1. Looking at rights
Andrew Clapham

Where does the concept of human rights come from? How has the human rights movement developed such a solid set of obligations that can be applied worldwide? The human rights issue is often contentious and the language of international human rights has become associated with all sorts of claims and disputes. ‘Looking at rights’ considers early historical invocations of the concept of rights and how modern rights theorists have sought to justify the existence and importance of rights by reference to some overriding value, such as freedom, fairness, autonomy, equality, personhood, or dignity. It shows how the concept of a ‘human rights culture’ means different things to different people.

8. Discrimination and equality
Andrew Clapham

‘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.

4. The case for secularism
Andrew Copson
The secular systems of different states have varied according to the nature of their own particular society and their religious, cultural, and political history. Even so, the same types of arguments have been used each time to advance secularism as the best religion–state arrangement to provide individual freedom, equality, peace, and democracy in a modern society. ‘The case for secularism’ considers these points in turn and concludes that the case for secularism is cumulative and deals with what is the best possible outcome, not the perfect outcome; it involves compromise and mutual accommodation. One thing all these arguments do is to assert the value of an impartial state that mediates the differences of its citizens.

Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction

Andrew Clapham

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.

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

Andrew Clapham

‘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

Andrew Clapham
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?

6. Cross-border institutions and systems
Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen

Cross-border institutions and systems are more important now than they have ever been. There are a number of issues that aren't subject to border controls: the environment, public health, the flow of information. ‘Cross-border institutions and systems’ considers how cross-border institutions and systems operate in the contemporary world. Today, ideas and information cross borders more readily than they ever have done. The ability of groups to transcend space and border barriers poses a challenge for governments. How has ‘supranationalism’ affected territorial assumptions of the nation-state system? The European Union's success in eliminating barriers between member states may ironically increase independence movements. What problems to borders pose for enforcing global human rights?