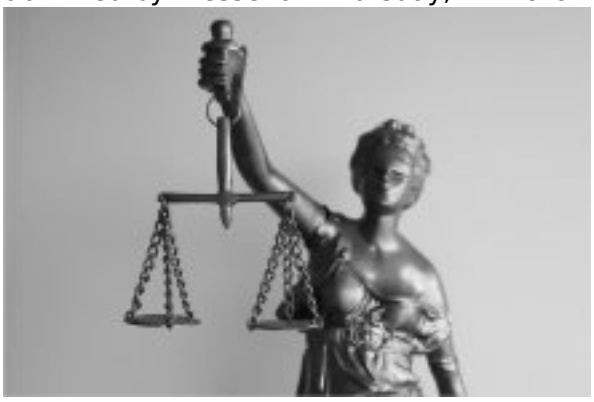
Rights, Privileges and Responsibilities **[1]**

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Read time: 12 minutes
When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, the sea of change swept in a whole new vocabulary for most people in the country. The “Rainbow Nation” was our new identity: celebrating not only a diversity in skin tone, but cultures as well. “Constitution” and “elections” became realities for the everyday person, and not merely the ruling and intellectual elite. Also the notion of “rights”. Previously, most people were defined by what they could not do: they could not go there, could not be out past a certain time, could not teach a particular thing to others, could not gather or interact with a certain group of people, could not insist on something. But the new constitution guaranteed certain basic human rights for *all* South Africans (and non-South Africans living in the country), ensuring that everyone would be able to enjoy the same basic liberties. This acknowledged the dignity of human beings and boosted the confidence and self-pride of people. But some people latched on to the notion of rights. Give a man a hammer as his only tool, and suddenly every problem starts looking like a nail. A generation later, and some children would invoke their “rights” (as if some magical incantation) against the teachers, parents and peers to object to anything they did not feel like doing.

My wife’s grandmother spent about a third of her life living mostly autonomously in a retirement village. In her last couple of years, she moved from her stand-alone house to a frail care ward. Among the artwork which decorated the walls were posters which spelled out the patients' *rights*, and their *responsibilities*. Although not novel, I had to marvel at it, because I had not really seen something like that displayed so publicly (and succinctly) before. I can well imagine many patients in years passed touting the privileges which they enjoyed for most of their livings and insisting on all sorts of “rights” to the detriment, and perhaps humiliation, of some of the staff, provoking management to come up with a solution so that the patients and staff could get along. Similarly, an elderly patient could easily be taken advantaged of or mishandled by an unscrupulous staff member. Some patients may be unable to speak up for themselves. Therefore, for the sake of some patients, their rights need to be inculcated, valued, and displayed.

But if we speak of “rights” in isolation, we can create for ourselves a distorted view of reality in which we occupy the centre. By merely laying them beside the concepts of “responsibilities” and “privileges”, a much more balanced view emerges. Of course, doing so I expect to meet some resistance. One is a matter of definitions. We live in a world which liberally redefines words, making mutual discussion difficult, if not impossible in some cases. The other kind of resistance is much less intellectual: a purely emotional resistance to compromise our beloved rights (which is inwardly focussed) with responsibilities towards others (which is outwardly focussed).

Let us have a brief survey or rights, privileges and responsibilities, and then consider how we relate to all of it.

Rights

Simply put, rights are which are owed to everyone[1]. The Oxford dictionary speaks of rights as *entitlements*, both morally and legally. I intend to have another, fuller discussion on rights another time, so I am not going to discuss the notion of rights with much depth. But a few observations are in order.

The first is that rights may be conflicting. For example, when a request to do business is refused on religious grounds [2] and then deemed discriminatory against a person's sexual preference [3]. Here, one person's freedom to religious belief and expression conflicts with another's sexual preference and identity. Such conflicts can be incredibly difficult to untangle at a legal and philosophical level, and usually disputes end up at the top judicial authority in a country.

Rights may also not be absolute. In Apartheid South Africa, the movements of people were restricted based on their race. Now, no such restrictions exist. But not everyone enjoys absolute freedom of movement: having been convicted of committing a crime, the government can legally restrict a person's freedom of movement by confining them to prison. And, as mentioned before [4], in extraordinary times, the government can impose seemingly draconian measures in order to protect the nation.

Rights may also seem arbitrary. For example, Finland has broadband Internet access as a basic human right [5], even though—in living memory—there was a time when the very concept did not exist and thus could not be enjoyed or enforced. This raises all sorts of questions, like whether all rights are not merely legislated instead of existing as something ethereal yet real.

Privileges

A corollary to the idea of *rights* is that of *privileges*. Whatever a person *has* which they are not *owed*, is a privilege. Rights are not earned. Privileges may be earned (e.g. an improved economic state through hard work, rigorous saving and frugal living), but they often also are not earned (e.g. someone being born into a wealthy family). The popular conception of privilege is that it is not (usually) earned: it results from the favour someone received from someone else.

Let us look at an example to differentiate between rights and privileges. A person may have the *right* to buy property, but if they do not have the means, they cannot own property. The right it not to having property, but to be able to transact with property. Someone who has the means to buy property has a privilege which other people may not.

