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This would be a terrific book if it were better written. Its scope is admirable, beginning with a chapter on the history of the concept of human rights in the Western tradition of political philosophy and continuing with a chapter on the evolution of the quasi-legal forms and elaborations of the concept through the work of the United Nations in the twentieth century. There are conceptual chapters seeking to clarify what the concept is and how it might be grounded by philosophical argument, and there is a concluding chapter on global ethics. However, the style of writing is atrocious. Mahoney cannot trust himself to speak in his own voice. He peppers his text with lengthy and frequent quotations from others, most of which he does not explicate or explore. The text reads very like that of an inexperienced research student assembling an uncritical literature review before feeling confident enough to begin to develop a thesis of her own. While Mahoney’s research is thorough and the range of his reading very wide, he never succeeds in synthesizing his ideas into a readable thesis of his own. Here is a typical passage from page 184:

Most [theorists], however, share misgivings at the prospect of a world government, and would prefer to see, not global government, but some form of global civil society developing. Thus, Falk recognizes that “we are in transition from a world of states to a globalized order assuming some as yet undetermined structure of authority and influence” (Falk 2000: 236 n. 7). It may be true, as Trigg comments (2005: 128), that “it is a mistake to assume that morality, even the morality of nations, is only real if it takes on a political guise.” Yet Falk is surely correct in observing that “the overarching aim of normative commitment is to incorporate rights and justice into a framework of humane governance (Falk 2000: 10), whatever structure that framework may take. However, Trigg (2005: 128) may be given the final word here: “Whether or not international institutions should be set up to enforce a ‘cosmopolitan law,’ governments ought to be answerable to the people they represent, and those people should never forget their moral responsibility, any more than members of a government should” (p. 128).

Mahoney offers no further commentary on these quotations.

Even when Mahoney does allow his own views to emerge, they do so without sufficient argument to support them. For example, at the conclusion of the historical chapter, Mahoney claims that it was the Catholic Church that preserved the concept of human rights in the face of the onslaught of communism. Critics of the undemocratic forms of governance and sexist policies of that church will be surprised by that claim. It is striking also just how Eurocentric Mahoney’s account of the history of the concept of human rights is. In the light of the concluding chapter in which the world relevance of the concept is espoused, one might have hoped for an exploration of the concept or of cognate concepts in other cultural traditions. Mahoney does provide quotations from others on this issue in later chapters but never explores the issue in his own terms.

The chapter that seeks to clarify the concept of human rights, as opposed to civil rights, toys teasingly with such alternative views that they are one’s basic entitlements, or reasons for others to act in certain ways towards one, or one’s moral power to produce obligations in others, or socially constructed expectations. Mahoney comments on debates about whether rights precede duties or vice versa, whether rights talk is conducive to an individualistic form of life as opposed to a communitarian form, whether the apparent proliferation of rights-claims in Western societies is justified, and how rights-talk counters the utilitarian tendencies of public policy making in modern societies.

The chapter on how the reality of human rights is established admits that the concept first emerged in conjunction with religious belief in a God who established Natural Law and gave human beings the moral property of having rights. More recent theorists have attempted to ground them in the nature of the human person or the purposes of human life. But if such arguments are not religious, they...
are still metaphysical. I would think it better to see rights talk as the expression of a moral consensus reached, largely through the organs of the United Nations, by the world community. The United Nations itself saw human rights pragmatically as prerequisites for world peace. While many think that such non-metaphysical arguments may be as solid a grounding as is available for the concept of human rights, this is one question upon which Mahoney seems to have a view of his own. His theory is that the existence of human rights is based upon the fact of human dignity and that human dignity, in turn, is a product of 'the wonder of our being.' Because we have such capacities as rationality and self-reflective consciousness, we have a dignity unique in the natural world. Accordingly, we ought to be shown the respect that is expressed as acknowledgement of our fundamental rights. The problem with this argument is that the conclusion -- expressed in an 'ought' statement -- does not follow. Not only does it commit the naturalistic fallacy, but one could just as well conclude, as slave owners did, that these wonderful creatures would be useful and profitable possessions. A further problem with any argument that rests on the concept of human dignity is that it is circular. Do we have rights because we have dignity, or do we have dignity because we have rights? Perhaps our dignity just consists in our having rights and, if this is so, our dignity cannot be foundational for our rights.

The final chapter looks at the significance of the concept of human rights in a globalized world. Is there a global ethic to which it might be tied or does morality take differing and incommensurable forms in different cultures such that some forms are congenial to human rights and others not? The view that emerges from the many sources that Mahoney cites is that the discourse of human rights is a valid global moral currency through which local practices can be evaluated and global policies developed. It is of particular relevance to the problems of world poverty, environmental justice and global health. Seeing the world as a global community inevitably leads to the postulation of a cosmopolitan outlook in which every individual is morally as worthy as any other. Indeed, this is a direct implication of the concept of universal human rights. One problem is that another implication is that nation-states deserve fewer sovereign rights than they currently claim.

This book raises a great many important issues and can be used as a guide to the literature on them. However, if you want to read a brief, more accessible and well-argued text on such issues I would recommend Robert Paul Churchill's 2006 text, *Human Rights and Global Diversity*, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall).

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