

# Disability: a heuristic for the human condition

Yordanis Enríquez Canto

## Abstract

A theoretical study in which disability is evidenced as a heuristic device to investigate the human condition. The relationship between disability and human condition has been little explored. The first section analyzes how vulnerability and dependence belong to the human condition and affect disability by conditioning the loss of qualities. Subsequently, the peculiar modality of possession of our qualities is analyzed. The third part argues that even though a human being with intellectual disability may not manifest rationality this does not suppose an exclusion of the status of person. Finally, it is explained how, although qualities can be lost with the disability, it is not possible to lose the embodiment and belonging to the human family. The heuristic approach was used with the formulation of questions based on three hypothetical cases. Disability is a manifestation of the human condition. It has heuristic value because it helps to examine constitutive aspects of our existence.

**Keywords:** Intellectual disability. Heuristics. Mentally disabled persons. Vulnerability personal. Dependency (psychology).

## Resumo

### Deficiência: uma heurística para a condição humana

Estudo teórico em que a deficiência é evidenciada como dispositivo heurístico para sondar a condição humana. A relação entre deficiência e condição humana tem sido pouco explorada. A primeira seção analisa como vulnerabilidade e dependência pertencem à condição humana e afetam a deficiência, condicionando a perda de qualidades. Posteriormente, a ideia de posse de nossas qualidades é analisada. Na terceira parte se argumenta que, embora um ser humano com deficiência intelectual não possa manifestar racionalidade, isso não supõe a exclusão do status pessoal. Por último, se explica como, apesar de ser possível perderem-se qualidades na deficiência, não é possível perder a corporeidade e o pertencimento à família humana. A abordagem heurística foi utilizada com a formulação de questões com base em três casos hipotéticos. A deficiência é uma manifestação da condição humana e tem valor heurístico porque ajuda a examinar aspectos constitutivos de nossa existência.

**Palavras-chave:** Deficiência intelectual. Heurística. Pessoas com deficiência mental. Vulnerabilidade pessoal. Dependência (psicologia).

## Resumen

### Discapacidad: una heurística para la condición humana

Estudio de naturaleza teórica donde se evidencia la discapacidad como dispositivo heurístico para indagar la condición humana. La relación entre discapacidad y condición humana ha sido poco explorada. En la primera sección se analiza cómo vulnerabilidad y dependencia pertenecen a la condición humana e inciden en la discapacidad condicionando la pérdida de cualidades. Posteriormente se analiza la modalidad peculiar de posesión de las mismas. En la tercera parte se argumenta cómo a pesar de que con la discapacidad intelectual puede no manifestarse la racionalidad esto no supone una exclusión de la condición personal. Por último, se explica cómo no obstante con la discapacidad se puedan perder cualidades, no es posible perder la corporeidad y la pertenencia a la familia humana. Se empleó el enfoque heurístico con la formulación de preguntas apoyándose en tres casos hipotéticos. La discapacidad es un modo de manifestarse de la condición humana con valor heurístico porque ayuda a examinar aspectos constitutivos de nuestra existencia.

**Palabras clave:** Discapacidad intelectual. Heurística. Personas con discapacidad mental. Vulnerabilidad personal. Dependencia (psicología).

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**Doutor** yenriquez@ucss.edu.pe – Universidad Católica Sedes Sapientiae, Lima, Perú.

## Correspondência

Universidade Católica Sedes Sapientiae. Faculdade de Ciências de la Salud. Departamento de Investigación. Esquina Constelaciones y Sol de Oro, s/n, Los Olivos. Lima, Perú.

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Declara não haver conflito de interesse.

It is characteristic of our human condition to experience disease and the risk of suffering injuries, which make us vulnerable<sup>1</sup>. This condition linked to our corporeality exposes us to the possibility of not developing our abilities. In parallel, it is due to the care of others, and therefore to the dependence of these people, that our lives remain in time, notwithstanding the situations of illness or our need to be nourished. In this sense, vulnerability and dependence are conditions of existence since they are present during our lives, that is, they are part of the human world<sup>2</sup>. However, our ability to face adversity or to need others to respond to our needs may vary over the years.

