

Are Human Rights Real?

“Rights! Boy, everyone in this country’s always running around yammering about their [expletive] rights. ‘I have a right,’ ‘You have no right’... Folks, I hate to spoil your fun, but there’s no such thing as rights. Ok? They’re imaginary. We made them up,” comedian George Carlin [said in a 2008 stand-up special](#).

According to Carlin, who was a vocal atheist, all we really have are “temporary privileges” that the government can take away at any time. He’s wrong.

Carlin isn’t even able to hold his own position consistently. He uses the example of Japanese internment during World War II to prove just how tenuous our so-called rights are, but he also implicitly condemns the U.S. government for mistreating Japanese-Americans. If humans have no inherent value that entitles them to be treated in a particular way, then what’s wrong with forcing American citizens into camps?

In another routine, Carlin accuses pro-life activists of viewing women as nothing more than “brood mare[s].” If humans are just animals, then that seems like a sensible point of view. Carlin clearly believed, on some level, that there is an objective standard for how humans should act toward one another.

Some atheists will say that human rights fall under “common sense.” That’s what [Bill Maher told Catholic columnist Ross Douthat](#) during a segment of his talk show. He probably means that, in the course of human trial and error, we’ve arrived at certain “best practices” that help us live better lives and have called those practices human rights.

But human rights are individual rights, and it’s far from obvious that individual rights form the best basis for society.

From an evolutionary point of view, individuals are nothing more than vessels for transmitting genetic material. Their happiness is irrelevant. With this perspective, a Nazi or Soviet could argue that human rights are a sentimental hang-up that must be abandoned so we can build a better future. They might argue, for example, that sterilizing or euthanizing people with physical and mental defects will strengthen the gene pool. Or that mass purges and kangaroo courts are necessary to liquidate the bourgeoisie.

What, exactly, makes individual humans special, other than the fact that we solipsistically think we are?

If human rights exist and are not a matter of common sense, where do they come from?

Even the United Nations' [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), after running through several "common sense" justifications, ultimately falls back on appealing to humanity's "faith in fundamental human rights." Faith in what, though? Human rights are concepts, and concepts exist only in minds, and we've already established that if they exist only in human minds, they are worthless.

Of course, the American founders [had no problem saying](#) where these rights came from: "[A]ll men... are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." [Neither did the French](#): "[T]he National Assembly recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man."

Rights don't come from governments. Rights come from the Mind of God. Governments are created to protect the rights that predate them.

This is why Carlin is mistaken when he uses Japanese internment to disprove the existence of rights. The government disregarded the legal rights of Japanese-Americans, but in doing so, it violated their natural rights. Carlin seems to

have been unaware of the distinction between the two. When he said that rights couldn't come from God because the Bill of Rights has been amended and because different countries guarantee their citizens different numbers of rights, he thinks it's a knockout argument.

It isn't.

Human rights are not synonymous with the laws protecting them. They are the first principles on which those laws are based. They are the standard by which those laws are judged.

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