



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

“Treat others the way you wish to be treated.” It’s everyone’s favorite golden cliché: the childhood solution to all wrongdoings, one that adorns countless school posters with colorful bubble letters and smiley face embellishments. As a child, The Golden Rule was the very definition of respect. But as those happy yellow smileys lost their persuasive grip with age, I came to realize that while this rule is not entirely unfounded, true respect comes not in treating others the way you wish to be treated, but in the way they innately deserve to be. It is an understanding of this principle that characterizes the real nature of respect. It is a trait unconstrained by differences or disagreements, undecided by an expectation of that respect to be returned.

When we respect others for who they intrinsically are: recognizing that, despite different values, beliefs, or appearances, they are just as deserving of every basic freedom, we accept their individual rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. “Natural Rights”: they are called. And, truly, “natural” is the perfect word for it. For these rights are unbounded, unconditional, undefined by race, sex, gender, religion. At a time when everything from the tight coils of one’s hair to the almond shape of one’s eyes are politicized, it is more important than ever to recognize that certain things cannot be granted or taken away at will. Republican or Democrat, White or Black, Catholic or Muslim, everyone is born with and deserving of these foundational freedoms. In learning to respect others unconditionally, we may learn to respect their natural rights as well. In so doing we promote a society founded not on principles of nationality or politics, but on celebrating our common gift of humanity. A gift of Life. Liberty. Happiness.

Unfortunately, an understanding of these concepts is not ubiquitous. Whether from oppression, censorship, or unintentional ignorance, the respect for and consequent acceptance of each individual’s natural rights sometimes falters, leading to catastrophic results. In his satirical

novel, *Animal Farm*, George Orwell demonstrates how unfamiliarity with our rights promotes exploitation. According to Old Major—a wise pig responsible for inciting rebellion on the farm—the opposite of exploitation is the state of being “rich and free”(2). Such ideas about animal rights reflect the importance—and scarcity— of human rights in an oppressive regime. When the leader responsible for rhetorically feeding the animals this message is later succeeded by one more tyrannical than he, many of the animals fail to understand the means to maintain this message or the significance of upholding it. This results in a vicious cycle of inescapable oppression that is not unfamiliar to many human experiences in the world today.

Across the world, such oppression runs rampant as a respect for and understanding of each individual's natural rights is both disregarded and prevented. Arguably, the most common of these oppressions is racially-driven. A society cannot be free if “almost one third of Asian American adults fear physical violence against them”(7); a violence that has since taken a rising-number of innocent Asian Lives. Vicha Ratanapakdee, Xiaojie Tan, Christina Yuna Lee... It cannot be free if the Liberties of Black Americans are disproportionately suppressed in a biased legal system, causing them to make up “35% of those incarcerated despite comprising only 13% of the United States”(5). It cannot be free if the Native American Pursuit of Happiness is hindered by “poverty rates of 25.4%”(3), the highest of any ethnic group.

Outside of America, these natural rights are similarly disregarded. Different political views mean subjection to “arbitrary arrest, punishment, and torture in North Korea”(1). Those of different religions or ethnicities may become one of the 43,000 victims in the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar(8). Ultimately, behind each of these failures to protect individuals' natural rights is a history of disrespect for the cultural “other”, one that causes the rights of those people to be neglected. Whether prompted by recent events like the Coronavirus, in the case of Asian

Americans or resulting from a history of ostracization and dehumanization, this foundation of inequality inevitably prevents the procurement of a free society.

However, while the fate of the characters in *Animal Farm* was far from optimistic, ours remains unwritten; a pen dangling within the grasp of our own hands. We must teach each other to accept our differences rather than overlook them. We must learn the importance of liberty and justice for all rather than a mere few. We must choose to fight for those whose ignorance is not willed, but forced by an oppressor. We must uphold our own and others rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is only in doing so that we can promote a society that is truly “free.”

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