Disease, on the other hand, can create different forms of vulnerability due to its own characteristics<sup>3</sup>. In turn, this variability depends on the age, sex and health condition of the people<sup>3</sup>. These elements reveal not only our ineluctable organic propensity to disease, but also that our bodies are exposed to loss by the deterioration of our abilities and disability itself. For these reasons, the possibility of experiencing disability, whether for short or longer periods, follows the way of living our human existence<sup>4-6</sup>.

Despite the widespread use of the term disability, there is still confusion about its meaning<sup>3</sup>. For example, even if it affects our health condition, it does not fully overlap with disease. In fact, disability indicates the relationship between an environment, understood as a facilitator or barrier to the development of human capabilities and the state of health of a person<sup>7</sup>. This definition, on the one hand, eliminates the false equating of the notions “disabled” and “sick”. On the other hand, it makes us reflect on the distinction between “normal” and “disabled” people, between “them” and “us”<sup>8</sup>.

This separation often refers to the possession of different qualities, to their absence or the marked diversity in their characteristics in those who possess them. Because of this, and for generations, bodily differences have determined social structures based on this distinction<sup>8,9</sup>. In this way, a “model of humanity” has been developed, to which the first fit and the others do not. In turn, this distinction is a reflection of the fact that, when we think of disability, we usually think of it in terms of a sociological category<sup>9</sup> and not as a condition that we can experience.

This conception of a macro-social category: “the disabled” or as something that affects “others” implies a refusal to recognize that disability changes us and that the loss of qualities is a part

of our experience. The aforementioned rejection, on the one hand, reflects the way we perceive and represent ourselves. On the other, it is the result of not adequately considering the consequences of our contingency and corporeality<sup>4,10</sup>. Also, this conception reflects a representation of the abstract human person, since it does not consider the changes that are operated in our body over time, nor the loss of our capacities due to deterioration. However, it is necessary to refer to an image of the human person consistent with the human condition that, understanding the phases of existence and also the disability, allows a reading of the human condition.

It is necessary to focus on this matter because the modality with which we conceptually approach the problem of disability is the reflection of the way in which we represent ourselves and interpret the human condition. Deepening this self-representation is relevant since it affects the ethical theories that justify relationships care<sup>11,12</sup>, as well as the foundation of the rights of persons with disabilities<sup>13,14</sup>. However, our self-representation must be confronted with the concrete human being considering the peculiar way in which we possess our qualities<sup>15</sup> and not with an abstract model.

Disability has the potential to challenge the idealized model of the rational, independent and autonomous subject that is often imagined when invoking the human<sup>1,3</sup> or when public policies are proposed<sup>6</sup>. However, the absence of this confrontation can introduce new ways of discrimination based on health condition or the possession of abilities and qualities. Therefore, a more adequate reflection on the human condition should consider these elements. It should be noted that, on the theoretical level, how the disability reveals the human condition has not been adequately addressed.

To favor the clarification of the problem addressed, an approach was used that consisted in the formulation of questions and conjectures based on three hypothetical and illustrative cases of disability. These were formulated considering elements of real stories. The heuristic method was used, addressing the relationship between disability and the human condition to facilitate a better understanding of the latter. From this perspective, disability was used as a heuristic device. Even when it is loaded with negative meanings, it allows us to explore and deepen relationships with the human condition. Considering the above, the objective was to demonstrate that disability can function

as a heuristic device to inquire about the human condition.

