

# The Right to Excellence Illumination and Human Rights

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## **Abstract**

In the classical Greek thought, the notion of “right” was concomitant with the “truth”. In the modern era, however, the notion of “right” became intertwined with the primacy of “possessive individuality”. This primacy was, however, from the outset intellectually challenged. In the light of challenges posed, and by invoking the commonalities between Shahaboddin Suhrawardi and Martin Heidegger, the right to excellence is envisioned here as a maximal theory of “human rights”.

**Keywords:** Human rights, Excellence, Illumination, Red Reason, Flight, Rupture, Resoluteness, Suhrawardi, Heidegger.

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## **Introduction**

In his examination of the modern notion of “human rights”, Jack Donnelly argues that “human needs” define “human nature”, which itself in turn gives rise to “human rights”. This approach, however, is not, according to Donnelly, helpful because the concept of “human needs” is almost as obscure as is “human nature”. Human needs are obscure because science gives us a very limited set of needs; whereas if we look beyond science, the concept of “needs” assume a metaphorical or moral meaning, which leads us back to philosophical disputes about human nature. Therefore, so concludes Donnelly, to understand the source of human rights, one must turn to philosophy. Accordingly, Donnelly suggests that “human rights” are needed “for a life worthy of a human being”, and the human nature that grounds such rights is “a moral account of human possibility.” Human rights, therefore, represent a social choice of a particular moral vision of human potentiality. (Freedman, 1994: 502- 514)

Donnelly’s vision of human rights pertains to an implication regarding what human rights can mean beside, or beyond, the current prevailing implications. Here such implication is pursued under the notion of the *right to excellence* by invoking the philosophies of the Iranian philosopher Shahaboddin Suhrawardi (d. 1191, A.D), and the German thinker Martin Heidegger. (d. 1976. A.D). To do this, first the relationship between the notion of “being human” and the notion of “right” in the history of western thought is briefly analyzed, then the critiques of modern possessive notion of Human Rights is reviewed. Finally, the notion of “Right to Excellence” is proposed.

### **A. “Man” and “Rights” in the Western Thought**

In the history of western thought the relationship between “man” and “rights” can be identified as having been of two kinds, namely attributive and possessive. The first kind characterizes the classical period of Greek thought and the second one characterizes the modern era.

1. The Classic Greek thinkers believed in unwritten “laws” which, in their view, were innate in nature. They considered the nature to be ordered and teleological, and, accordingly, human beings were conceived as “social” by nature. “Law” meant that there are certain unchangeable

and rational principles in social life which provide the norms necessary for the fulfillment of ethically determined goals. This in turn pertained to what the Greeks considered as the “right way to live.” (Ullman, 1970) Hence, in Crito, Plato defines “rightness” as “correctness” or “justness”:

...or do we believe that this part of us, whatever it may be, in which right and wrong operate, is of less importance than the body...what we ought to consider is...how we stand with the expert in right and wrong. (Plato, 1968, Crito: 48 a – 50 b )

According to such conception, the notion of “good life” was conceptualized by Aristotle as the "right political" order:

[A]ll persons ought to endeavor to follow what is right, and not what is established... . Nor is it, moreover, right to permit written laws always to remain without alteration. (Aristotle, 1928: 1269a)

2. In the modern era, however, “man” was defined as a self - sufficient being, and the notion of right assumed a new connotation, namely a “possessive” one. Accordingly man was considered as “having rights”. Hobbes was the first thinker who applied nominalism along with atomism for an individualistic theory of rights (Taminiaux, 1990: 6). After Hobbes, John Locke, inspired by a religious interpretation, regarded ‘the Nature’ as something molded by God and his creature. Extending the notion of individualism to the relationship between man and the world, Locke’s interpretation of “rights” takes an explicitly possessive turn. This interpretation holds that “right” is a human possession and, according to the Natural Law, Man is the owner of the Right. Locke held all men to be equal in “nature” and “capacity”. He hence postulated a particular relationship between God, nature, individual reason, law, and possession:

God having made Man, and planted in him, as in other animals, a strong desire of Self-preservation... directed him by his Sense and Reason... to the use of those things, which were serviceable for his Subsistence. ... . Man had a right to use of Creatures, by the will and Grant of God .. . And thus Man's property in the Creatures, was founded upon the right he had.... (Locke, 1965: I. Para. 86)

Hence, in modern political philosophy, “right” became an ancillary to Man’s possessive characteristic and he was defined in terms of this attribute. Therefore, “Right” was used to determine how to possess,

instead of how to be.

