through legal or political means.[9] As a concept, inherent vulnerability has come to be redefined as a condition of openness to affect that is beyond a person's control, experienced in ambiguous ways, and resulting in uncertain outcomes. Yet, philosophers of vulnerability continue to grapple with how inherently vulnerable human beings can still exercise meaningful agency as a vital part of flourishing, tending instead to rely on a binarism that opposes agency to passivity, thus reinscribing the association of the latter with vulnerability.[10]

[5] Catriona Mackenzie, "The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability," in Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 42. See also Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

[6] Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory 26 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 85–92.

[7] Brown et al., "The Many Faces of Vulnerability," 504–505.

[8] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), 34, 55. See also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 22–29.

[9] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 7-9; Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 36–38; and Erinn Gilson, "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (May 2011): 308–32.

[10] See Alyson Cole, "All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique," *Critical Horizons* 17, no. 2 (May 2016): 260–277.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Contributing to the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability is an emerging effort to re-evaluate the concept through a theological lens.[11] Scholars from Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions have constructed comprehensive anthropologies that uphold the vulnerability of Jesus Christ, his exposure to the world from birth to death on the cross, as the basis for human flourishing in vulnerability.[12] However, these accounts could benefit from a contribution that 1) more fully treats vulnerability as ambiguous—liable to wellbeing and harm—even as it serves a constructive end in flourishing, and 2) theorizes more fully how the inherently vulnerable human beings possess the capacity for agency. Such a contribution, I will argue, can be found in the modern Orthodox tradition, which has so far offered few significant contributions to the field.[13] Specifically, I will make the case that a careful reading of the anthropology of John Zizioulas provides a constructive theological "companioning" for the Butlerian philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability.[14] Zizioulas's "top down" her-

[11] For an overview of theological responses to vulnerability, see Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas, eds., *Exploring Vulnerability*, V&R Academic (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

[12] Some prominent examples include Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008); Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

[13] An exception to this paucity is Myroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn's excellent study, which in any case focuses on disability, rather than vulnerability per se. See Myroslaw I. Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference* (Toronto: Novalis, 2013). For a more recent contribution to the field to the Orthodox theological engagement with vulnerability, see Petre Maican "Vulnerability and Solidarity: An Improbable Connection," *Journal of Disability & Religion* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 55–67. See also Richard René, "Absolute Vulnerability: A Contemporary Orthodox Anthropology in Dialogue with Judith Butler, Erinn Gilson, John Zizioulas, and Sergius Bulgakov" (Ph.D., Toronto, ON, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, 2024).

[14] William Desmond, "Superiority beyond Interiority," *Louvain Studies* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2021), 200–202. Analogies to Desmond's "companioning" approach can be seen the correlational method developed by Paul Tillich. See especially Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 59-66. David Tracy has built on Tillich in proposing his own revised model. See especially David

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

meneutical premise for anthropology offers a teleological vision of vulnerability that enriches the philosophical accounts, whose hermeneutics are limited to the empirical forms of the vulnerable condition. Specifically, Zizioulas's neopatristic trinitarian theology—particularly his account of the monarchy of the Father as "inconceivable" without the Son and the Spirit—provides a divine model for human vulnerability as both interdependent and free. In light of this divine model, Zizioulas's thought reframes the Butlerian view of vulnerability as ambivalent and ambiguous in terms of a paradoxical tension between the "biological hypostasis,"[15] the tragic inability to transcend our created nature subject to death, and free, loving interdependence with God in Christ through eucharistic communion, that is, the "ecclesial hypostasis"[16] or "communion in otherness."[17] In addition, Zizioulas's account responds to the question of agency in vulnerability by proposing *kenosis* as a continual ascetic self-denial to receive the other and let the other truly *be* other.[18] Yet, Zizioulas's "top down" hermeneutical framework also has its limits, his emphasis on the human *telos* as "ecclesial hypostasis" tending to instrumentalize the biological hypostasis, reducing it to a platform for staging the event of personhood. As such, the Butlerian philosophy of vulnerability provides an empirical grounding for Zizioulas's theological reappraisal.

Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 45–46.

[15] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 50. Henceforth, *BC*.

[16] Ibid.

[17] John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 9. Henceforth, *CO*.

[18] Zizioulas, *CO*, 5–6, 83–84, 302–305. See also "Relational Ontology: Insights from Patristic Thought," in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 150; and "Preserving God's Creation. Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology. III," *King's Theological Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 5.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

The Philosophical Reappraisal of Vulnerability

Before turning to Zizioulas, it is worth examining in more detail the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability. A watershed in this movement is Judith Butler's reflection on the 9/11 attacks and the United States' subsequent "War on Terror," in which she breaks new conceptual ground by redefining vulnerability as inherent to the way our identities are formed in a fundamentally and continually relational matrix:

> Given over from the start to the world of others, [my body] bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. . . . Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.[19]

Although Butler associates vulnerability here with violence (since violence most sharply reminds us of our core vulnerability), she is clear that "the body's vulnerability is not reducible to its injurability." [20] Further, our "unwilled proximity" to the world "animates responsiveness" in ways that are both negative and positive.[21]

Although Butler has been criticized for emphasizing violence as a site of vulnerability,[22] her insight is a seismic shift in the reappraisal of the concept as ambiguous, rather than purely negative. Further, Butler makes an important distinction between precariousness, which is a universal ontological feature of all human life, and precarity, which is "a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differently exposed to injury, violence, and death."[23] Precarity is indeed destructive, and should be eliminated, reduced, or mitigated, if at all possible. By contrast, precariousness is inherent to all human beings; as a core suscepti-

[19] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.
[20] Butler, *Frames of War*, 34.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 66–67.
[23] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

bility to the outside world, it can result in harm, yet it is also vital to our "feeling of aliveness."[24]

Feminist scholars have since built on Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity to construct a taxonomy of vulnerability, identifying the former as "inherent" and the latter as "situational" forms.[25] Most recently, Erinn Gilson has adopted this taxonomy to bracket the situational vulnerability and make room for a more constructive definition of the concept (linked to core ontological realities).[26] Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's ontology,[27] as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology,[28] Gilson offers a fully-fledged, reappraised definition of ontological vulnerability as,

> first, a condition of potential the experiential reality of which is undetermined; second, a fundamental and shared underlying condition of openness to alteration; third, a condition that cannot be characterized as homogeneous, but is manifest in a variety of forms and kinds of experiences; fourth, the nature and value of which are both ambivalent and ambiguous rather than determinatively and inevitably negative.[29]

These three features of Gilson's definition are worth expanding on. First, vulnerability should not be understood as necessarily reducible to certain expressions. Simply put, the phrase "being vul-

[24] Ibid., 55.

[25] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 7–9.

[26] Ibid., 37.