### The specificity of the human condition

Human existence is conditioned<sup>2</sup>. Regarding human beings Hannah Arendt indicates that *each thing with which they come in contact immediately becomes the condition of their existence*<sup>16</sup>, which in turn depends on certain conditions. Notwithstanding Arendt's precision, the term human condition is broad and polysemic. Therefore, it is important to note that in this paper only three of these meanings are reflected: in reference to the circumstances (conditions of existence) that mediate human life<sup>2</sup>; in the sense of quality or human characteristic linked to our corporeality, for example, becoming in time, being born, being vulnerable and in need of support<sup>17</sup>. Finally, it indicates belonging to the human family.

We often try to specify the human condition taking into consideration the conditions of existence. Those that group us in the state of terrestrial beings<sup>2</sup>. These can be subdivided into three levels: the environmental conditionings as connected to artifacts, the biological ones due to our corporeal existence and, in short, those generated in the interaction with other human beings. From them it turns out that the life of the human being is "subordinated". These conditions, although not desired or sought, "subordinate" existence.

Among the conditions at the biological level are the health condition and the permanent negative effects of the disease<sup>18</sup>. This element, which is closely linked to our corporeal existence, connects us with facticity and contingency. The negative effect does not automatically place us in a situation of disability, though. However, it will be verified if we are in an unfavorable circumstance regarding our health condition. For example, in the case of people suffering from multiple sclerosis and experiencing progressive acquired motor disability<sup>19</sup>. The disability associated with multiple sclerosis challenges us, altering one of our most common qualities: the ability to walk. As it becomes evident in the hypothetical case of Laura:

*When Laura began to feel the numbness on the right side of her body she had been married to Martin for three years and her daughter was a year and a half old. In fact, she did not notice the difference between the fabric of her pants and the brush of a hand on*

*her right leg. A few months after the onset of the first symptoms, she was diagnosed with progressive multiple sclerosis. By then she was using a cane and after two years of diagnosis she needed a walker to move around, which also made managing the home and her young daughter difficult. She lived these events in a way that summed up in one sentence: "I am willing to use whatever help is necessary to live". However, the help she needed from her husband was missing because Martin abandoned them after three years of diagnosis.*

Considering the situation described, it is evident that our condition is constituted by an inherent dependence, since our existences develop from a condition that we can not choose. In particular, with the case of Laura, the temporary and contingent health condition becomes evident. To the foregoing, it must be added that the experience connected to the loss due to the deterioration of qualities is complex since it not only limits the daily activity and the quality of life of the person, but also mutates personal relationships.

The arrival of this condition can disrupt and change the closest emotional ties because the person "is no longer the same", which causes separation and abandonment. Therefore, the negative effect of disability not only changes the body itself, it eventually mutates the relational structure. Regarding our condition, these two elements connect our corporeal vulnerability<sup>18</sup> and the social dimension of our existence.

The health condition and the relationships, in the case of Laura, reveal the two sources of vulnerability, namely our corporeality<sup>18,20</sup> and our psycho-social dimension<sup>21</sup>. With corporeality, on the one hand, we have the material needs and care of the body. On the other, we are exposed to the actions of others in a wide range of typologies that range from contempt, through abuse and violence to care, generosity and love. The paradox that emerges from the experience of vulnerability is that although we can all experience it<sup>18,20</sup>, each one does so in a unique way through his/her own body. This data is accentuated with disability. The same, from the presence of limitations in body function, emphasizes the different ways in which we can be vulnerable.

On the other hand, the psycho-social dimension brings with it the possibility of harm or loss that may have a physical, psychological or socioeconomic nature<sup>21</sup>. Laura's case also states that, at the root of vulnerability, is also our dependence

on the cooperation of others<sup>22</sup>, attributing a strong relational aspect to vulnerability. In this sense, in us the pain, abuse, humiliation or ostracism can cause psychological vulnerability, in the same way we are vulnerable to exploitation and oppression. In short, we are vulnerable to the natural environment, to the impact of individual and collective actions evidencing the contextual and relational root of vulnerability.