By this trend of thought, a possessive relation prevailed between Man and Right, and, therefore, “having Rights” replaced “being Right”. This was a paradigm shift compared to the classic notion of “natural right” as proposed by Plato and Aristotle, for whom, the notion of “Right” signified the “essence” and “truth” of things.

Such paradigm shift from the classic paradigm continued through the works of Kant and Hegel and had significant implication for European political philosophy. Philosophical arguments for the possessive sense of “right” were first proposed by Kant and then by Hegel. In his moral philosophy, Kant gave a central role to human “personal will” and regarded liberty as a property possessed by causation of the will (Rundell, 1987: 21). In the same vein, Hegel recognized Right as the immediate incarnation of Freedom, and as something connected to the ownership. He linked the concepts of “individual identity”, “liberty” and “ownership” to the concept of “idea”, which is the substance of being. Hegel then regarded the Right of ownership as the realization of that linkage: “as a Free Will, I am the subject of myself in what I possess, and hence for the first time I am a real Will there” (Hegel, 1967: Para.45).

3. Thus, unlike the classical perspective in which “the whole” took precedence over “the parts”, modern theories assigned primacy to the idea of “natural rights”, in the context of “individual rights”. This then delineated the nature of suitable political institutions. Against this backdrop, the modern idea of “man” – as an individual – and, in turn, the modern idea of “right”, can be viewed in an interactive context with such many-sided intellectual and institutional entities as religion, philosophy, church, government, political philosophy, and rights.

## **B. The Critique of Possessive Rights**

1. At the 12th century, prior to the rise of possessive individualism, William of Ockham had lashed out against the idea of “ownership” as the root cause of human ills. (Dumont, 1986: 65) After Ockham, in the 18th century, Rousseau echoed Ockham's concern when he wrote:

The first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him,

was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared by someone who, uprooting the stakes or filling in the ditch, had shouted to his fellow-men: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are lost if you forget that the fruits belong to all and the earth to no one (Rousseau, 1964: 141).

Ironically enough, Hegel too ardently criticized individualistic-possessive conception of “human rights”. He argued that:

Particularity by itself, given rein in every direction to satisfy its needs, accidental caprices, and subjective desires, destroys itself and its substantive concept in this process of gratification. ... [Such] civil society affords a spectacle of extravagance and want as well as of the physical and ethical degeneration common to them both. (Hegel, 1967: Paragraph, 45)

2. By the end of 19th century a number of western thinkers realized that a growing fundamental crisis is in the making, namely that the “human subject”, was itself being subjugated. This crisis was expressed first by Nietzsche, then by Max Weber, and then more explicitly by Martin Heidegger in early 20th century. Finally, at the end of the 20th century, Foucault, Derrida, Habermas and other European thinkers narrated this subjugation in different ways. Martin Heidegger regards the central role of ‘will to domination’ as the root of many human problems. According to him, Man is looking after safety and calmness; with reliance to such will to dominance. But the problem is that human life is itself brought to be endangered and the achieved safety and calmness is terribly shaking:

Today, man is subordinated to an extending power which is a reflection of dominance. Globalization of imperialism and violence of technology are instantiations of this dominance. (Heidegger, 1935: 3)

As the result, Heidegger thinks “being” is realized in Ge-stell, where, by technological formalization, things do not appear as they are; but rather they appear and are identified by being utilized. The Nature becomes the raw material for industrial production; Man becomes the work power in the industrial system, and everyone becomes a “consumer”. Therefore everything, Man, things, living, and understanding, are subordinate to the will which is realized in Ge-stell.

After Heidegger, in discussing the question of “formation of the modern subject”, Michael Foucault indicates that modern subject is actually an

object, namely that which is constructed by discourse and is “the site of” the exertion of the modern cultural acts. This means that contrary to those who had argued for the predominance of the “subject”, Foucault discovered the actuality of "the subjugated subject" in modern era. (Foucault, 1988: 57-84)

Jurgen Habermas too, by regarding modern egoism as a major theoretical fallacy has criticized possessive notion of human rights. He argues that the notion of “individuality” is paradoxically comprised of an existential as well as a logical dimension. This is clearly manifested in the case of Hobbes' delineation of the process of formation of social contract. According to Habermas, in the formation of social contract, there is an implicit recognition of intersubjectivity which precedes any individual participation in signing the contract. With the same token, Kant’s central notion of “subject” suffers from the same defect. Kant believed that the right of a single individual should be distinguished within the context of a legal system, so that both the freedom of every member of the society as a human being, and his equal status as an ego, can find their concrete manifestation. (Habermas, 1992: 92-93)

### **C. Illumination and the Right to Excellence**

Illumination (*ishragh*, *Lichtung*) is the central notion in Suhrawardi and Hedegger’s thought. According to Suhrawardi, man is not merely a corporeal terrestrial being, but is actually an “abstract light” not alone in his journey from the beyond, but accompanied by theoretical reason. As such, Suhrawardi considers the rational-self as the ray and also the manifestation of the sacred in the world.

