

ETHICS of LEADERSHIP

The Nature & Ambiguity of Rights

As you read the material for our next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the reading:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- United Nations Commission on Human Rights. (1948, December 10). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Retrieved December 24, 2003, from <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.
- Kagan, S. (1998). Rights. In *Normative Ethics* (pp. 170–177). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Background

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* was the result of over two years of deliberation among the United Nations. Based upon ideals of dignity, equality, and freedom, it provides an extensive lists of the rights that the signatory states thought ought to be protected for all persons. In his article, Shelly Kagan expresses the concern that the nature of rights—like those contained in the *UDHR*—is often difficult to fully understand. That is, he suggests that it is not always clear what a given right entails and/or who is actually obligated to ensure that right is protected and fulfilled.

Questions

1. Generally speaking, what does it mean to have a right? For instance, why might it make more sense to say that an animal has rights than a table has rights?
2. How does Kagan characterize the differences between the following kinds of rights?
 - General versus special rights,
 - Negative versus positive rights, and
 - Natural versus conventional rights.
3. Must rights be absolute? What four or five other properties does Kagan suggest are often also ascribed to rights?
4. How does Kagan's discussion of all these issues substantiate his claim that "talk of rights . . . is horrendously ambiguous" (p. 170)?