However, it should be specified that, regarding the way in which human beings experience dependency and vulnerability, there is a frequent bias. This could be formulated: although both are universal<sup>1,3</sup> as the possibility of experiencing them, they are different with respect to temporality. In a more specific way, our vulnerability would be constant, while dependence would be linked to the stages of human development such as childhood or certain episodes in which illness or old age intervene<sup>1,10</sup>. On the other hand, this vision does not take into account our dependence on human relationships<sup>23</sup>. Which means that we depend on others even if we are adults, healthy and without disabilities.

The case of Laura, it also reflects that the human condition is characterized by its dynamism. In a specific way, manifesting a modification at a biological level that implies a loss of the mentioned capacity. Undoubtedly, our existence is constantly changing, it is dynamic. This is not only reflected in the changing context, but especially at a biological level in our corporeality<sup>20,24</sup>. For example, our qualities are perfected or modified over time. The ability to walk or our self-consciousness develop in the temporal arc of our life. However, we are not architects of this particular mutation linked to time.

Reconsidering Laura's example regarding the human condition, in addition to the three aspects already reflected on, two other relevant elements become evident. The first is the possibility of the loss of one's own abilities or qualities. In effect, with disability comes the paradoxical meaning with which we "possess" them<sup>15</sup>. The second is linked to the meaning of the change that occurs in people with respect to the loss of their qualities. People change not only because the use of these qualities may change, but also because they may lose them. However, what does this loss and this change for the human condition entail?

However, possession identifies the human being, since the possession is an exclusively human capacity<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, with the disability, the limited and contradictory sense with which our qualities are "in our possession" comes to light. This

paradoxical possession mode is indicative of a certain indigence that is the manifestation of being able to lose what one has<sup>15</sup>. So this conditioning makes us not to be the owners of the house. Considering the above, it is worth asking: in what sense do we possess these qualities and capabilities? In what way are they ours?

### Human qualities and their possession

To begin to clarify these questions, the distinction that Gabriel Marcel makes about having as possession and having as an implication is significant. <sup>15</sup> Having as possession indicates an accurate and strong sense with diverse modalities (for example: having a car, having Fiat shares). Regarding this meaning we do not dispose of - according to any of the meanings in which we commonly attribute (basic and external) to having - our qualities and capabilities. Therefore, we can not refer to them in the same way as I say: I have a *Phalenopsis stuartiana* orchid.

This is because, on the one hand, the dynamics of owning is determined by the presence of a *qui* and a *quid* that is referred to, that is, it is subordinated in the last instance to the former. In other words in having there is someone who possesses and an object that is possessed. To the above is added the non-reciprocity of the relationship regarding the use, that is, of disposing of the possessed object. On the other, a difference and an exteriority of the former with respect to the latter is necessary and characteristic of this relationship<sup>15</sup>.

According to the above, the *quid* for being an external thing - being under the avatars of materiality - can be lost or destroyed. Linked to it, in fact, our natural apprehension of loss is manifested. So in the case of our qualities we can not fully refer to this first sense of tenure since, for example, this exteriority is not manifested between that which is possessed and the one who possesses.

In what refers to tenure as implication, and unlike the previous meaning, there is no externality of the *quid* with respect to the *qui*, nor is the latter material. The sense of implication is manifested when we mention the properties or characteristics of an object, for example: the square has four sides. Considering the phrase with attention one could think of an unjustified linguistic use of the verb to have<sup>15</sup>. In the sense that the square does not have four sides, but rather it is a figure with four sides.

In these cases the “possessed” is inherent to the possessor and qualifies him.

The fact is that bodies do not have their characteristics or properties, on the contrary, they constitute their essence. Analogously, we “possess” our qualities and characteristics, with respect to which we certainly dominate them, but only in this limited sense. In fact, we have only that which we can dispose of.

