

PHIL 338: Philosophy of Human Rights

Autumn 2016 • University of Washington

Instructor: William Talbott

Overview

This course will provide you with a comprehensive introduction to the philosophy of human rights. The course begins with an overview of the main issues in the conceptualization and justification of human rights. The course then considers the following special topics: Should human rights be understood only negatively, as rights not to be coerced, or they include positive rights—that is, rights to be provided with something (e.g., subsistence, health care, or education). Are human rights culturally relative? We will consider the position that human rights reflect "Western values" and do not apply to societies with "Asian values". We will also consider the potential conflict between women's rights and traditional values; and feminist criticisms of human rights as andocentric. Other questions include: Are there gay and lesbian rights? Are human rights individual rights, or do they also include group rights? We will also discuss military intervention to enforce rights, the legal restrictions on the interrogation of prisoners by the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the new role of the International Criminal Court. An important goal of the course is to enhance your ability to understand complex ideas and arguments, and to be able to explain them and to critically evaluate them in your writing.

Role of Service-Learning in the Course

Students will have the option of doing service learning with a Seattle-based human rights organization. This will provide an opportunity to combine the philosophy of human rights with involvement in real world cases. In the past, many students have used their service learning as a springboard for more involvement in real world human rights issues.

Assignments Related to Service-Learning

In addition to other course requirements, service learning students will write a 4-5-page report on their service learning, with emphasis on a human rights issue that it addressed.

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