



Respect: The Bridge Between Natural Rights and a Free Society

On February 22, 2022, following Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's nomination to the Supreme Court, Paul Ryan - former Speaker of the House - released a press statement on Twitter. Ryan, who is related to Justice Jackson, declared "Our politics may differ, but my praise for Ketanji's intellect, for her character, and for her integrity, is unequivocal." This statement from Ryan encapsulates the discussion about natural rights and - more importantly - respect, and how they factor into and benefit society. Through understanding and upholding the natural rights of each of its citizens, and encouraging and maintaining mutual respect between everyone - regardless of political affiliation or circumstances - the foundations of a free society are built.

To examine the impact natural rights have on a society, it is necessary to first understand how the concept of natural rights formed. The first modern concept and codification of natural rights occurred through philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with the introduction of a hypothetical state of nature - where rights such as life, liberty, and property existed without restraint - coexisting with the government's enforcement of these rights through a social contract. This conceptualization of natural rights not only drove the Age of Enlightenment - a period where rational, humanistic thinking proliferated - but served as the inspiration for revolutions and calls for independence that were instrumental in cementing these natural rights into legal systems across the world. The assertion of natural rights can be seen anywhere from the Declaration of Independence in the United States, to the Napoleonic Code in France, which cemented universal property rights across the nation. Furthermore, for a society to be truly free, as Locke and Rousseau imagined, it has to protect the natural rights of its citizens. Freedom - defined by Cambridge as the condition or right of being able to do, say, or think whatever one wants to - and liberty - defined as the freedom to go live as one wishes - are functionally synonyms. To protect a natural right such as liberty does not just uphold the ideal of freedom, but reinforces it.

Emphasizing natural rights in a society, especially those of life and liberty, encourages a society to build up institutions that protect citizens from their freedoms being obstructed by the government or by others. Institutions such as the Human Rights Campaign, which champions LGBTQ+ rights, build upon the understanding of natural rights in a society to include members of minority groups that otherwise would not have seen the same extent of freedom in society that

They do now. Another example lies in the Southern Poverty Law Center, whose goal - to “advance the human rights of all people” - can find its origin in the same premise of natural rights as the HRC. Through understanding and upholding the value of natural rights - life, liberty, property, religion, etc. - a society understands the importance of protecting these rights, and increasing the freedom of its citizens to exercise them.

Beyond emphasizing the importance of natural rights, respect - particularly when it comes to political differences or differences in circumstances - can also ensure the foundations of a free society. As former Speaker Paul Ryan’s emphasis on respect during Justice Jackson’s nomination process showed, mutual respect, especially in politics, serves to open lines of communication across partisan lines and increase opportunities for everyone, regardless of circumstance. The importance of mutual respect is even more evident when looking at the end of the Cold War - as former Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan exchanged letters and phone calls throughout the eighties, the respect they held for each other increased. It was this mutual respect that drove the end of the Cold War, and that encouraged peace talks and diplomatic summits. Respect does not just increase the opportunities of minorities in a society, but can free up communication between previously hostile nations and break down cultural barriers.

As A. Philip Randolph, American labor activist, once said “A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess.” If a society is to be truly free - free for its citizens to express themselves, free for its people to live as they want to live, and free for its citizens to pursue any career they please - it must not only understand natural rights, but respect them as well.

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