

Rights are a Tool



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Property rights, human rights, civil rights, children’s rights, animal rights; many are the types of rights defended by people across the globe. What are rights? Do they exist? Are they something tangible, concrete? Or are they merely an abstraction, a useful tool of the mind for use by mankind? Methinks the latter.

Society

Mankind are social animals. We need others around us or we will literally become insane. Therefore, mankind implies society, and society by definition is community and fraternity. In order for society to exist, men and women must agree, tacitly, to keep their hands to themselves, meaning, to not take what others have claimed as theirs, and to not hurt or kill each other. When this agreement is violated, men and women no longer enjoy society, rather, they are at war with each other, and their chances of survival and finding happiness are thereby diminished.

Natural Law

This is a result of the natural law that governs our universe. When certain agreements, or rules if you will, are obeyed among people, society flourishes. When they are discarded or disobeyed, society withers. Society cannot exist where men and women are constantly at each others throats. Rational thinking eventually discovered the rules for human flourishing and called them “rights”. In other words, rights are just a tool for people to get along in society.

Pseudo Rights

As the concept of rights has grown and evolved, many today claim rights that can only be respected through the violation of other rights. When someone claims a right to housing, for example, they are claiming the right to take what belongs to others in both resources and labor to build them a house. Clearly, the right to housing and the right to not be stolen

from or enslaved cannot coexist. Respecting which will lead to human flourishing? It is obvious to me and I hope to you that only in respecting the latter rights can society be maintained. Philosophers call rights such as a right to housing “positive rights”, and the rights to not be stolen from, enslaved, or killed, “negative rights”. Positive rights, then, are not only silly, but dangerous. While the right to housing is thus indefensible, the right to be left alone to make or trade for housing is consistent with a proper conception of rights.

Final Thoughts

It is my belief that rights only exist as a matter of abstract thought among human beings who desire to live together in peace and harmony, in society. Libertarians and voluntaryists are among the most consistent defenders and promoters of a logical conception of rights. Only among philosophers of these sorts will you find rational thinking as it concerns the construction and maintenance of rights as they lead to human peace and prosperity. While there are areas of disagreement, like among such controversial topics as abortion and children’s rights, philosophers are continually making progress in the development of a rational ethic. This gives me hope for the future of mankind.

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