Regarding the relationship that man has with his qualities, it is necessary to make a further point. On the one hand, the possession has a relation of permanence in time, be it of the possessor or of the possessed<sup>15</sup>. Likewise, it was already pointed out that what we possess can be lost. In a particular way, material possessions can be lost or destroyed altogether, which puts an end to their permanence. On the other, the asymmetry between the *qui* and *quid* was indicated: the one who possesses is superior to what is possessed. With these elements it is possible to wonder in which way the absence of the link between both damages or changes to the first one.

For example, when someone steals my *Phalenopsis stuartiana*. Regarding the theft I can be indifferent or deeply sad because I would have lost an important sample of my collection, however that loss does not affect me essentially: I continue being who I am. Now, does the same dynamic happen when it comes to our qualities? In this sense: what shows the disability regarding the possibility of the loss of our qualities?

### Disability: loss or non-manifestation of qualities

Considering again the case of Laura it is evident that, after a few years, she lost the sensation of her right side together with the ability to walk. This loss affected a functionality, it changed her body, as well as the way to relate to it and the world; it even changed her personal relationships. However, all these transformations, in fact, did not change her human condition. That is, Laura, even losing an important quality, is a human person like me.

To the previous statement, what could be objected? For example, for Fletcher<sup>26</sup> true humanity is manifested through fifteen indicators, among them: self-consciousness, self-control or relational capacity, to name a few. In attempting to define the person in philosophical terms, the discussion has depended to a large extent on the psychological functions associated with the human capacity to

reason<sup>27-30</sup>. Therefore, this premise would lead to admitting that a human being with intellectual and developmental disability that manifests significant cognitive deficits should not be considered a person. This is the position of Fletcher<sup>26</sup>, MacMahan<sup>31</sup> and Singer<sup>32</sup>. With the above, the objection could be that although in the case of Laura, it does not come to lessen her personal condition, people who lose qualities linked to the use of rationality as self-consciousness or relational capacity would lose what identifies us as human persons. This would be the hypothetical case of Marianela:

*Marianela was sixty years old when she was taken by her brother to a neurological evaluation due to the deterioration of memory. She had professional studies and worked as a secretary in an office. Since the death of her husband in 2000, she had lived alone maintaining her own home and financial affairs. However, her brother had begun to notice a worsening in the gradual deterioration of memory and difficulty in finding the words. Also, at work, they had already begun to observe the decline in her performance, but they had no complaints. The neurological evaluation, together with other tests, indicated the presence of Alzheimer's. The gradual deterioration of Marianela's nervous system led her to abandon her job due to the loss of memory, reasoning and language entering the severe phase of her disability. The worsening of symptoms not only prevents Marianela from performing activities of daily living such as getting ready to eat, but also limits her relational capacity.*

A second objection, similar to the previous one, would include those who have never manifested qualities linked to the use of rationality, for example attributing or recognizing value to their own existence<sup>33</sup>. In these cases they would lack what identifies us as human persons. Such would be the situation of Susana:

*Susana is almost thirty years old and she is the oldest daughter of two teachers. She loves beautiful dresses and music, and she responds to the affection that other people show her. When she listens to music with her parents, she sways and then throws herself into their arms. However, she will never be able to walk, talk, or read because of her congenital cerebral palsy and severe mental retardation. Susana is not only unable to pronounce her own name, but will always depend on others, also needing to be washed, dressed and nurtured.*

