



# Respect: The Bridge Between Natural Rights and a Free Society

Humanity's understanding of natural rights and respect is the centerpiece of the most successful societies. Without this centerpiece, society, which bolsters community and cooperation, dissolves into division and discord. Thomas Aquinas' natural law theory offered a basis of good and evil within relations between humans. Subsequently, John Locke's concept of natural rights, and Immanuel Kant's concept of respect expanded this basis and developed an application of negative and positive law for human relationships. This relationship defined how humans are meant to be viewed and treated within society. It is this relationship that makes society free.

Thomas Aquinas' natural law theorized that God designed the universe for the flourishing of his creations, and that God gave His creations the intuition to pursue the five "Basic Goods" He made for them. These five "Basic Goods" include: life, procreation, knowledge, social life, and rational conduct. Aquinas claimed that for each "Basic Good" there was a negative law, or prohibition, that restricted actions against any "Basic Good." Aquinas expanded that for each prohibition, there was an according positive law, or positive injunction, that permitted actions that supported the pursuit of a "Basic Good." Aquinas believed that by reason, we could derive how these laws apply to each "Basic Good," and in turn we could understand good and evil actions. Take this example of application—as a human, I have a desire for life, a "Basic Good." By reason, I am led to find that all human life is valuable. I can conclude that depriving other humans of life violates natural law, the prohibition. Consequently, the positive injunction would be to promote life, perhaps by providing food for the hungry, or donating to an orphanage. Thomas Aquinas' theory of natural law laid the foundation for John Locke to advance the concept of prohibition in society through his theory of natural rights.

Locke's concept of natural rights is best defined as a specific set of fundamental individual rights that are not dependent on culture or government. Locke held that these fundamental rights included a natural right to life, liberty, and property. Locke argued that though we live in a state of liberty, with our natural rights, we are also in a state of license. He reasoned that even in a

state of liberty, nature's law prohibited the extent of how we express our natural rights. Thomas Aquinas theorized that the only prohibition given by the law of nature was that we cannot deprive others from their "Basic Goods." Thus, Locke claimed that the natural rights of an individual could not be taken, nor could the individual himself deprive others of their natural rights; this serves as the prohibition in society. Locke applied this concept in his idea of a social contract, in which individuals agree to create and live under a limited government that enforces laws to protect the natural rights of those individuals. In relation to Locke's basis of prohibition, Immanuel Kant's theory of respect advanced natural law's concept of positive injunction.

Immanuel Kant's concept of respect is best defined as the moral recognition of the worth of individuals. Kant believed that though we are not legally obligated to give respect, each individual holds a moral obligation to respect other individuals; thus, morally right actions that recognize the worth of persons are those that express respect. Kant explained that this moral obligation extends our respect, even at the cost of our own desires, making us able to respect people with whom we do not share common interest. In this way, respect serves as the positive injunction in society. Kant claimed that as we increased our awareness of each other, we also increased our effectiveness at working together, thus making a smoother society. Take this example: a young man is carrying his bike into the subway, and an older man asks, "Is that illegal?." The young man responds, "No, but I would not bring my bike during rush hour." The young man showed respect toward other users of the subway by not taking his bike during rush hour, and while it would have not been illegal, the young man knew it would have made the process of riding the subway difficult for others.

In our society today, the understanding of natural rights and respect allows us to effectively participate in community with others who may have different beliefs. Conflicts regarding opinions are bound to happen in a uniquely diverse country. However, having an understanding that all

humans and their expression of rights are to be valued is the difference between a cooperative community, and a divided community. Fractional communities form distinct societal interests, many of which unfairly limit the freedom of those who have different beliefs. Humanities ability to live in community creates a free and effective society, even in regard to differentiating beliefs found within it.

### Works Cited

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