Sustaining Human Flourishing: Reconsidering Autonomy as Authentic Vulnerability

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Medicine’s attempt to show exactly where autonomy is “lacking” reflects its mistaken conceptions of suffering, vulnerability, and autonomy. By utilizing measurable domains to empirically capture the patient’s suffering, vulnerability has been defined as an individual’s lack of autonomy--I am immunodeficient, so therefore I am vulnerable. Yet, relying on the analytical language of autonomy, medicine is barred from a whole conception of vulnerability. Phenomenological bioethics offers an avenue whereby a fuller conception of suffering is uncovered, subsequently removing the ambiguities surrounding vulnerability, avoiding the narrow, analytical language of autonomy.