The objection would then be formulated: human beings with intellectual disabilities who lose or have never manifested qualities linked to the use of rationality (self-consciousness, self-control or relational capacity) would not have that which identifies us as human persons. This is a consequence of the definition of the concept of “person” used by Fletcher<sup>26</sup>, MacMahan<sup>31</sup> and Singer<sup>32</sup>. That is, only as an entity that is self-conscious, rational, capable of moral activity and endowed with autonomy<sup>27-30,33</sup>.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the familiar term person inserted into our everyday language has a rich background and runs through different semantic fields such as law and theology. However, its origin is framed in the theater because the Greek word *prosopon*<sup>29</sup> (person) indicated the mask used in plays to distinguish the different characters pointing to their role in the drama. In time the term acquired a further wealth in the context of the disputes over the Trinity of the fourth century making it a major category of western philosophical reflection<sup>34,35</sup>. With Boethius, the notion acquires an ontological meaning, providing that: person is an individual substance of a rational nature<sup>36</sup>. Later, with Thomas Aquinas, the analogical dimension<sup>34,35</sup> of the term is added. The same limits in relation to man: *person indicates the individual substance of rational nature. Individual is the indistinct in itself, but different from the others. Therefore, in any nature, person means what is different in that nature, as in human nature indicates this flesh, these bones and this soul, which are the principles that individualize man. These principles, even when they do not mean a person, however, do come within the meaning of a human person*<sup>37</sup>. For this reason, in order to respond to the objection it is necessary to pay attention to how the term “person” is described by the adjective “human” “ This adjective determines and qualifies the noun person.

On the other hand, the determination is necessary since from the descriptive point of view regarding the human being it is more appropriate to refer to the human person. Although we agree with Lima Vaz that the person is the essence of man<sup>38</sup> because it is an expression of final unity and synthesis between the essence and the existence of the human being. Equally, the analogical dimension<sup>34,35</sup> of the notion and, in turn, the principles that individualize man (for example, its corporeal dimension) should be taken into account when addressing the topic. For these reasons it is essential to remember that the human person lives in the human condition. What does it mean to live

in the human condition? as it has already been tried to describe, it coincides with the development of existence under different types of conditions, dynamism, vulnerability and dependence. From this perspective, in human beings, the mentioned qualities of self-consciousness, rationality, autonomy can not but manifest under the influence of these three elements.

Connected to the above, there is a second counter-argument linked to the distinctive way in which we possess our qualities as an implication<sup>15</sup>. This modality also manifests itself in the phenomenology of the love relationship. It shows the peculiar link between our personal being and our qualities. Pascal wrote for that purpose in his famous “Thoughts”: *(...) he who loves someone because of their beauty, does he really love him? No, because smallpox, which will kill beauty without killing the person, will have the effect of not loving her anymore. And if they love me for my ability to judge, for my memory, they love me? No, I can lose those qualities without losing myself*<sup>39</sup>.

Pascal is wrong to say that we never love others for themselves, but for their qualities. Conversely, the coincidence of the loving state with the beloved object is indicative of its truth. The object of my love is the other with his/her qualities. The love of the other is not directed to his/her qualities, on the risk of being an illusion. Precisely, as we have noted in the examples of people with disabilities, these can be lost or mutated over time. In other words, we know that loving only the other’s qualities is not loving the other.

On the other hand, the hypothesis of loving only the qualities contradicts what characterizes the experience of love: perceiving the other as a whole with the qualities<sup>40</sup>. This perception of human alterity as a whole with its qualities goes hand in hand with the way we have to own these qualities<sup>15</sup> as an implication. Since the other that I love is not separate from his/her qualities<sup>29</sup>, but rather, as was evidenced previously, the qualities constitute his/her essence. Consequently, the qualities (for example, self-consciousness or rationality) do not subsist independently of the beloved human being. The human person is, however, the same thing with them, manifesting a bond that can not be broken, since they constitute one’s essence. So much so that it is not possible to conceive the love relationship with the other without referring to them and without this being mediated by their qualities. While it is true that there are qualities or characteristics that impel us to define human persons as men, on the contrary,

what we call people are not these qualities, but those who possess them<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, Pascal is right when he states that “I can lose the qualities without losing myself.” Because without that someone those qualities would not exist, contrarily, even without the manifestation of those qualities that someone continues to exist as a human person.