[27] Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 96, and *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 208. My understanding of Deleuzian concepts is indebted to Taylor Hammer, "Difference and Creativity: Virtuality and Actualization in Deleuze's Reading of Bergson," *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 60–61.

[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 263, and *Phenomenology of Perception* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982), 380. See discussion of this concept in Dimitris Apostolopoulos, "Intentionality, Constitution and Merleau- Ponty's Concept of 'The Flesh,'" *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (September 2017), 682; and Rajiv Kaushik, "The Secondary Passivity: Merleau-Ponty at the Limit of Phenomenology," *Continental Philosophy Review* 54, no. 1 (March 2021), 66.

[29] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 140.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

nerable" should not necessarily imply that one is vulnerable *to* anything. Rather, the concept needs to be seen as possessing a real existence distinct from how it is actualized. To this end, vulnerability is a *potentiality*: an undetermined virtual openness that enables change. Second, vulnerability cannot be a quality that some possess to a greater degree than others; rather, it must be *univocal*. Vulnerability must be shared by all beings, not as a property, but in and through their individual differences in relation to one another, that is, their interdependence. This ensures that vulnerability is not a natural or fixed quality that can then be applied to some and not to others, but a universal mode of being that is open to affectation in differing relations. Yet vulnerability is not a homogeneous property that manifests itself identically for all; it is therefore also *equivocal*, emerging out of a particular individual's situation and relations with others, and thus, irreducible to others' experiences of the vulnerable condition. Equivocity also means that what comes from our experiences of vulnerability—its results—are ambivalent, in that they cannot be determined in advance; moreover, these experiences are ambiguous in that they are bound up with one another within the same capacity to be affected.

It is important to note here that for Butler and those who followed her, vulnerability is co-conditional with another concept, namely, interdependence. From beginning to end, humans are dependent on others for identity, growth, and flourishing.[30] Butler points out that since we come into being within the matrix of relationships, our sense of self and otherness is not atomistic, but profoundly interconnected:

> Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. . . . I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well.[31]

Thus, we cannot recognize ourselves as subjects apart from others because our subjectivity is "riven from the start, interrupted by

[30] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 2.
[31] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22. See also, *Frames of War*, 44.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

alterity."[32] Moreover, if our lives are dependent, not just on those we know or see (such as parents, siblings, and friends) but also on "anonymous others," whom we may never know or see, then our identities must remain, at least in part, mysterious to us.[33] If there is a boundary that defines a subject as an "I" as distinct from the other as "you," Butler argues, that boundary is "a function of the relation, a brokering of difference, a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness."[34] Because we are fundamentally "given over" to the other, we can be "impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others"[35] and, therefore, "at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure."[36] Butler understands this precariousness as our capacity to be "undone by each other," which "testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control."[37] In other words, we are vulnerable to one another because of our inescapable dependence on one another.

While I would agree with Butler's affirmation of human interdependence as an inescapable relational matrix in which subjecthood is formed, this paper will focus on the vulnerable condition itself, for two reasons. First, when we simply assume the meaning of vulnerability, we allow its common negative associations with weakness and susceptibility to violence and other forms of harm to flourish and hinder our attempts to articulate an ethical response to it.[38] To fully grasp the constructive possibilities of interdependence and allow that reality to shape our ethical responses, we need to attend to the significance of vulnerability itself as a complex, multifaceted existential phenomenon.[39] The second reason for considering vulnerability as distinct (but not apart) from interdependence is that the latter operates within the matrix of a

[32] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.
[33] Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.
[34] Ibid., 44.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 20.
[37] Ibid., 23, 46.
[38] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 5.
[39] Ibid., 9–11.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

universal, affectable condition.[40] Simply put, while we recognize vulnerability in the context of dependent (and therefore ethical) relations, our dependent relations are meaningful only within a fundamental capacity to be affected by others. As Gilson puts it,

> If we are not vulnerable, we have no need for ethics, and it is precisely because we are vulnerable—can be affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, or empathy—that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically.[41]

In this sense, ethical behavior is the active and distinctly human response to our inescapable dependence on others. Yet both human interdependence and ethics "live and move and have their being" within a broader affectable capacity, which is shared by both human and non-human beings. As such, a full and accurate account of human flourishing must not only acknowledge the fact of interdependence and offer an ethical response that reflects this fact, it must also make efforts to describe the underlying "ontological condition of our humanity" that gives our dependence on and responsibility to others any meaning at all.[42] Yet, my focus on vulnerability is not a preference over interdependence, as the invocation of the former necessarily implicates the latter. Indeed, the co-conditionality of the two concepts will be important when I consider Zizioulas's contribution to an Orthodox theology of vulnerability.

Agency in Vulnerability?

The reappraisal of vulnerability as ambiguous rather than necessarily harmful has raised a key challenge for scholars in the field, one they have yet to fully address: the question of how an inherently vulnerable human being can exercise genuine agency. Cole has critiqued philosophers of vulnerability for reinforcing the active/passive binary in their conceptions of vulnerable agency "either by redefining passivity itself as dynamic or by arguing that

[40] Ibid.
[41] Gilson, *Ethics of Vulnerability*.
[42] Mackenzie et al., *Vulnerability*, 4–7.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

other ways to inhabit norms have been misrecognized as passive."[43] She points to Butler as representative of the latter tendency, and Gilson of the former.

While Butler's earlier thought on gender suggests that human identity itself is performative, an "act" whose script is predetermined by the culturally normative discourse in which it is embedded,[44] her later work allows for the possibility that within their performatively shaped identities, human beings can act "in new and unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede and exceed us."[45] In this way, as Knight argues, Butler conceives of "a limited form of autonomy, one which involves reflecting on and calling into question the very norms and power relations that form us."[46] Even as we are acted upon and shaped by forces external to ourselves, Butler says, "there's always a certain kind of possibility of becoming otherwise and becoming what is not fully anticipated."[47] Human agency can exist, then, not as the activity of "a state of individuation, taken as self-persisting prior to and apart from any relations of dependency on the world of others,"[48] but rather "from a subjectivity located in a distinct context never wholly of one's making."[49] Our agency is always enmeshed in our exposure to "the world of others," which acts upon us in ways we cannot predetermine or control. By the same token, our exposure and thus vulnerability to others can also be agentic,

[43] Cole, "All of Us are Vulnerable," 270.

[44] Amber Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics: Judith Butler on Autonomy and the Pursuit of a 'Livable Life,'" *Feminist Formations* 33, no. 3 (2021): 181. For a summary of Butler's theory of performativity, see Zembylas Michalinos, "Butler, Judith," in *SAGE Research Methods Foundations* (London: SAGE Publications, 2020).

[45] Qtd. in Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics," 181.

[46] Ibid., 182. Catherine Mills makes the same point, arguing that Butler sees agency as "the opportunity to distort and destabilise relations of power in their reiteration." See Catherine Mills, "Efficacy and Vulnerability: Judith Butler on Reiteration and Resistance," *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no. 32 (July 2000), 271.

