



Kerri Woods

Human Rights

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Human rights are an integral part of our political and legal language, acting as a moral authoritative compass for what is right or wrong. The branding alone of an action, legislation, or policy as a violation of human rights would severely damage its legitimacy. We regularly talk about human rights and identify them as important in interpreting right and wrong. Nonetheless, at the same time it seems that we cannot agree on what human rights are and when they should be applied or not. This paradox of broad acceptance of human rights as an authoritative moral guide while not being able to define it properly is the entry point of Kerri Wood's book. Kerri Wood's *Human Rights* tackles this paradox by systematically demystifying the concept of human rights, taking the reader into the historical development of the concept, the philosophical and political foundations of human rights, and eventually into an introduction to vital contemporary debates on the topic.

The book is organized into nine chapters, with the first introducing the challenge of trying to define human rights. The next three chapters attend to the historical, philosophical, and political perspectives on the development of human rights. Chapters five, six, and seven present important debates that converse with the development described in the former chapters. The last two chapters highlight urgent current debates on human rights.

The first chapter directly addresses the question of what a human right is. Wood does not try to provide a definitive answer to this question. Instead, she introduces ways to conceptualize rights so the reader would be better equipped with differentiating human rights from claims of human rights. These conceptualizations guide the reader through the next chapters.

The second chapter provides the historical dimension of the development of the human rights discourse, introducing the reader to the events that contributed to the emergence of the human rights regime as we know it today. Woods focuses here on three key historical moments in the development of human rights. The first is the Natural Rights debate as it was inspired by the American and French revolutions. The second focuses on the 19th century socialist response to the industrial revolution, with emphasis on the abolitionist movement. The third historical moment presented is the creation of the global human rights regime in the post-WWII world.

The third and fourth chapters examine the philosophical foundations of human rights, its critics, and the political views emerging in this dialogue. The author introduces several important discussions pertaining the question of why we have human rights, addressing the work of Christopher McRudden, Michael Freeman, Richard Rorty, and others. In the fourth chapter Woods presents the outcome of these discussions. Here the focus shifted of the undecided debates into what is referred to as the "political view" of human rights.

The next three chapters correspond with the "political view", focusing on some of its major challengers. The fifth chapter examines two fundamental sets of questions



related to religion and human rights. The first explores the possible conflict between human rights as a secular term and the religious interpretation of human rights; and the second the tension between the “political view” and the Islamic interpretation of human rights. The next chapter introduces the debate of Universalism and Relativism in relations to human rights, with emphasis on the feminist critique of human rights definitions and scope. The seventh chapter expands upon some of the discussions of group rights, multiculturalism and, and minority rights presented in the sixth chapter.

Chapters eight and nine target global justice and environmental human rights, respectively; two contemporary debates that have recently been at the center of human rights debates. The chapters look at the counterpart human rights’ duties and their limitations, including the human rights of future generations.

In this book Woods attempts to cover substantial ground while avoiding the simplification of the philosophical and legal arguments. Her success in doing so is this book’s advantage, but also the source of my main critique. This approach, though laudable, is always challenging and invites critique. From my reading two main critics stood out: accessibility and coherency.

First, the complicated language and ideas presented are not always accessible. Woods uses legal and philosophical terms and concepts that are not fully explored or explained, leaving the reader with a feeling that they miss something. The reading becomes even less accessible as Woods make an effort to exhibit how theories and concepts corresponds with one another across chapters, creating a convoluted web of influences.

Woods attempt to incorporate multiple important points and debates generated an incoherent book structure that is sometimes hard to follow. I believe that a genealogy of the discourses presented, as an appendix or illustration, would have provided a useful guide to Woods' complex discussion, aiding readers' comprehension.

Regardless, *Human Rights* is an important and effective contribution to the human rights literature. As mentioned earlier, Wood assumed an ambitious and challenging task and handled it well. The book’s two main strong points are its comprehensive review of both the foundations of the human rights discourse (historical, philosophical, and legal/political) as well as the presentation of the main debates in the field (universalism, feminist, religion and others). In both instances the author demonstrates a high level of understanding and careful attention to details. Additionally, the author navigates through historical, philosophical, and political landmarks that are essential readings for human rights researchers. These two points provide an effective introduction to the study of human rights. I see this book as important reading material and reference book for human rights researchers and political theory scholars.

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