

Rights Don't Exist? Bitch, Please



Send him mail. [f](#) [t](#)

“One Voluntarist’s Perspective” is an original column appearing sporadically at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Sklyer J. Collins. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

There are two ways to perceive rights, two perspectives, like looking at the concept from one direction and then another: positive and negative. Both are essentially limits on behavior. The positive: I have a right to life. The negative: Others have no right to kill me. Both perspectives are inseparable from the right in question. When one uses the language of one perspective, they are simultaneously using the language of the other.

This language is not limited to the verbal. Our behavior also has language. What we do with ourselves, our actions, our behavior, says something to the world about who we are and what we believe. Our verbal language may contradict our behavioral language, though. In the case of saying “Rights don’t exist,” those who say this are contradicted by their behavior.

How? Because their behavior shouts “I have these rights!” If they defend themselves in an attack, their behavior is shouting, “I have a right to be left alone!” and “You don’t have the right to attack me!” and “I have the right to enforce my subjective preference of avoiding harmful interactions!” and probably countless other claims. If the person truly did not believe in rights, then he would not defend himself from attack. That he does proves that he believes he may justifiably limit the behavior of his attacker.

Other behaviors, I think all behaviors, likewise shout “I have these rights!” To go deeper, as I hope is obvious, rights are a mental construct. When they are rights that we claim either verbally or behaviorally, they are an individual mental construct. When they are rights that we agree on with other people, they are a social mental construct. Either way, to Acting Man, they exist in the mind and guide and limit his behavior. Even Acting Wolf claims rights when he defends himself, his pups, his territory. Rights are a mental construct, yes, but they are very real in the sense that they guide real people and real actions, even of those who verbally deny them.

I see no point in shouting or arguing “Rights don’t exist!” Not only is it to contradict one’s

behavioral language, but it serves no purpose. Rights do exist in the way explained above. It is far more effective to tease out what people verbally or behaviorally claim are their rights. Show people both perspectives, positive and negative. Usually when seeing what they claim is a right from the negative perspective, its true colors as something insidious like slavery or murder are revealed. Then they change their minds because slavery or murder are contrary to the values they hold. Their belief in rights is too deeply ingrained in who they are as a human being to be persuaded with a verbal claim that contradicts theirs and everyone else's behavior. But we can help them see why the rights they believe in are incompatible with their values and with other more basic rights.

Read more from "One Voluntaryist's Perspective":