[47] Vikki Bell, "New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality: An Interview with Judith Butler," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 1 (January 2010), 150.

[48] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32.

[49] Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics," 184. Butler describes agency as "a complex choreographed scene with many kinds of elements—social, material, human—at work." See Bell, "New Scenes of Vulnerability," 151.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

in that within "the field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way," human beings possess a conditioned form of autonomy that is "neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region, a constituent feature of a human animal both affected and acting."[50] For Butler, then, vulnerability and agency are not a binary, where vulnerability is a "subjective disposition" characterized by passivity, and agency is a state of individual sovereignty. Rather,

> vulnerability is a kind of relationship that belongs to that ambiguous region in which receptivity and responsiveness are not clearly separable from one another, and not distinguished as separate moments in a sequence; indeed, where receptivity and responsiveness become the basis for mobilizing vulnerability rather than engaging in its destructive denial.[51]

How one might mobilize the receptivity and responsiveness of one's vulnerability Butler does not fully elaborate. At most, Butler characterizes the mobilization of vulnerability in terms of "practices of deliberate exposure" in which people put their bodies "on the line" in nonviolent resistance to oppression and violence.[52]

Butler's argument that agency is inseparable from vulnerability is a compelling one. That said, her account stops short of providing a fully articulated theory of vulnerable agency. Cole is correct in observing that Butler's account tends to perpetuate the active/passive binary in the sense that Butler sees vulnerability as being mischaracterized as merely passive, when in fact it can also be agentic. Butler carves out a space within the boundaries of vulnerability where agents can reflect, plan, and make choices.[53] This tacitly invokes a discrete "autonomous (pre-discursive) subject"[54] who is certainly inseparable from the conditions within which

[50] Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Leticia Sabsay, and Zeynep Gambetti (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 24.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 26.

[53] Knight, "Feminist Vulnerability Politics," 183–184.

[54] Lise Nelson, "Bodies (and Spaces) Do Matter: The Limits of Performativity," *Gender, Place & Culture* 6, no. 4 (December 1999), 340.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

they operate, but who nevertheless transcends those conditions through personal reflection, critique, resistance, etc.[55] Butler goes a long way to undoing the opposition between agency and vulnerability,[56] yet the two concepts in her account remain divided between active responsivity, on one hand, and passive receptivity on the other. How the vulnerable condition might generate agency, and not simply condition it, remains unclear in Butler's work.

Erinn Gilson takes a different tack, seeking to recast vulnerability itself as the matrix of agency. Following Deleuze again, she refers to this form of agency as "becoming," which is "a process of alteration that takes place only through a relationship with another being."[57] Gilson draws on Merleau-Ponty's thought to argue that vulnerability is a "mode of passivity, which can be thought in terms of receptivity rather than simply as susceptibility."[58] This receptive openness is a necessary condition for *becoming*: "nonvolitional affective transformation that occasions new ways of feeling, thinking, and relating."[59]

Following Merleau-Ponty, Gilson says that these transformative events are not merely imposed on us from the outside in a "passivist" fashion; rather, we participate in them, though they do not originate with us.[60] She then draws on Deleuze to argue that affect "makes" us agentic, though the "active forces" operate in our unconscious.[61] As Gilson states, "becomings are necessarily unpredictable, uncontrollable, and their results unknown."[62] While vulnerability as an affective condition can generate agency in the form of actions distinctly our own, the affective condition cannot enable us to consciously exercise agency. Perhaps sensing that this argument risks negating the possibility of agency in vulnerability,

[55] Nelson, "Bodies and Spaces Do Matter," 340.
[56] Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 25.
[57] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 139.
[58] Ibid., 134.
[59] Ibid., 139.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 42. See Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 139.
[62] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability,* 139.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Gilson adds that while becomings lie outside our volition, we can act to "[create] the conditions necessary for entering into a process of becoming."[63] This action involves cultivating what she calls "epistemic vulnerability," which she defines as an attitude of readiness to have our normative reality destabilized and subverted, paving the way for transformative change.[64] Yet, this attitude does not emerge from a vulnerable being itself, but depends (similar to Butler) on the notion of a subject who independently evaluates and identifies their own ignorance, articulates their own ideas, reflects on unfamiliar encounters and situations, and decides to make changes. In this independence, Gilson tacitly invokes the ideal of the libertarian subject, and in the end, she is not able to move beyond the active/passive binary. Her account of becoming is nonvolitional and looks a lot like conventional passivity: affects generate activity, but both play out in a realm beyond our control. And despite her efforts to avoid this outcome, her account of epistemic vulnerability effectively reinscribes libertarian forms of activity in the form of a rational, independent subject, evaluating, reflecting, and choosing to embrace epistemic attitudes and behaviors that enable flourishing. Though she moves closer than Butler to a theory of vulnerable agency, Gilson's account lacks the resources to show how human beings, whose bodies overlap with the world and are subject to its affect in ways beyond our control, can act in a way that is also *un*conditioned without relying on the intervention of a subject formed by the libertarian ideal.[65]

Zizioulas's Anthropology

As I will show, Zizioulas's theological anthropology provides resources to correct and augment the Butlerian accounts of vulnerability, which are limited by their immanent hermeneutical framework. Three key features of Zizioulas's thought will prove useful:

[63] Gilson, Ethics of Vulnerability, 139.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25. See also Mackenzie, "The Importance of Relational Autonomy," 36.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

the monarchy of the Father in the life of the Trinity; human existence as a paradox of biological and ecclesial hypostases; and *kenosis* as human agency *par excellence*.

The hermeneutical starting point of Zizioulas's anthropology is "top down," flowing from his doctrine of God, rather than from an empirical account of human life as it happens to be.[66] Zizioulas views this doctrine as integral with his neopatristic "duty,"[67] which is an "ideological continuity"[68] with the Fathers, rather than an attempt to retrieve a "pristine" historical meaning and perpetuate a mere theology of repetition.[69] Zizioulas's goal is to faithfully interpret the writings of the Eastern Fathers and apply "the special ethos that Orthodox tradition brings with it . . . to the problems of modern Western man, which are rapidly becoming the problems of humanity in its global dimension."[70]

From this starting point, Zizioulas argues that an anthropology that can respond to the malaise of fallen humanity in the modern world must be founded on the biblical identification of the "one God" with the Person of the Father that is affirmed by the Cappadocian Fathers and preserved in the Orthodox tradition.[71] Simply put, Zizioulas argues that God cannot give freedom to human beings as long as God's self is understood as subject to the necessity of the divine nature.[72] Only the biblical and Orthodox patristic understanding of God identified with the Person of the Fa-

[66] John Zizioulas, "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (October 1975), 401, and *CO*, 4.

[67] Zizioulas, *CO*, 267.