Being able to recognise privilege is important. If one can do that, that means they understand the limits of rights, and brings a self-awareness about one's position in the world in relation to others. Not being able to do this can lead to an unhealthy delusion of entitlement, which in turn can lead one (who has certain privileges) to look down on others (who do not have those privileges) or see them as a means to an end of one's own entitlement. Or, if one does not have a privilege, to imagine that "rights" entitle one to others' privileges.

The line between privileges and rights is not necessarily fixed. Christian ascetics may consider the very breath of life (and everything else) to be a privilege. For this article, we are going to stick to the contemporary "secular" descriptions of rights, as found in, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [6].

The topic of "privilege" is a hot one today. Some people believe that those who have privilege (particularly if so because of historic injustices and the oppression of other people) have a duty to share and enable with those who are not privileged. This leads us to the topic of responsibilities.

Responsibilities

I mentioned the poster outlining the rights and responsibilities of patients that I saw in a nursing

home. I must confess that when I first saw it, my instinctive reaction was to become defensive against having responsibilities enforced upon someone. This visceral reaction surprised me. After all, I was not even the intended audience, and the poster had no direct relevance to me. But I think the reaction stemmed from a couple of ideas. The first, simply, was having limits placed on someone's rights. Rights, instinctively, should be innate, and not "earned" or "bargained", but when one starts talking about responsibilities, it does start to seem transactional. The other source of my reaction was the question of who has the authority (the right) to put these responsibilities in place and lay them on people? If responsibilities are imposed by some, does that mean that those same people grant us our rights? If so, who has this authority? Are rights and responsibilities, essentially, arbitrary?

Yet, when one thinks about it, responsibilities in relation to rights are inescapable, even if there is only one responsibility: to protect (or to not violate) the rights of other people. In practice, there are many more, as spelled out by the laws of a country (which may, at least in part, have been built around a framework of human rights).

Where Do All These Come From?

The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America famously says in its preamble "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men…" Much is packed into this short excerpt[2], but I would like to highlight only a couple of things.

The "truths" of rights are "self-evident". We desire these rights, they feel "right", and nobody would themselves want to be deprived of them. Having these rights ensures a just society; one where there is less oppression and exploitation. Society, on a whole, simply functions better with them.

Yet these "self-evident truths" are "endowed by [the] Creator"—that is, God. These truths (which are self-evident) are only truths because God makes them so. If God did not give them, then they are not there, except in our imagination. And, importantly, we (or someone else who is powerful and has authority over us) does not have to imagine them.

This excerpt from the Declaration of Independence summarises perhaps the two most common views of where rights come from. For some, rights fundamentally come from God. For others, the reference to God merely echoes the superstitions of the day, but that does not mean that what is good and right for society and mankind is any less self-evident. By virtue of its goodness and utility, rights are self-evident; rights don't "need" to be dictated or prescribed by some transcendental force. But this view raises certain questions, such as whether rights are immutable, or whether they change over time as society changes. These can be difficult questions to answer.

Coming from a Christian theistic blog, there should be no surprises for guessing which side I fall on. But, again, I am going to leave a fuller discussion of this for another day. For now, we just know that the givenness of rights is not straight forward. The concept of rights may be easy for us to intuit, but the discussion behind it is complex. No wonder, then, that the world has, for most of humanity's time on it, been without the concept of universal human rights.

The Christian and Rights

The Silver Rule, which was widely known in various ancient moral and religious teachings, states:

> Do not do unto others that you would not have them do to you.

This is passive form of the Golden Rule which Jesus taught (Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31)[3]. It embodies the spirit of the notion of rights: they are individualistic and passive. They are passive in the sense

that, as long as they are not violated, everyone gets along. If nobody is infringing on your rights, then let others (with their rights) be. No additional burden is laid on a person. They are also individualistic, because they allow one to get on with one's own business: one's own morality, own sexuality, own religion, etc.

But this is not what Jesus taught. We need to be active ("do unto others…"). This builds community. This speaks to responsibility: responsibility in recognising other people's dignity [7], the Imago Dei [8]. We are to go out, recognise, help, and celebrate other people. As Christians, our narrative is not "you cannot do to me", but rather "I will do for you". Indeed, many Christians throughout the centuries have gladly forfeited their rights, if only they believed that Christ could be glorified in the process (Philippians 3:8). Like with anything else we have, may we recognise that our rights (though they may be innate and self-evident) are still gifts to us, and that we never value them over the One who gave them to us. The Kingdom of God is not, as many of our modern nations are, built on a framework of rights, but rather on a framework of responsibilities. We do not say "I have a right to", but rather, "I have a responsibility towards". May how we actually live our lives reflect that!

- 1. My own definition.
- 2. I have omitted the gist of the Declaration of Independence, which goes on to describe how, if people's inalienable rights are violated by an unjust government, people have the right to overthrow such an unjust government. That is beyond the scope of this article.
- 3. The Golden Rule is not necessarily unique to Jesus. But many ancient traditions seemed to emphasise the Silver Rule, including the Graeco-Roman world with which the Jews of Jesus's day interacted, which does make Jesus's choice of the positive form of the rule noteworthy.

Categories:

- Terminology & Concepts [9]

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