Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction

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Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction considers the controversies surrounding the human rights movement by focusing on highly topical issues such as torture, arbitrary detention, privacy, equality, health, and discrimination. It discusses the historical origins of human rights and how they are formed in law; explains what our human rights actually are; and considers where the human rights movement might be heading. Today, it is usually not long before a problem gets expressed as a human rights issue. Indeed, human rights law continues to gain increasing attention internationally, and must move quickly in order to keep up with a social world, which is changing so rapidly.

8. Discrimination and equality

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‘Discrimination and equality’ considers the prohibited grounds of discrimination (based on age, sexuality, religion, nationality, gender, and disability); what new grounds may be emerging; and when distinctions can be drawn between people reasonably and therefore legitimately. Despite the existence of obvious inequalities at birth, justice and fairness demand a system to give everyone equal access to opportunities and, in some versions, redistribute resources to ensure that the least well-off are prioritized in an attempt to achieve equality of outcomes. These philosophical approaches provide much of the ballast for the human rights rules on discrimination—and the moral case for developing these rules to achieve greater social justice globally.

7. Food, education, health, housing, and work

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‘Human rights’ covers not only civil and political rights such as freedom from torture, slavery, and arbitrary detention, but also economic, social, and cultural rights. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being and the right to security. ‘Food, education, health, housing, and work’ considers these rights in turn, examining their place in a wider view of human rights, and the appropriate mechanisms for their enforcement. A main concern is that economic and social policy is best determined by policy makers who are democratically accountable, and not by unelected judges with no specialized knowledge of how to prioritize the distribution of limited resources.

2. Historical development and contemporary concerns

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The content of human rights is usually understood by reference to the legal catalogue of human rights we find developed through international texts. ‘Historical development and contemporary concerns’ examines the key text for human rights today—The Universal Declaration of Human Rights—adopted in 1948 by the UN General Assembly. Since that time many treaties and intergovernmental Declarations have supplemented this proclamation of rights. The treaties are best viewed as providing a framework against which we can legitimately judge the performance of governments. How did this human rights catalogue come about? What roles did the League of Nations and Second World War play?