[68] Torrance, "Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology: Reassessing the Debate," *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 4 (July 2011), 700.

[69] Torrance, "Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology," 701.

[70] Zizioulas, "Communion and Otherness," 348. Cf. Gallaher and Ladouceur's characterization of the neo-patristic synthesis as a "perpetual theological return to and renewal in patristic thought" that responds creatively and synthetically to contemporary problems. See Georges Florovsky, *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, ed. Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 6.

[71] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 410; *BC*, 40–41; *CO*, 114–118.

[72] See Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 88–89.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

ther, who constitutes the divine Being in Absolute freedom, can offer fallen human beings a way to see themselves as gifted with personhood in God's image, that is, an ability to freely constitute their own nature in God's likeness.[73] As the "one God" and the "ground of unity" of the trinitarian Persons, the Father is the cause of the Son and the Spirit.[74] Aware of the danger of subordinationism and causal necessity in this claim, Zizioulas clarifies that in traditional Greek thought, subordination results from temporal causation, because what comes "after" is subordinate to what comes "before"; however, Zizioulas argues that the Cappadocian Fathers, by introducing the idea of the Person of the Father as creator *ex nihilo* into Greek thought, "made personal causation constitutive of being,"[75] separated the necessary association of causality with time, and rejected the notion of divine causation on the level of nature (that is, as necessity), but only at the level of personhood (that is, as freedom).[76] This freedom, for Zizioulas, is Absolute: not only is the Person of the Father not constrained by the divine nature, but communion with the Son and the Spirit "is not a constraining structure for His existence (God is not in communion, does not love, because He cannot but be in communion and love)."[77] As a Person, the Father "makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God."[78] As Zizioulas puts it more startlingly, "God owes His existence to the Father."[79] Thus, the priority of the Father means that both the existence of God's nature, or *ousia*, and the personal existence of the Trinity is contingent on the Father's personal, perpetual free willing.[80]

In asserting the radical priority of the Father, Zizioulas appears to uphold what Tom McCall calls "a robustly 'libertarian' notion

[73] Zizioulas, *CO*, 144–145.
[74] Ibid., *CO*, 118–119 and *BC*, 41.
[75] Zizioulas, *BC*, 88.
[76] Zizioulas, *CO*, 128. See also, "Human Capacity," 409–411 and *BC*, 39–42.
[77] Zizioulas, *BC*, 18.
[78] Ibid., 41.
[79] Zizioulas, *BC*, 18. See Tom McCall's summary of Zizioulas's argument in "Holy Love and Divine Aseity in the Theology of John Zizioulas," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 2 (May 2008), 195.
[80] McCall, "Holy Love," 198.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

of divine freedom,"[81] that is, freedom without reference to anything other than Himself.[82] Yet, Zizioulas also affirms the "'Being as Communion' (BAC) thesis,"[83] asserting that the Father, while freely causing divine Being and the otherness of the Son and the Spirit, is always a "relational entity"[84] and thus "inconceivable without the radically other persons."[85] Thus, the Father "freely affirms his being, his identity, *by means of an event of communion with other persons*."[86] In a key passage of *Communion with Otherness*, Zizioulas discusses this simultaneity in the Father's freely constituting the divine Being in and through communion with the other divine Persons:

> In saying that "God as person—as the hypostasis of the Father—makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God," we automatically exclude the priority of substance over personhood, and at the same time its privileged possession by the Father, which would introduce the risk of inequality of deity in the Trinity. The co-emergence of divine nature with the Trinitarian existence initiated by the Father implies that the Father, too, "acquires," so to speak, deity only "as" the Son and the Spirit are in existence (he is inconceivable as Father without them), that is, only "when" divine nature is "possessed" by all three.[87]

The Father is prior in initiating trinitarian existence, but always as *Father*, begetting the Son and "spirating" the Spirit,[88] so that the mutual otherness of the Persons and their communion in the divine nature are *simultaneous*. Thus, Zizioulas understands "God is

[81] McCall, "Holy Love," 196.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 195.

[84] Zizioulas, *CO*, 122.

[85] Ibid., 36. See also *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today,* ed. Fr Gregory Edwards, Kindle (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2010), loc. 882; "Communion and Otherness," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (January 1994), 353; and "On Being a Person. The Ontology of Personhood," in *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 41.

[86] Zizioulas, *CO*, 18. Emphasis mine.

[87] Ibid., 140.

[88] Ibid., 120.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

love" (1 John 4:16) to mean "God's mode of existence [that] 'hypostasizes' God, *constitutes* His being"[89] as a communion in otherness and otherness in communion.[90]

As Zizioulas recounts it, the concept of the person developed in the context of the trinitarian controversies of the fourth century.[91] In a move Zizioulas calls "a revolution in Greek philosophy,"[92] the Cappadocian Fathers distinguished between two hitherto synonymous terms: *ousia* and *hypostasis*.[93] While denotating the former as the general nature of a being, they linked the latter with the particularity of *prosopon* or person.[94] In this way, they could speak of God as having a single nature (*ousia*), while existing in three distinct Persons (*hypostases*). For Zizioulas, this conceptual revolution has allowed for the possibility of seeing human beings made in God's image, not in exclusive reference to their nature, as in classical Greek thought, but as persons, freely constituting the "catholicity"[95] or totality of their shared nature with human beings in a way or "mode" that is distinct and unique.[96] Zizioulas thus defines persons as "*otherness in communion and communion in otherness,*"[97] where "communion" refers to the shared nature or *ousia* (the *what* of their being), and "otherness" refers to the way or *hypostasis* (the *how*) in which the common nature operates in freedom, uniqueness, and self-transcendence, or *ekstasis*.[98] While all created beings, "possess a *hypostasis*, a mode of being,"[99] only humans are made "gifted with the freedom to relate this hypostasis to the divine 'mode of being' which is not subject to death, and thus to allow or enable their hypostasis to exist for ever as particu-

[89] Zizioulas, *BC*, 46
[90] Ibid. and *CO*, 130.
[91] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 409; *BC*, 36–39; and *CO,* 155–161.
[92] Zizioulas, *BC*, 36–39.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 408.
[96] Zizioulas, *BC*, 39 and "Human Capacity," 408.
[97] Zizioulas*, CO*, 9–10. Emphasis in original.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 95.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

lar, truly personal and hypostatic."[100] Zizioulas thus views personhood as the image of God uniquely present in human beings,[101] forming the basis for divine-human communion or theōsis, which is "participation not in the nature or substance of God, but in his personal existence."[102]

