



What is it to be human? Western thought since Aristotle has by and large responded to this question by defining the human as *animal rationale*: a definition that saw its heyday during the Enlightenment, when reason was believed to herald human sovereignty: freedom from the gods and control over the world of objects. Implicitly challenging such long-standing conceptions, much recent scholarly work on the phenomenology of embodiment has instead emphasised our inextricable dependence on the world outside ourselves. Judith Butler, for example, argues in her latest book, *Frames of War* (Verso 2009), that the human body “is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition” and, as such, “must rely on what is outside itself.” This fundamental dependence on exteriority shatters any illusions of human sovereignty, freedom or control: “To live is always to live a life that is at risk from the outset and can be put at risk or expunged quite suddenly from the outside and for reasons that are not always under one’s control.” To be human, in this conception, is thus not so much to be *animal rationale* as *animal vulnerabilis*.

How does one live when one’s life is permanently at risk? How does this risk manifest itself and how do we respond to it? Or, perhaps more simply, how do we live with our own vulnerability?

A decade into the new millennium, we are arguably more than ever forced to front up to these questions. Instead of having confidently conquered, domesticated and made serviceable our worldly domain, we are daily reminded of our dependence on that domain for survival. Whether it is the global economic crisis, or the deepening ecological crisis and its various recent disasters (Haiti, Samoa, New Orleans, to name but a few): we are exposed and vulnerable to forces beyond our control and typically respond to such exposure and vulnerability with fear. Clambering for full body armor (metaphorical as well as actual), we go into battle against a wide range of real or imagined threats: illness, pollution, terrorists, killer flu viruses, alien invasions. Listening to daily news reports about “homeland security” and food safety, not to mention campaigns to save the environment or, more ambitiously, the planet, we do everything we can to keep (some) humans safe. Problematically, however, this fixation on our own safety tends to come at a cost, and this cost is the growing violence against even more vulnerable “others”: Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, the MS Tampa Affair, the Northern Territory Intervention and the Urewera Raids are only a few of the growing list of proper names that call up scenes of unspeakable violence against humans at their most vulnerable.

How, then, can we perhaps live *otherwise* with our own vulnerability? How can we find the confidence and imagination to overcome our fear and invest in *animal vulnerabilis* as an enabling human condition? How can we argue, as many thinkers associated with the recent “ethical turn” in critical theory have done, that our vulnerability is the condition of possibility for social justice?

This symposium seeks to canvas a range of contemporary responses to, and analyses of, the question of human vulnerability. It invites 20-minute papers from across the disciplines (including interdisciplinary work), and from a variety of theoretical perspectives, that address any aspect of the topic of human vulnerability. Panel proposals of up to three 20-minute papers are also welcome.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- vulnerability and the body
- vulnerability and biotechnology
- vulnerability and biopower
- vulnerability and climate change
- vulnerability and global capital
- vulnerability and the virtual
- vulnerability and violence
- vulnerability and survival
- the vulnerability of skin (black skin? white skin?)
- vulnerability as a human condition vs. specific vulnerability (of children, colonized peoples, prisoners, those without cultural capital, etc.)
- vulnerability and ethics
- vulnerability as foundation for social justice
- vulnerability and disability studies
- vulnerability and aesthetics
- vulnerability vs. victimhood
- vulnerability as a postcolonial concern?
- the vulnerability of power/the power of vulnerability
- vulnerability and agency
- vulnerability and trauma studies
- vulnerability and terror
- vulnerability and death
- vulnerability and creativity
- vulnerability and the work of Agamben | Arendt | Butler | Deleuze | Derrida | Foucault | Heidegger | Levinas | Merleau-Ponty | ???

To preserve the integrity of the event, and foster a productive exchange between participants, the symposium is planned as a single-stream event with no parallel sessions. For this reason, the maximum number of papers we can accept is 30.

Selected papers will be published in a quality-assured international journal.

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

Deadline: **30 June 2010**

Paper and panel proposals should be emailed to Dr Simone Drichel:
simone.drichel@otago.ac.nz

Please give the email the subject ‘*Vulnerability* abstract – your surname’ and include your name, paper title, an abstract (250 words max) and up to 5 key words. Please also add a short biographical note. Panels should submit an abstract and biographical note for each paper/presenter.