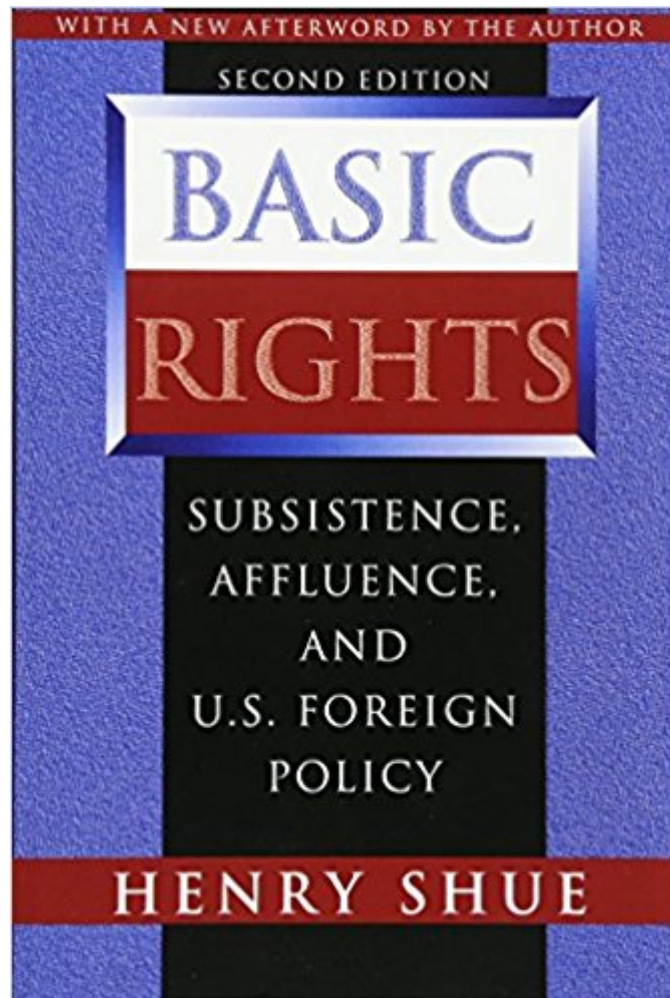




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Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, And U.S. Foreign Policy



Synopsis

Which human rights ought to be the first honored and the last sacrificed? In the first systematic attempt by an American philosopher to address the issue of human rights as it relates to U.S. foreign policy, Henry Shue proposes an original conception of basic rights that illuminates both the nature of moral rights generally and the determination of which specific rights are the basic ones.

Book Information

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This is one of the strongest arguments for an economic human right that I have found to date.

"With unrelenting logic Shue recommends that American law be broadened to require the termination of aid not merely to those governments that engage in shocking and outrageous conduct but to those countries indifferent to the rights of their citizens to food, shelter, and health care. . . . Shue has written the classical statement affirming that the rich nations are required by justice and by international law to share their abundance with those millions who are chronically malnourished."--Former Congressman Father Robert F. Drinan, *Commonweal*"This is one of the strongest arguments for an economic human right that I have found to date."--Carl Wellman, *Human Rights Quarterly*

Excellent

Basic Rights is a sort of hybrid between a radical polemic and a subpar work on philosophical ethics. Shue's main goal is to make a case for some subset of human rights being "basic," meaning (as he defines it) that the fulfillment of the right is a precondition for literally every other human right (basic or not) being fulfilled. He identifies several such rights, including the rights to subsistence, physical security, freedom of movement, and participation in government. From there, he tries to identify who has the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill these rights, and what this obligation entails. Finally, he relates it to U.S. foreign policy. As a philosophical basis for applied ethics, the work suffers from insufficient nuance and a strident tone. Shue fails in his essential task of demonstrating that any rights are basic, partly because he fails to consider all of the implications of his own argument. For example, he claims that it is impossible to have any human rights in a dictatorship, because the dictator can take away subsistence, physical security, etc. at will. Shue fails to consider that this may also be true in a democracy. That a right can be taken away does not make it less of a right; if it did, there would be no such thing as rights. Shue does not seem to understand the difference between metaphysics and practical objections. Shue's next core argument is still more problematic. He claims that subsistence rights are so basic, that there is a universal obligation to fulfill them. And not just any obligation, but an obligation to sacrifice everything short of subsistence to fulfill this right for other people. If necessary, people in Country A have a moral duty to sacrifice their television sets, their computers, their banjos, their ketchup, etc. so that the starving in Country B can eat. Although Shue's humanitarian motive is commendable, his ethical argument is indefensible. He never considers any of the myriad intervening variables that might justify someone in Country A from disclaiming complete responsibility for the subsistence of a malnourished individual in Country B. The fundamental problem with this book may be that Shue's dogma clouds his ability to consider the nuances and counterarguments involved in a very complex moral issue. He is so dead-set on getting those starving people fed that he is willing to overlook the most basic objections to his arguments. In summary, it is not a competent argument, and not worth reading, unless you are looking for an exercise in refuting a poor line of reasoning.

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