Yet, the inherent longing of human beings to attain the divine mode of being is tragically unfulfilled.[103] Striving to overcome our inherent perishability, we are unable to do so because of a primordial sinful tendency to make ourselves "the ultimate point of reference in creation."[104] This impulse is bound to fail, Zizioulas says, precisely because the question of human identity cannot be answered with sole reference to our own nature, which is naturally subject to perishability, and thus, the limits of necessity and individualistic division, separation, and death. Such a mode of existence is the "biological hypostasis," freedom from which can only be found in the "new birth" of baptism, which gifts humans with the ability to constitute their nature according to the relationship between the Father and the Son,[105] a process that is perfected only in the age to come, that is, eschatologically.[106] Until then, human beings continue to exist in the ecclesial and biological hypostases in paradoxical simultaneity.[107]

Zizioulas views the dynamic tension of biological and ecclesial hypostases that characterizes actual human life as the arena for the exercise of agency. He views agency in this condition as "self-denial"[108]—that is, the abrogation of the "self-existent" being, "determined by its own boundaries"[109] that acts independently,

[100] Zizioulas, *CO*, 95.
[101] Ibid., 108.
[102] Zizioulas, *BC*, 50, "Human Capacity," 440, and *CO*, 166.
[103] Zizioulas, *BC*, 52.
[104] Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation, Lecture Three," 5. See also "Human Capacity," 434.
[105] Zizioulas, *CO*, 240–241 and *BC*, 56.
[106] Zizioulas, *BC*, 59 and *CO*, 14.
[107] Zizioulas, *BC,* 50.
[108] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 428.
[109] Ibid., 409.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

introverted to its own created nature.[110] By contrast, genuine being, Zizioulas says, "is found ultimately in personal *communion* and not in the 'self-existent,'"[111] so that the proper task for human beings is to "deny any natural possession, any capacity—only by so doing he proves fully that he is free, and thus shows himself to be capable of something that no impersonal creature has."[112] Within the paradox of biological/ecclesial existence, then, humans affirm their freedom from slavery to necessity and death precisely through the denial of self-dependence.

The act of dying to oneself, Zizioulas contends, is nothing less than an ascetic act that is kenotic, rooted in the Incarnation:

> Since the Son of God moved to meet the other, his creation, by emptying himself through the kenosis of the Incarnation, the "kenotic" way is the only one that befits the Christian in his or her communion with the other—be it God or one's "neighbour."[113]

Self-denial through kenosis in the likeness of Christ involves the "breaking of one's own will,"[114] which signifies "the achievement of *freedom, par excellence*."[115] By rejecting the impulse for self-preservation and embracing the very depths of the perishability of the created condition, the ascetic breaks "the strongest of all necessities binding man"[116] and participates in Christ's own suffering: death on the cross, and descent into Hades.[117] At the same time, the ascetic comes to experience the "positive significance" of kenosis, "the reducing of oneself to nothing *so that* space may be made for the reception of the Other."[118] This yielding[119] of the self to the other is nothing less than kenotic agency as love, ultimately rooted in the love of Christ who "moved to meet the other, his

[110] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 406.
[111] Ibid., 445.
[112] Ibid., 430.
[113] Zizioulas, *CO*, 5–6 and 302–305.
[114] Ibid., 302.
[115] Ibid., 303. Emphasis in original.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Zizioulas, *CO*, 303.
[118] Ibid., 83. Emphasis mine.
[119] Ibid., 85.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

creation"[120] in his divine self-emptying love. Zizioulas, then, does not think of kenosis merely in terms of a negative movement, but the positive expression of self-denial *for* the other, so as to receive the other in a communion of love.[121] As he states, "Ascetic life aims not at the 'spiritual development' of the subject but at the giving up of the Self to the Other, at the erotic ecstasis of the I, that is, at *love*."[122]

It is worth noting that on Zizioulas's account, the full realization of the ecclesial hypostasis in the eschaton will effectively transcend the necessity, individualism, and death associated with biological existence.[123] He argues that this eschatological state, this state of being will "involve an ontology *which will mean the survival of our world* and thus will not amount to a denial of history and matter in a Gnostic or Neoplatonic sense."[124] Human beings will exist eschatologically *only* as ecclesial hypostases,[125] as communion in otherness and otherness in communion, but such an existence *will* be bodily, because the *how* of the human hypostasis, if it is to remain human, must hypostatize the *what* of human nature, even if that nature is entirely adapted and changed to a divine mode of being. It is unclear, however, how Zizioulas might view biological existence in an eschatological mode, free of those qualities that make it what it is, while remaining what it is. In the end, this suggests that Zizioulas tends to view biological existence as instrumental (though vitally so) to the attainment of personhood. Existing as ecclesial hypostases in the eschaton, human bodies seem to lose their active, dynamic capacities, with no other role than to be a mere platform for the staging of the event of personhood.

[120] Zizioulas, *CO*, 5–6.
[121] Ibid., 83.
[122] Ibid., 84.
[123] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 444–445.
[124] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[125] Ibid., 445.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Zizioulian Support for the Reappraisal of Vulnerability

Having outlined Zizioulas's anthropology, I now turn to the ways it correlates to the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability. The linchpin of my argument rests on a claim I made earlier, namely, that interdependence and vulnerability are co-conditional. To restate that point briefly, if Butler is right that "who 'I' am is nothing without your life, and life itself has to be rethought as this complex, passionate, antagonistic, and necessary set of relations with others,"[126] and if our dependency on others means that they can impinge upon us, then "vulnerability seems to follow from our being socially constituted bodies."[127] While Butler puts the point negatively in terms of loss and violence, Gilson's work shows that the converse also holds true: if human identity depends on relations with others, then we are not just exposed to possible harm from them, but also to the possibility of flourishing in relation to them.

Given the co-conditional link between interdependence and vulnerability, Zizioulas's relational anthropology tacitly supports a reappraised understanding of vulnerability and its role in human flourishing. While Zizioulas does not engage explicitly with vulnerability, other than pejoratively, as "necessity," his claim that all beings are constitutively interdependent means that they are *de facto* exposed to affect by others. Put another way, when Zizioulas speaks of dependence *on*, he can be read simultaneously as invoking vulnerability *to*. On this basis, Zizioulas's anthropology offers more support for a reappraised definition of vulnerability than it first appears. Specifically, his account of the biological/ecclesial hypostases supports the understanding of vulnerability as 1) a distinct potential for change for better as well as for worse that 2) can be said univocally of all beings, even as it is 3) experienced by different beings in different contexts, that is, *equivocally*. Finally, his view of kenosis as self-denial to receive the other in love offers a way to conceptualize human agency within the vulnerable condi-

[126] Butler, *Frames of War*, 44.
[127] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

tion. Yet, Zizioulas does not follow the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability on all points. I will show that his "top down" hermeneutical framework ultimately leads him to diverge from these criteria laid out by Butlerian thought, as well as to offer theological solutions to problems raised (and still unsolved) in the philosophical accounts.

