# Disrupting Complacency: A Solidarity of Relational Vulnerability

## Patrick McArdle

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# The context…

## People living with disabilities have social and legal protections unimagined previously in history…

## People living with disabilities often find their situation to be precarious and peripheral…

## Theology has often argued for an absolute right to life, civil protections and equality before the law

## Theology has usually been poor at developing a stance for the particular needs of those in precarious and peripheral circumstances

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# The context…

## Theology has been too focused on the ‘divinity’ of Christ – hence Jesus is perfect

## Flowing from this is a reading of scripture that looks to ‘charity’ rather than ‘justice’, ‘perfection’ rather than ‘brokenness’, ‘strength’ rather than ‘vulnerability’

## Today we so often see this in a culture that lauds perfection – see how we treat sports stars

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# A theological beginning…

## And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **18**And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. **19**You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” **20**And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” **21**And Jesus, **looking at him, loved him,** and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” **22**Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Mk 10:17 - 22

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# A different beginning…

## Human beings are relational entities…

## We are born with only the skill to relate to other humans

## We reach out…and are welcomed or rejected…

## Humans are essentially vulnerable – especially to other humans

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# Macmurray and Relational Personhood

## John Macmurray (1891 – 1976) Scottish philosopher at Manchester, Witwatersand, Balliol, University College, London and Edinburgh

## Rejected British empiricism and developed an “organic” personalistic philosophy

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# Macmurray and Relational Personhood

## “if the world is to be comprehended, it must be in terms of personality.”

## “Modern philosophy is characteristically *egocentric*. I mean no more than this: that firstly, it takes the Self as its starting-point, and not God, or the world or the community; and that, secondly, the Self is an individual in isolation, an ego or “I”, never a “thou”. This is shown by the fact that there can arise the question, “How does the Self know that other selves exist?” Further, the Self so premised is a thinker in search of knowledge. It is conceived as the Subject; the correlate in experience of the object presented for cognition”

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# Macmurray and Relational Personhood

## 3 points:

### Egocentric ways of looking at the world diminish ‘the Other’ – the more ‘other’ one is the less one counts

### A conversation beginning with ‘thou’ instead of ‘I’ inherently prizes the other

### ‘Knowing’ should never take priority over ‘being’

## The nature of human ‘being’ is relational

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# Relationality is disruptive

## Human relationships challenge and shatter complacency

## In beginning conversations with ‘thou’ and understanding relationships as unfolding, ever more complex ‘I-Thou’ dialogues we are formed and we form ourselves and others

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# Relationality implies commonality

## “the basic form of human existence, as a personal mutuality, as a “You and I” with a common life”

## “we are persons not by individual right, but in virtue of our relation to one another”

## “The unit of the personal is not the “I” but the “You and I”’

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# A theological anthropology

## Persons are formed in and through sedimented interactions with other persons

## Each interaction brings about embrace or rejection

## ‘Embrace’ leads to greater openness and becoming

## ‘rejection’ leads to closure and avoidance of pain and hurt

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# Disruption? Complacency?

## Relational experiences are sedimented (like sandstone), building one on another

### Consistently positive relationships build resilience, confidence, openness

### Consistent ‘rejection’ builds mistrust, anxiety, isolation

## Most of us have mixed experiences

## Our responses to others reflect our relational sedimentation

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# Disruption? Complacency?

## Disruption: bursting asunder, dissolution of continuity

## Complacency: tranquil pleasure or satisfaction

## The Incarnation of Christ is the ultimate disruption – causing all assumptions about G-d (omniscient, omnipotent) to fail

## Our claim that humanity is in ‘the image and likeness of G-d’ is explicated in and through relationships

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# Disruption? Complacency?

## ‘Disability’ also challenges implicit assumptions about communication, personhood and relationships

## The existence of disability, debility, injury and illness *reveal* the insufficiency of the self as an individual

## They function to disrupt the complacency of “the image of the self-sufficient individual”

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# Vulnerability: a key to relationships

## A challenge to society and culture to recognise inherent human vulnerability

## All human relationships are built on vulnerability:

### Simple commercial transactions (supply chain/income)

### Transactional relations (co-workers, co-students, regular economic contacts)

### Interpersonal relationships (family, friends, lovers)

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# Vulnerability: a key to relationships

## Genuine human relationships acknowledge our needs, our desires, our interdependencies

## Relationships and communication are not unidirectional but dialogical – a framework of call and response

## Each ‘call’, each ‘response’ gives rise to new opportunities and new risks

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# How does this make a difference?

## The Gospel is a call to perfection: not that we simply do all that we can but that we strive to do all that is needed

## What is needed is a fundamental recognition of the innate vulnerability that is part of human existence

## This can be a basis for improved policy and practice – at a personal level, community level and societal level

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# The basic questions

## Where do we stand?

## With whom do we stand?

## How do we build relationships of encounter?