In the case of people with severe intellectual disability such as Susana, their personal condition is denied since self-awareness would not be manifested. This would be justified, for example, because she would not be able to attribute or recognize the value (at least basic) of her own existence<sup>33</sup>. This presumes, in turn, that the absence of this active characteristic would prevent one from noticing one’s own elimination and consequently the suffering connected to this event would not be generated. Therefore, according to this vision, self-recognition and the ability to evaluate one’s existence would be necessary to be a human person.

However, two limitations to the dynamics of the evaluation must be taken into account. First of all such action implies as a basic condition that one be present to oneself, that is, not to be sleeping or to be incapable of understanding<sup>41</sup>. Second, this capacity from the cognitive point of view is complex and is not exercised in all periods of development of human life (for example, during the embryonic, fetal or newborn stage), not even in some adult individuals.

Making the human person coincide only with his/her self-conscious being and with his/her evaluative capacity means to ignore that each human being, as a being that changes in time, will be able to express more or less the characteristic feature of self-consciousness. This approach derives from a philosophical current that defines the person taking into consideration fundamentally their interiority and that goes back to the Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. With Gilbert Ryle<sup>42</sup>, contemporary philosophy has criticized the Cartesian dualism that interprets man as a natural machine inhabited by the spirit. This dichotomy present in Western philosophy has identified a spiritual principle or recognizable soul in thought (*res cogitans*) and a body-matter (*res extensa*). Ryle has criticized this approach as lacking in foundation with the suggestive phrase of “Dogma of the ghost in the machine”<sup>43</sup>.

This conception reflects, in fact, a mode of self-understanding that considers the mentioned qualities of rationality as independent of our corporal dimension<sup>10</sup>, something that in our experience is

revealed, on the contrary, conditioned to that sphere of our existence. It must be remembered that our existence develops under biological conditions: health condition and sequelae of disease are two examples of this. In the case of Susana, these two elements manifest our contingency as a result of our corporeal existence. This shows that the way of subsisting of the human person is that of a living organism, as a consequence our existence develops at the primary level in an organismic dimension. On the other hand, with Susan it becomes clear that the qualities that we possess as an implication will depend on the conditions of exercise that the disease limits. Hence, the manifestation of rationality or self-consciousness depends on this biological conditioning.

In short, being a human person, like Susana, expresses a singularity that surpasses the universal of the essence through the particularity of existence that is materialized in its history,<sup>38</sup> in its biography, in its peculiar way of possessing and manifesting its qualities. Susana also demonstrates that this uniqueness of the human person, through its historical particularity, is a dialectic of identity in difference<sup>38</sup>. These elements must be considered to identify human persons with or without disabilities.

Up to this point in the analysis we have considered that the qualities can be lost, however, is there a limit to this loss? or, in other words: are there qualities that we cannot lose? These questions are important regarding the theoretical validity of the hypothetical “transience” that delineates the two objections considered, since according to this vision the human person would depend on the possession of some qualities or attributes. On the contrary, it is determined by essential qualities that are inherent in the subject, who remains her/himself, despite being able to manifest them in different degrees.

### Qualities that can not be lost

Although self-consciousness expresses an element of excellence of the “person”, the quality that signals the human person is corporeality. The human person subsists as a living organism, therefore, their existence develops primarily in a bio-organismic dimension. Important consequences derive from this fundamental conditioning.

It must first be demonstrated that our identity is strongly anchored in corporeality<sup>29</sup>. The strong relationship between both terms has a double meaning. In the first place that I coincide with my

body, not only I have a body, because of this body is the starting point of our lived experience<sup>15</sup>. The second meaning is connected to the fact that we are beings in relationship. Identification and recognition are fundamental in interpersonal links. In them the body constitutes the external perspective of the human person. As a result, it is through the face and body that they recognize and identify us. For example, to the questions: who is Susana? or where is Susana? we respond by pointing to her body. Indeed, with respect to Susana, the empirical identification criterion used by the others is external.