Zizioulas's view of the paradox of the biological and ecclesial hypostases supports an Orthodox reappraised understanding of vulnerability in two ways. First, in presenting the fallen human existence as a mode of being that refers to the biological hypostasis alone, Zizioulas joins philosophers in challenging a reductive view of vulnerability as "liability to injury, weakness, dependency, powerlessness, incapacity, deficiency, and passivity."[128] Following the biblical and patristic affirmation of God as creator *ex nihilo*, Zizioulas understands the nature of all created beings, both human and nonhuman, as sharing a single fundamental characteristic: perishability. All beings experience this common perishability as an ontological necessity, which compels them to submit to their natural instincts. At the same time, they strive to perpetuate their natures beyond death through sexual reproduction, biological birth, and individuation, which leads to separation, division, and death, prompting the impulse to restart the reproductive cycle. This mode of being, Zizioulas says, is "not subject to the control of freedom";[129] it is mere susceptibility to impulses beyond the control of the creature. While for nonhumans, the biological hypostasis is a given, humans experience it pejoratively as tragic, because they have a unique capacity for freedom from givenness that they have perverted by turning it from its proper exercise in a relationship of love with their creator, and towards themselves.

Like Gilson and other philosophers of vulnerability, then, Zizioulas sees vulnerability understood as passivity as a bad thing. For Gilson, the reduction of vulnerability to passivity derives from a false philosophical ideal of the human being as invulnerable, self-sufficient, and independent, the so-called "libertarian

[128] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 5.
[129] Zizioulas, *BC*, 50.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

subject" discussed in the introduction. For Zizioulas, vulnerability experienced as passivity is a fact of human existence, but it stems from a profound ontological malaise: the breakdown of the relation between human beings and "the Other par excellence." Still, interesting parallels can be seen here between Gilson and Zizioulas, in that he links fallen human existence with the subject's bid for independence, a futile effort to define one's identity apart from others. Thus, Zizioulas's thought correlates with Gilson's notion of the libertarian subject—invulnerable, self-sufficient, and independent of others—as a false ideal of flourishing that human beings perpetuate through the willful denial of "epistemic ignorance." Zizioulas simply adds that the ideal and its continuing promotion result from a fallen mode of existence in which human beings, rebelling against God, persist in trying to define themselves with reference to themselves alone.

While Zizioulas converges with Butler and Gilson in asserting that vulnerability, understood or experienced as mere passivity, is bad for human flourishing, his anthropology supports a constructive view of vulnerability in a second vital way: as "a persistent openness to change . . . that enables continuing transformation."[130] As he states repeatedly, all being is relational, operating always in reference to others. In a fallen mode, humans attempt to exist independently of others and "the Other par excellence," but end up existing in reference to created nature, whether in themselves or other created beings, which leads to slavery to necessity and self-destructive individualism. In baptism, human beings receive the hypostasis of the Son of God in the Spirit, so that the *what* of their nature is made to exist, hypostatized, according to the mode of the Son's relation to the Father. Again, this "ecclesial hypostasis" is actualized historically always in reference to others in the eucharistic communion of the Church, which concurs with Butler's assertion that human beings are fundamentally "given over . . . to the world of others."[131] If that is the case, then humans are also always open to being *affected* by others, either for their harm

[130] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 135–136.
[131] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26. See also *Frames of War*, 23.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

(being "undone" by them, as Butler puts it), or (as Gilson would argue) for their good and flourishing, which for Zizioulas is theōsis.

Zizioulas sees the biological and ecclesial hypostases as simultaneous, paradoxical modes of existence integral to the mystery of the human being, even if the ecclesial hypostasis alone will remain operative in the eschatological state. This paradoxical condition means that human relations with others need not result in their subjection to necessity, leading to individualism and death. Put another way, their interdependent (and therefore mutually vulnerable) relations do not necessarily result in harmful expressions. Rather, they may actualize themselves in ways that are both tragic (when referred only to themselves) and transformative (when referred to the uncreated Other in baptism and others in the ecclesial network of relations). Thus, while Zizioulas does not present the ecclesial/biological hypostasis as a "virtuality" in the Deleuzian sense—that is, as a distinct entity capable of actualizing itself along creative lines, both positive and negative—his account affirms vulnerability as potentiality in the sense of being an openness to change that is *undetermined* in its expression.

Zizioulas also treats relationality as applicable to all beings "in the same sense," that is *univocally*. As Gilson argues, drawing from Deleuze, univocity is not a substantial property shared by beings, but a fundamental commonality of openness to affection that emerges out of the diverse relations of beings irreducible to one another.[132] While Zizioulas explicitly rejects Deleuze's (and Gilson's) postmodernist belief that "Difference is what determines existence,"[133] he affirms with them that ontological identity arises out of a relational dependence on others. He also agrees that relational, interdependent being does not derive from a common substance or shared properties. Zizioulas diverges from Deleuze and Gilson in that, rather than conceiving being as a "clamour"[134] that arises from the contrast or differentiation among beings, he ar-

[132] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 136–137.
[133] Zizioulas, *CO*, 52.
[134] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 35.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

gues that interdependent being emerges out of the participation of different beings in *personhood*, the relational event in which each being transcends itself to affirm the otherness of the other in a communion of love.[135] Nevertheless, his account meets the conditions of univocity in that he upholds personhood as a mode of being equally common to all humans.[136] To that extent, Zizioulas would also affirm that because interdependence may be said of all beings in the same sense, they are also univocally open to mutual affect, that is, vulnerable.

Zizioulas likewise demonstrates an awareness of the equivocity of vulnerable being, i.e., that not all beings experience their vulnerability in the same way. Nonhuman beings experience the biological hypostasis as a given of necessity, individuation, and death, which they attempt to avoid by adjusting and adapting, but to which they are ultimately passive. By contrast, human beings experience the same hypostasis as tragic, an unacceptable state of affairs from which they strive to escape, either in the destruction of the given (including themselves), or through its creative transformation.[137] In baptism and the eucharist, humans experience vulnerability positively as openness to transformation into the likeness of the hypostasis of the Son of God, that is, theōsis, while preserving their irreducible uniqueness as persons.[138] While for Zizioulas only humans experience theōsis directly, they can act as "priests of creation," affirming their interdependence with nonhuman beings and carrying them into "transcending relatedness with the 'other.'"[139] Thus, human and nonhuman beings experience openness to change, in ways irreducible to one another. To that extent, he supports the notion that vulnerability is not just univocal for all being, but equivocal in its manifestations among beings.

[135] See Zizioulas, *CO*, 55.

[136] Zizioulas also argues that nonhumans can participate in personhood through human mediation, becoming "humanised." See "Preserving God's Creation, Lecture Three," 4.

[137] Zizioulas, *BC*, 52.

[138] Zizioulas, *CO*, 167–168.

