

# HEALTH, DEVELOPMENT & HUMAN RIGHTS

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## The Nature & Ambiguity of Rights

### Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

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 position on an issue, rather than another.

### Reading

Kagan, S. (1998). Rights. In *Normative Ethics* (pp. 170–177).  
Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

### Questions

1. Generally speaking, what does it mean to have a right? For instance, why might it make more sense to say that a gorilla has rights than that a table has rights?
2. How does Shelly Kagan characterize the differences between the following kinds of rights?
  - A. General versus special rights,
  - B. Negative versus positive rights, and
  - C. 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)?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

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.