Secondly, we remain and exist in time as a human body<sup>15,29</sup>. As a consequence, it must be admitted that this empirically allows the location of the human person. In this sense, location would be impossible if the person coincided exclusively with self-consciousness, self-control or relational capacity and not with a physical-organic element. However, for the human person there is no way to be different from being a human being and therefore to coincide with a human body. Finally, corporeality is the means of manifestation of our qualities. As has been evidenced in the three hypothetical cases, the body provides the dynamic sense with which the qualities manifest themselves in the human condition. From this point of view, the main “conditioning” of human beings is our corporeal existence<sup>4</sup>.

This intrinsic conditioning to existence is connected to the fact that man is a reality in becoming, for which the qualities are modified in time, with the possibility of losing them or not manifesting them. However, it must be specified that even if these are modified or lost, it is not possible to lose our body dimension, without ceasing to exist. There is no possibility for human beings of a disembodied existence<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, there is no human person independent of his body. Considering the above, it can be affirmed that there is no man to whom the fundamental quality of belonging to the human condition is eliminated.

Disability brings our domain over human qualities to question, evidencing the limited sense in which we can call them “ours”. The cases of Marianela and Susana show that although they can disappear or our domain over them diminish it must be recognized that, although we are not always in relation with others, we are not always autonomous or self-conscious we are always human beings. Therefore, in the emergence of the condition disability, the fundamental quality that man cannot lose and that he really possesses is his belonging to the human family.

## Final considerations

The human condition not only refers to the set of events and fundamental characteristics that make up our existence. It is also relative to a group of qualities linked to our biological dimension that brings dynamism to our existence and exposes us to the experience of the loss of qualities. In this sense, disability is a way of manifesting the human condition and a possible experience during our existence that poses questions and opens new ways to explore our condition. Therefore, disability has heuristic value with respect to the human condition because it helps to examine constitutive aspects of existence such as our changing in time or being dependent and vulnerable.

Vulnerability is inherent to human beings<sup>1,18</sup>, regardless of the fact that they have a disability or not. The sources of vulnerability are connected to two of our dimensions: corporeality<sup>18,20</sup> and the psycho-social sphere<sup>21</sup>. Vulnerability, therefore, concerns all human beings and all phases of existence. This is not only due to our biological finitude, or because it can be generated in relationships between people, but also because we live in groups composed of subjects who need help and mutual care<sup>23</sup>. In this sense, vulnerability and dependence are closely interconnected. On the other hand, the conditionings of our existence (environmental, biological and cultural) are also primarily linked to corporeality. From this nexus results our facticity and contingency for which we are “subordinated” to the circumstances of existing.

Disability illuminates our conception of the human condition because it also facilitates the understanding of how we possess our qualities. The way they manifest themselves, as well as their possible loss, is mediated by the constitutive aspects of existence. Disability highlights the paradoxical sense in which we possess our qualities. They are inherent to us, although we do not have real possession of them, but rather we have them as an implication<sup>15</sup>.

The loss of qualities with disability, although it represents an important change for the individual, does not entail a reduction or exclusion of the human condition, much less of the personal condition. Even in those cases of intellectual disability where there is loss or non-manifestation of rationality. While there are qualities that allow us to identify ourselves as human persons, we nevertheless call persons those who possess them and not their qualities.



In fact, the qualities do not exist without someone who has them, although in the absence of them, this person continues to exist as a human person. The term “person” with respect to human beings may have an alienated use of corporeality<sup>10</sup>. However, it must be considered that the person lives in the human condition. For this reason, rationality in human beings, as sentient beings, can be expressed in different degrees or even not manifest.

However, with disability, the loss of our qualities is evident, although, for human

beings, it is not possible to lose the dimension of corporeality. It constitutes the initial point of experience and provides dynamism to our biological existence. It is also that aspect of continuity of existence that empirically allows us to recognize someone even when this person’s psychic life has lost self-consciousness. In disability, the fundamental quality emerges, which man can not lose: the belonging to the human family. Recognizing this aspect unites us beyond our differences.

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