[139] Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation, Lecture One," 2.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Both ambivalence and ambiguity are features of Zizioulas's understanding of the equivocity of vulnerable human existence. In that the created experience of relational being can be both tragic (in reference to its own nature) and transformative (in reference to God in Christ through baptism and the eucharist), the resulting experiences of vulnerability are undetermined, and therefore, ambivalent. They are also ambiguous in that tragedy and transformation are located in one and the same experience of suffering that is the primary feature of created being.[140] Yet, Zizioulas diverges from Gilson's philosophical account in that he does not view this state of affairs as a "pervasive immanent condition,"[141] the only possible mode of human nature. The *telos* of the biological hypostasis in reference to itself is death, which for Zizioulas remains "the worst enemy of man, the most unacceptable of all things," regardless of how it may be viewed empirically in the natural world by scientists or philosophers.[142] The simultaneity of the biological and ecclesial hypostases are integral to the historical stage of the process of theōsis, but this process is not endless. It culminates in the eschaton and results in a condition in which the ambivalence and ambiguity of the empirical experience of vulnerability in history are resolved in a wholly ecclesial mode of being in the likeness of God.[143] Even in this eschatological state, though, Zizioulas remains clear that interdependence persists as integral to personhood.[144] In that sense, his account also continues to support the persistence in the eschatological state of vulnerability, though in a special form that is free from all necessity and individualism, and defined wholly by openness to loving communion with God and other beings.

[140] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 430–431.
[141] Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, 11.
[142] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 422.
[143] Ibid., 444–445.
[144] Ibid.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

The Reappraisal of Vulnerability: a Zizioulian Contribution

In envisioning an eschatological form of vulnerability that remains open to others even as it moves beyond the susceptibility to change for good or ill characteristic of human experience in history, Zizioulas's anthropology moves from "companioning" Butler's and Gilson's treatment to offering his own distinctly theological contribution. Specifically, he provides a way to address the difficulties of explaining how vulnerable human beings can exercise genuine agency without invoking, directly or indirectly, a libertarian subject. Both Butler and Gilson have attempted to meet this challenge, with limited results. Butler appeals tacitly to an autonomous subject within a field of vulnerability, while Gilson invokes an independent consciousness able to cultivate epistemic vulnerability and enable becoming. As noted previously, Zizioulas follows Butler and Gilson in rejecting the notion of agency as rooted in subjective independence. Such a view, he suggests, amounts to self-delusion, echoing the malaise of "epistemic ignorance" described by Gilson, in that a creature's bid for independence inevitably results in slavery to the necessity of its own nature—vulnerability reduced to mere passivity. Exercising agency in the creaturely state, then, means first engaging in active self-denial, by which Zizioulas means rejecting the claim of autonomous self-existence by embracing one's perishability—suffering—to prove oneself capable of freedom from the biological necessity of preserving oneself. Agency in this negative sense consists precisely in the exercise of vulnerability as a free yielding to the experience of necessity, rather than an attempt to resist necessity and preserve the illusion of one's self-existence. At the same time, this free yielding of oneself has the positive sense of making space to affirm others as unique and irreplaceable, that is, to love them.

One might object at this point that my reference to "free" self-denial tacitly invokes a subject who is independent from the biological hypostasis, and therefore *able* to deny themselves. Hans S. Reinders, for instance, has critiqued Zizioulas's notion of relationality as depending on an independent subjectivity, which down-

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

grades the personhood of those with profound disabilities.[145] However, Reinders' critique does not sufficiently take into account Zizioulas's own assertion that self-denial to realize communion in otherness and otherness in communion, or personhood, "can only be realised from outside human existence"[146] in the trinitarian God, who is the model for the human being through the Son of God.[147] The ability to constitute one's personhood freely must have its origins in God, and since God cannot give what God does not have, the ground of human personhood rests ultimately in the Person of the Father, who constitutes the personal existence of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with Absolute freedom, through perpetual free willing.[148] Through baptism in the Spirit into the Son, all human beings, regardless of abilities or capacities, come to share in the filial relationship between Father and Son, and thus participate in the freedom whose origin is the Father.[149]

Yet, by grounding human freedom in the monarchy of the Father, is Zizioulas not merely positing a libertarian divine subject, as McCall argues?[150] If so, he is simply raising the libertarian ideals of independence and invulnerability to a metaphysical level, and so cannot account for vulnerable agency any better than Butler or Gilson. As I have shown, however, Zizioulas holds together both the ultimate priority of the Father (alone) *and* the ultimacy of the communion of the three divine Persons. He makes it clear that "There is no inconsistency in making communion primordial and at the same time making the Father ontologically ultimate,"[151] precisely because the notion of the person is relational, a relationality that is truly univocal because it can be said of all beings, including God. Thus, in positing the ground of human freedom in the monarchy of the Father as a Being who exists eternally in a communion of love with the Son and the Spirit (even as

[145] See Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2008), 252-260.

[146] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 433; 402–403.

[147] Ibid., 402–403.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Zizioulas, *CO*, 140–145. See also, "Human Capacity," 410.

[150] McCall, "Holy Love," 196.

[151] Zizioulas, *CO*, 126.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

he himself freely wills that relation), Zizioulas is in fact conceptualizing not a libertarian divine subject, but a subject who freely wills to exist within a divine "network of relations" with the Son and the Spirit. God is therefore also vulnerable in a special sense, and this divine vulnerability is the ultimate model for vulnerability as human beings will experience it in the eschaton: beings eternally open to one another in a "movement towards communion which leads to a transcendence of the boundaries of the self and thus to *freedom*."[152]

Finally, Zizioulas's account of divine personhood suggests a trinitarian model for human vulnerable agency as kenosis. As Papanikolaou observes, this point requires more development in Zizioulas, though his thought is already well-positioned for such an interpretation because he allows for "reflection on the immanent Trinity based on the economic activity."[153] Papanikolaou clarifies, "If what is revealed in the economy is the *mode of existence* of the trinitarian persons, then the Son, by his incarnation and passion, reveals that such a *mode of existence* is *kenotic*."[154] Papanikolaou expands on how this kenotic mode of existence plays out between the divine Persons by arguing that "each of the divine persons as persons freely receives the *ekstatic* movement toward their person. Thus, an *ekstatic* movement is not complete without reception, which itself is a *kenotic* act."[155] I agree, but would suggest that before it can be a reception of the other, divine kenosis must first involve a yielding "in the context of an erotic ecstasis in which one lives the life of the beloved one, freely and fully embraced by him."[156] In the likeness of this mutual yielding of the divine Persons to one another, human beings exercise their own vulnerable agency as the yielding to suffering that denies the claim to self-existence, while making a space to receive and let the other be unique, irreplaceable, and beloved.[157]

[152] Zizioulas, "Human Capacity," 408. Emphasis in original.
[153] Papanikolaou, *Being with God,* 152–153.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid., 153.
[156] Zizioulas, *CO*, 85.
[157] John D. Zizioulas, "Relational Ontology," 150.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Conclusion

As I have shown, Zizioulas's anthropology supports an Orthodox contribution to the philosophical reappraisal of vulnerability. Based on reading of the Cappadocian Fathers, Zizioulas's neopatristic anthropology upholds a relational ontology: being as communion. Assuming that interdependence and vulnerability are co-conditional, I have argued that his account of being as relational thus places vulnerability at the heart of his account of what it means to be human. This tacit invocation of vulnerability through a relational ontology meets the criteria for the reappraised definition of vulnerability as undetermined openness to change that can be said univocally of all beings and manifests itself equivocally among all beings.

