

compos mentis

Human Standards of Commodious Living

Hamzaullah Khan

University of Michigan-Flint

ABSTRACT

Basic rights aren't being protect within society in the ways that they should be. In addition to lack of protection, basic rights aren't being viewed as equal to each other. This perception of right inequality leads to certain rights being under protected and eventually forfeited by society. One example of a right that isn't seen as worthy of protection in the way it should is the right to material goods. Every member of society should be guaranteed access to basic material goods such as food and water. These basic rights are not just demanded for the good of the individual, but for the good of society as a whole. Without the protection of all basic rights members of society cannot reach their full potential or live commodious lives.

KEYWORDS

Commodious Living, Basic Rights, Material Rights, Physical Security

I. INTRODUCTION

The intent of this essay is to outline the most basic standards that every human being must demand from their society in order to live commodiously. These standards will be mostly demanded from the commonwealth which that human being is a citizen of. I will address the demands as two different categories; rights and commodities. Rights will include the moral and social standards that the commonwealth must uphold and commodities will include the institutions and material goods guaranteed by rights.

Henry Shue does a great job of outlining the need for morality and basic rights in his appropriately named book *Basic Rights*. We will use his definition of basic rights for the understanding of this essay. Shue describes basic rights as "everyone's minimum reasonable demands upon the rest of humanity (Shue 1996 653). Basic rights are an understanding amongst humanity that I will not transgress against you in this way and you shall not transgress against me in the same way. For example, it's not unreasonable to ask my fellow man not to rape or kill me.

II. HUMAN CLAIM TO BASIC RIGHTS

Before we analyze the basic human rights deserved by each and every citizen we must first understand the importance of rights and our claim to them as human beings. Shue says, " One of the chief purposes of morality in general, and certainly of conception of rights, and basic rights above all, is indeed to provide some minimal protection against other helplessness to those too weak to protect themselves. Basic rights are a shield of the defenseless against at least some of the more devastating and more common of life's threats...(Shue 1996 652)." Basic rights are the very foundation of commodious living because without the protection of basic rights one could never live to their full potential let alone live a comfortable life.

III. BASIC RIGHT TO PHYSICAL SECURITY

Now that we understand what basic rights are and the need for them in a commodious life I will offer an example for one of the most important human rights. In my opinion physical security and the right to be protected from assault of my person or property is the most basic right and the most crucial to living a commodious life. It is easy to see why assault can be detrimental to commodious living. Imagine you're sitting in the perceived safety of your own home watching

television. Right before you head off to bed a masked man invades your home and attacks you before stealing your property. Not only was your night ruined and your rights violated, but now you suffer from physical/psychological pain and your property is gone. No reasonable person would be comfortable with home invasion and therefore couldn't live commodiously under those circumstances.

One important thing to point out in the aforementioned example is that through the violation of your right to physical security many other rights, such as rights to property and privacy, were also violated. Without the protection of physical security no other right can be protected and no material good can be enjoyed because at any time an individual or institution could take them away. It can be said that physical security is a "necessary condition for the exercise of any other right (Shue 1996 655)."

IV. BASIC RIGHT TO MATERIAL GOODS

Commodious living requires more than just protection from assault and security of my property. Commodious living also requires the right to property, at least basic shelter/food/water. Without the aforementioned you wouldn't be living commodiously, or living at all for that matter. The right to these basic material goods is the same as the right to live, much like the right to not be murdered is the right to live. Without the protected right to these material goods it would be impossible to enjoy any basic right and even worse it would push others to violate the basic rights of their fellow man. Could I really blame a starving man for violating my rights to fill his empty belly? So not only are rights to material goods important to commodious living as an individual but it is also an important right in regards to living commodiously as a society. For this reason it should fall on the Commonwealth/society to protect these rights.

V. PARALLELS BETWEEN RIGHTS TO SECURITY AND GOODS

I agree with Shue that, especially in the US, it is sometimes more difficult to grasp the understanding of material goods as rights. But for the same reasons security is a right, if we don't have food or water we cannot exercise or enjoy any other right. The lack of basic material goods have the potential to be just as fatal and hindering to commodious living as assault. In fact, a military tactic that has been around since there have been humans violating other humans rights is "The Siege." To lay siege to a city is to surround the area and deprive the citizens of

any resources in or out of the occupied area. Sooner or later the city will run out of clean water, food, clothes, leading to death or surrender without any assault taking place. Therefore, basic material goods are a crucial right to commodious living.

One of the biggest reasons it's important to recognize access to basic material goods as a human right is because it needs to be protected in the same way other rights are protected. Physical security is a great example of a right that sees a sufficient amount of protection as far as setting up government institutions to ensure that right. In one city there might be three or four police agencies operating in the same jurisdiction to ensure citizen's right to security is not infringed. There are city, county, state, and federal police all working together to establish a secure area in almost every city or town across America.

Unlike the right to physical security, the right to basic material goods aren't being protected in the same way or in some cases at all. An example of this lack of protection for basic rights is the situation of water in the City of Flint. For years the water in Flint was known to be unsafe to use, yet no government institution stepped in to protect citizens right to clean water. Local and national charities provided clean drinking water until eventually, after irreversible damage was done, the Army National Guard was sent in to distribute water.

VI. PROTECTION OF RIGHTS

Another reason why this parallel between the right to physical security and the right to basic material goods is such an important area of discussion is because the common wealth and society need to determine which parts of the government are responsible for protecting rights. When it comes to filling private prisons with young men Flint has no shortage of city, county, state, and federal agents policing the streets. But when it came time to point fingers in regards to who was responsible for pregnant mothers drinking lead polluted water, the federal government looked to the state and the state looked to the county and the county looked to the city and the city looked right back to the state. Just like the responsibility for protecting rights to security fall on every level of government I would argue that same responsibility falls on every level to protect rights to basic materials goods.

An important fact to note when discussing the Flint water crisis is that the water situation is no accident. Much like a masked intruder is responsible for breaking

and entering into your home, someone had to violate your rights by dumping contaminants into the Flint river. For decades factories would dump untreated waste into the river and with loose environmental laws there was nothing to protect the people from eventually ingesting those harmful chemicals and forms of waste. This lack of environmental protection is more detrimental to society than if there was no protection against assault or breaking and entering. Assault might affect two or three people in a neighborhood but when the water is poison the whole city suffers. Furthermore, reports show that the state Department of Environmental Quality wasn't treating the Flint River water with an anti-corrosive agent (Ganim 2016). This type of water treatment is mandatory by federal law. Because the water was corrosive it eroded lead pipes causing the drinking water to become even more poisonous. The lack of enforcement of environmental laws already on the books would be similar to police not defending you from assault in your own home.

VII. CONCLUSION

When looked at from the perspective of a basic right, it seems ridiculous that material goods aren't guaranteed in the same way physical rights are. No person should be subject to assault or robbery much like no citizen should be impacted by contaminated water, especially if it can be easily avoided if protected in the same way as other rights. If material goods are viewed as a right and not a privilege, existing laws would be enforced and negligent parties could be held responsible. A society cannot live commodiously until both physical and material rights are guaranteed and protected to the greatest of our ability.

REFERENCES

Ganim, Sara, Linh Tran. 2016. "How Flint, Michigan's Tap Water Became Toxic."
CNN, Cable News Network

Shue, Henry. 1996. *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy*.
Princeton Univ.Press.