

**Vulnerability, Violence and Virtue,**  
**Bryan S. Turner, Professor of Sociology, National University of Singapore**

The paper develops an ontological argument in defence of universal human rights, the core concept of which is human vulnerability. Different religious traditions have conceptions of vulnerability which suggests that relativism is not an argument against this position. Because we are wounded animals (*vulnus*), we share a common community of fear. This common ontology creates a need for reciprocity and co-operation. This ontology can provide a 'thick' basis for community, and it is also a basis for a defence of virtue ethics, namely cosmopolitanism. Co-operation does not mean agreement and a notion of critical recognition might meet the requirements of Rawls's overlapping consensus. Technological change does not make us less vulnerable; on the contrary technological change increases the precariousness of social institutions and the vulnerability of civilians through the spread of new wars. In a world of mounting violence, rule of law and rights become elementary foundations of civil order. There are several arguments against my position. One has been developed by Jack Barbalet in *Emotions, Social Theory and Social Structure* in which the emotion of revenge is said to be important for social movements seeking justice. If correct, it is an important argument against truth commissions. Revenge is psychologically better than reparation or forgiveness. Barbalet's solution would create a cycle of revenge in which there is no satisfaction. My argument raises important considerations about the relationship between the sociology and the theology of rights.

Professor Bryan S. Turner was professor of sociology at the University of Cambridge (1998-2005) and is currently professor of sociology in the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is the research leader of the cluster on globalisation and religion, and is currently writing a three volume study of the sociology of religion and editing the *Dictionary of Sociology* for Cambridge University Press. A book on human rights and vulnerability is to be published in 2006 by Penn State University Press. Professor Turner is a research associate of GEMAS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris), a professorial Research Associate of SOAS, University of London, and an honorary professor of Deakin University, Australia. Turner's recent publications include *Classical Sociology* (1999) and *The New Medical Sociology* (2004). With Chris Rojek, he published *Society & Culture. Principles of Scarcity and Solidarity* (2001) and with Engin Isin, he edited the *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, (2002). Turner is the author of numerous publications, cf. e.g. <http://www.frontlist.com/booklist/32908>