

Mid-term essay for HUMR 5131 Autumn 2021

Deadline: October 13 at 1:00 PM

Maximum length (including footnotes): 2500 words

PLEASE ANSWER ONE OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. The need for a philosophy of human rights

In his article, "Elements of a Theory of Human Rights" (2004), Amartya Sen writes:

"Human rights activists are often quite impatient with such critiques [i.e. philosophical critiques of human rights and in particular of welfare rights]. The invoking of human rights tends to come mostly from those who are concerned with changing the world rather than interpreting it [...]. It is not hard to understand their unwillingness to spend time trying to provide conceptual justification, given the great urgency to respond to terrible deprivations around the world. This pro-active stance has had its practical rewards, since it has allowed immediate use of the colossal appeal of the idea of human rights to confront intense oppression or great misery, without having to wait for the theoretical air to clear. However, the conceptual doubts must also be satisfactorily addressed, if the idea of human rights is to command reasoned loyalty and to establish a secure intellectual standing. It is critically important to see the relationship between the force and appeal of human rights, on the one hand, and their reasoned justification and scrutinized use, on the other.

There is, thus, need for some theory and also for some defense of any proposed theory." (p. 317)

In his book *Human Rights in International Relations*, David Forsythe writes:

«There is a remarkable lack of connection between philosophical or theoretical debate on the one hand, and, on the other, considerable agreement on behalf of internationally recognized human rights» (4th ed. p. 46)

Taking these quotes as a point of departure, discuss whether there is a practical need for a philosophical theory of human rights.

2. The history of human rights

In light of the discussions in the readings on the syllabus pertaining to how the concept of human rights can be understood, discuss different answers to the following question:

What does one write the history of when one writes the history of human rights?



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