

On Human Rights

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At the core of human rights is the question of what it means to be human. To be human has specific implications: human self-awareness and the actions taken to uphold human dignity—these are what gives the concept of humanity a special meaning.

Human self-awareness and human actions are embodied in the interplay between individual thought and language and the wider society, in economic security, the right to education, and the right to free association and free expression; it is human actions that create conditions for protecting expression and encouraging bold thinking. If we abandon efforts to uphold human dignity, we forfeit the essential meaning of being human, and when we waver in our commitment to the idea of human rights, we are abandoning our moral principles. What follow from such a failure are duplicity and folly, corruption and tyranny, and the endless stream of humanitarian crises that we see in the world today.

More than two centuries have passed since the concept of human rights was first proposed. During that time humanity has gone through various stages of historical development and the world has seen enormous changes. In Europe, what was once a collection of colonialist, autocratic states has transformed into a democratic society with a capitalist orientation, establishing a democratic framework and a mechanism that protects individual rights. Under the new globalizing order, other societies are also seeing structural changes, and the concept of human rights is facing grave challenges. In part the challenges stem from the disparate demands of countries in different stages of development, with contrasting economic situations and competing economic interests. But challenges also come from divergent conceptions of human rights, from divergent understandings of human dignity, morality and responsibility, and from different interpretations and applications of the core principles of human rights. In the contemporary world, as we weaken our grasp of the fundamental values and principles of human rights and humanitarianism, we risk losing our right, responsibility, and power to uphold human dignity.

History shows that a moral failure is always accompanied by painful realities, visible everywhere. The global refugee crisis is worsening daily, and 70 million refugees have been forced to leave their homes by war and poverty. Our living environment is constantly being degraded, and the ecological balance is ever more fragile. Armed conflicts persist and potential political crises lurk; regional instabilities grow more acute; autocratic regimes brutally impose their will, while democratic government is in decline. Unreasoning and unrestrained expansion under a nationalist, capitalist order is exacerbating the global gap between rich and poor. Our views of the world have become more divided and more conflicted than ever before.

In many countries and many regions of the world, individuals have no chance to receive an education, no chance to access information or communicate freely, no chance to exercise their imagination and creativity and fulfill individual and social ideals, no chance to enjoy freedom of belief and freedom of association. Such rights and freedoms pose a fatal threat to autocracy and authoritarianism. This is why, in so many places, lawyers have been imprisoned, why journalists have been disappeared and murdered, why censorship has become so pervasive, why religious and non-governmental organizations have been ruthlessly suppressed. Today, corrupt regimes continue to benefit from reckless arms sales, and dictatorships enjoy the quiet support of capitalist nations. Religious divisions, ethnic contradictions, and regional disputes all feed into primitive power plays. Their logic is simple: to weaken individual freedoms and strengthen the controls imposed by governments and dominant elites. The end result is that individuals are deprived of the right to live, denied freedom from fear and freedom of expression, or denied the right to maintain their living environment and their right to development.

The concept of human rights needs to be revised. Discussions of human rights used to focus on the one-dimensional relationship between state's rights and individual rights, but now human rights involve a variety of multidimensional, mutually impacting relationships. Today, no matter whether demands are framed in terms of the rights of the individual or in terms of the goals pursued by political entities and interest groups, none of these agendas exist in isolation. Compared to other periods in history, the conditions governing human existence are now all the more globally interdependent.

The right of children to grow up and be educated, the right of women to receive protection, the right to conserve nature, the right to survival of other lives intimately connected with the survival of the human race--all these rights have now become major elements in the concept of human rights. As science and technology develop, authoritarian states invade privacy and limit personal freedom in the name of counter-terrorism and stability maintenance, intensifying psychological manipulation at all levels. Through controls of the Internet and command of facial recognition technology, authoritarian states tighten their grasp on people's thoughts and actions, threatening and even eliminating the political rights of groups that are seeking freedom. Similar kinds of controls are being imposed to varying degrees within the global context. From this we can see that under these new conditions human rights have not gained a common understanding, and if discussion of human rights becomes narrow and shortsighted, it is bound to become nothing more than outdated, empty talk.

Today, Europe, the United States, Russia, China and other governments manufacture, possess, and sell arms. If we fail to curb these dangerous practices that make armed conflict all the more likely, to pontificate about human rights is simply self-deluding. Likewise, if there are no limits placed on capitalist global expansion and the pervasive penetration of capital power, if there is no effort to curb the sustained assault by authoritarian governments on natural human impulses, a discussion of human rights is just idle chatter. Such a blatant abdication of responsibility can lead to no good outcome.

Human rights are shared values. When we talk about human rights, we are not talking about the rights of one individual or the rights of people in one part of the world—we are talking about the collective values of humanity. Human rights are our common possession, and shared human rights are all people's rights. When abuses are committed against anyone in any society, then all of us suffer injury and the dignity of humanity as a whole is compromised. By the same token, it is only when the rights of any individual and rights of the people of any region receive our care and protection that humanity can achieve a shared redemption.

Such is the principle of human rights, in all its stark simplicity. But a shared understanding of that truth still eludes us. Why so? Could it be that we are too benighted, too selfish, too lacking in courage? Or, perhaps, it is rather because we are insincere, because we

don't really love life enough: we con ourselves into imagining we can get away without discharging our obligation to institute fairness and justice, we fool ourselves into thinking that chaos is acceptable, we are willing to entertain the idea that the world may well collapse in ruin, all hopes and dreams shattered.

Conversely, if we truly believe in the existence of values that we can all identify with and aspire to—a recognition of truth, an understanding of science, an appreciation of the self, a respect for life and a faith in society—then we need to eliminate obstacles to understanding, uphold the fundamental definition of humanity, affirm the shared value of human lives and other lives, and acknowledge the symbiotic interdependency of human beings and the environment. A belief in ourselves and a belief in others, a trust in humanitarianism's power to do good, and an earnest recognition of the value of life—these form the foundation for all human values and all human efforts.

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Translated by Allan H. Barr