Yet, Zizioulas's hermeneutical prerequisites, characterized by a "top-down" theological starting point for anthropology, offers a teleology of vulnerability that supplements and enriches philosophical accounts, which are limited to the empirical dimensions of the vulnerable condition. His neopatristic trinitarian theology, particularly his articulation of the monarchy of the Father, allows for his concept of "communion in otherness" to be understood as "divine vulnerability" that is the basis for the *imago Dei* in vulnerable human beings. In the light of this divine paradigm, Zizioulas reinterprets the Butlerian view of vulnerability as a paradoxical tension between the "biological hypostasis," marked by the tragic inability to overcome our created nature subject to death, and the "ecclesial hypostasis," which embodies free, loving interdependence with (and thus vulnerability to) God in Christ through eucharistic communion, or "communion in otherness." Zizioulas also addresses the hitherto unresolved philosophical problem of vulnerable agency by presenting kenosis as an ongoing ascetic practice of self-denial, enabling one to receive the other and allow the other to truly exist as other.

I should note in closing that Zizioulas's anthropology is not without its problems from the standpoint of the reappraisal of vulnerability. As I have shown above, his eschatological vision of human existence tends to instrumentalize the biological hyposta-

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

sis in history, and render it inert in the age to come. This tendency towards instrumentalism, downgrading the inherent value of the body, may perhaps be a symptom of Zizioulas's lack of emphasis on the Incarnate Son of God as the defining exemplar of the vulnerable yet agentic human being. This paucity in Zizioulas points to a need for a more rigorous application of Christology to the reappraised definition of vulnerability as more than mere susceptibility to harm, i.e. suffering, and suffering as the vital instrument through which humans come to experience an impassible condition *beyond* suffering. Instead, in the light of the Incarnation, our historical experiences of vulnerability can be seen and experienced as temporal-spatial "branches" on the cruciform tree of God's "divine vulnerability," which is His capacity to be the God who is truly love.[158]

References

Apostolopoulos, Dimitris. "Intentionality, Constitution and Merleau-Ponty's Concept of 'The Flesh.'" *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (September 2017): 677–99.

Bell, Vikki. "New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 1 (January 2010): 130–52.

Brown, Kate, Kathryn Ecclestone, and Nick Emmel. "The Many Faces of Vulnerability." *Social Policy and Society* 16, no. 3 (2017): 497–510.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2010.

—. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

—. "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." In *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Leticia Sabsay, and Zeynep Gambetti, 12–27. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

[158] See René, "Absolute Vulnerability."

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Cole, Alyson. "All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique." *Critical Horizons* 17, no. 2 (May 2016): 260–77.

Culp, Kristine A. *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Bergsonism*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Reis. ed. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

—. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. Rev. ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

Desmond, William. "Superiority beyond Interiority." *Louvain Studies* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2021): 200–215.

Fineman, Martha Albertson. "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, no. 1 (July 2008): 1–24.

Florovsky, Georges. *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*. Edited by Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur. New York: T&T Clark, 2019.

Gandolfo, Elizabeth O'Donnell. *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.

Gilson, Erinn. *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*. Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory 26. New York: Routledge, 2014.

—. "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (May 2011): 308–32.

Hammer, Taylor. "Difference and Creativity: Virtuality and Actualization in Deleuze's Reading of Bergson." *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 60–68.

Kaushik, Rajiv. "The Secondary Passivity: Merleau-Ponty at the Limit of Phenomenology." *Continental Philosophy Review* 54, no. 1 (March 2021): 61–74.

Knight, Amber. "Feminist Vulnerability Politics: Judith Butler on Autonomy and the Pursuit of a 'Livable Life.'" *Feminist Formations* 33, no. 3 (2021): 175–98.

Mackenzie, Catriona. "The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability." In *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, 33–59. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Mackenzie, Catriona, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds. *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

—. "Vulnerability and Solidarity: An Improbable Connection." *Journal of Disability & Religion* 25, no. 1 (2021): 55–67.

McCall, Tom. "Holy Love and Divine Aseity in the Theology of John Zizioulas." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 2 (May 2008): 191–205.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. London: Routledge, 2004.

—. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utoronto/detail.action?docID=243264.

Michalinos, Zembylas. "Butler, Judith." In *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020.

Mills, Catherine. "Efficacy and Vulnerability: Judith Butler on Reiteration and Resistance." *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no. 32 (July 2000): 265–79.

Nelson, Lise. "Bodies (And Spaces) Do Matter: The Limits of Performativity." *Gender, Place & Culture* 6, no. 4 (December 1999): 331–53.

Papanikolaou, Aristotle. *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006.

Reinders, Hans S. *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2008.

—. *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008.

Springhart, Heike, and Günter Thomas, eds. *Exploring Vulnerability*. V&R Academic. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017.

Tataryn, Myroslaw I., and Maria Truchan-Tataryn. *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference*. Toronto: Novalis, 2013.

—. *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Torrance, Alexis. "Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology: Reassessing the Debate." *Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 4 (July 2011): 700–707.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Tracy, David. *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Zizioulas, John. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.

—. "Communion and Otherness." *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (January 1994): 347–61.

—. *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Edited by Paul McPartlan. London: T&T Clark, 2006.

—. "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (October 1975): 401–47.

—. "On Being a Person. The Ontology of Personhood." In *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, edited by Colin E. Gunton and Christoph Schwöbel, 33–46. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991.

—. "Person and Nature in the Theology of Maximus the Confessor." In *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection*, edited by Bishop Maxim Vasiljevic, 85–113. Contemporary Christian Thought Series 20. Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2013.

—. "Preserving God's Creation." In *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, edited by Luke Ben Tallon, 143–75. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011.

—. "Preserving God's Creation. Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology. Lecture One." *King's Theological Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 1–5.

—. "Preserving God's Creation. Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology. Lecture Two." *King's Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1989): 41–45.

—. "Preserving God's Creation. Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology. Lecture Three." *King's Theological Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 1–5.

—. "Relational Ontology: Insights from Patristic Thought." In *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, edited by John Polkinghorne, 146–56. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2010.

—. *The Meaning of Being Human*. Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2007.

—. *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today*. Edited by Fr. Gregory Edwards. Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2010. Kindle.

© 2025 The Author(s). *OmegAlpha* presented by John Zizioulas Foundation. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.