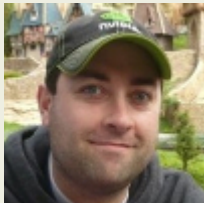


Rights in Context



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“The Self Owner” is an original weekly column appearing every Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Spencer W. Morgan. Spencer is a husband and father, and has studied History and Philosophy at the University of Utah. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OVP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

In last week’s column, I wrote about the correct notion of liberty as being the free range of action implied by self-ownership. As I examined the notion of liberty, and its inherent limits, we came up with a name for this sphere of action, which is a “right.” This week I’d like define rights in a way that builds upon the context and understanding of what we’ve already discussed, and in coming articles I will apply this concept to illustrate the common fallacies surrounding the term. I will also examine in future columns how this core notion of rights leads to material property.

In the most basic sense, a *right* simply means something to which one is legitimately entitled. This is evident in the meaning of the word itself. It denotes something that is “of right” yours or an action that is “of right” yours to take. It is a word that inherently contains a moral judgment. One can not assert a right without simultaneously making a moral assertion, whether it is characterized as such or not.

It is the more general meaning of the word right that causes much of the confusion when rights are applied to the political or social sphere (personal interactions). There are a variety of ways by which one may come, legitimately, to have a moral entitlement to a material object or to take an action. For example, if I form a contract voluntarily with another person to buy something and fulfill my payment, then I have a *right* to the provision of the product that was contractually offered in exchange for my payment. This is a *right* in the more general sense, but it is not this sort of *right* that I wish to discuss, and to avoid confusion would be better referred to as a valid entitlement.

Natural Rights, or Rights Implicit From the Human Condition

The most primary, and basic types of valid entitlements are those that do not arise from any external relationship, contract or bestowal. These are also commonly referred to as *natural rights*. In other words, this type of right is an entitlement that is inherent to a

person's humanity and implied by the human condition. It needs no external conveyance, pronouncement or permission to be valid.

So to what, then, does a human being have a *right* merely by virtue of their existing and being human? Just as with our concept of liberty (which is essentially the same concept as natural rights) we should examine the universal applicability of any so-called "right" that is asserted as an inherent "human right" to see if it can be maintained without contradiction.

Each human being has a right, by virtue of his or her being such, to take all self-directing action. Just as with our notion of self-ownership, this is axiomatic. To assert the absence of an inherent moral entitlement to self-using action, would be an inherent contradiction because of the self-using action involved in making this very process of making the assertion.

An important distinction to draw, however, is that this entitlement does not extend to the results of those actions. I have a right to use myself, and interact voluntarily with others to achieve my needs and desires. I don't, however, have a *right* to a certain outcome from those actions, nor to impose terms upon the participation of others (who are also self-owners).

This is a vital key to the definition of a right. It is a right to an *action* only. Because it is the action (self-owning action) itself to which you are, by nature, entitled; your *rights* are not reduced or violated by a variation in the results of your actions or by a limitation of your capabilities. The entitlement to self-owning actions does create a moral entitlement regarding the results of those actions, which we know as *material property*. In future columns, we'll dissect this notion of material property and look at how this understanding of rights avoids several common fallacies.