In one of Suhrawardi’s discourses named Red Reason (*Aql-e Sorkh*), a crimson-faced man gives an account of man’s original creation with a white and luminous countenance, and ascribes his present crimson face to his mingling with the darkness of this world. The Luminous Gem (*Gohar-e Shab Afruz*), the first object of creation, is said to be the Reason, which is the agent of Illumination (*ishraq*), that against the disastrous consequences of its improper use one must, however, guard. (ibid: 230)

As such, man is an existential continuum, stretching from a pre-eternal past to an eternal future. In his journey from the other world to this

earthly sphere, man is accompanied by the Reason. The essence of man's soul is immaterial light, a light emanating from the divine light and capable of knowing its true self. A pure light, of the same essence as angels, whose difference from other divine lights derives from its distance to the Light of Lights, or Absolute Light, or God.

Suhrawardi' views human life as a journey which begins with falling away from an original essence, and drifting into bewilderment and homelessness:

We hail from transoxiana (*mawara' al-nahr*, that which lies beyond the river), from absolute light, the infinite ocean of absolute light, from the unknown land (*na Kojā abad*). (Suhrawardi, 2001: Vol. 3: 228)

Heidegger, on the other hand, derives the notion of *eksistenz* from Greek *ek-stasis* which means "rupture". *Ek-sistenz* means to stand outside of oneself in the light of Being which is

[T]he locus where man's essence preserves the origin of his determination. In other words, man is the locus of the illumination (*Lichtung*) of Being. (Smith, 1996: 245-247)

Man can hence be conceived of as "natural light". Things come to light through him. This is due to two factors, first, man is concerned about his own being. Secondly, he projects himself by understanding "possibilities". This possibility is envisioned by both Heidegger and Suhrawardi in such a way that can be named Excellence.

### 1. Excellence

Echoing Aristotle, Suhrawardi holds that one has to come to the knowledge of his own "self" (من) before becoming capable of gaining knowledge of other phenomena. Unlike both classical and modern notions of man, Suhrawardi understands the meaning of "being human" in man's liberation from his alienated existence (*Ghorbate Gharbi/غرابت غربي*). On a practical level, this "self" is the source of lofty aspirations that have been shrouded in the veil of temptations arising from man's transitional (*barzakhi/برزخي*) dimension. As such, Suhrawardi can be considered as the first thinker who implied the notion of "alienation" in his philosophical anthropology. On the intellectual level, however, the "self" is the source of illumination. This is due to the fact that all creatures innately seek after

perfection by their “desire for light”. In other words, in his worldly existence, man is in a state of “occidental exile” or “Illuminationist exiguity”, though he is potentially capable of breaking away (ecstasy), or in Suhrawardian words, “flight” (پرواز) to the existential abode (Mount *Ghaaf*/كوه قاف). Suhrawardi describes this experience metaphorically, namely that in the course of descent to the lower world “man loses his wings” and is compelled to remain in exile until such time that he has grown fresh “wings”. This “rebirth” is what Suhrawardi calls “realization” (*Tahaghugh*/تحقق) which is as the perfection of being human. (ibid: 228)

According to Suhrawardi “Man” returns to his “homeland” (origin) through his dwelling in the nearness of Being; a dwelling achieved through a spiritual journey. In Suhrawardi’s mystical fables, the existential need for spiritual ascension is described in the language of the birds. Hoopoe in the Language of Ants stands for one who has attained to illumination. Flight is the *raison d’être* of man’s existence in this world, thus the mystical allegorization of man to a bird. Hoopoe is a cryptic allusion to Aql Mustafad (*Reasonus acquisitus*/عقل مستفاد) or “God’s Friend” (*Wali Allah*/ولی الله), who upon becoming aware of the birds’ desire for having a king, hastens to inform them about Phoenix (*Simorgh*/سپهرغ):

There is for us a king, who errs not; beyond a mountain, which is called *Ghaf*. His name is *Simorgh*, the king of birds; he is nigh, but we are far, far away from him. (Suhrawardi. In Abbasi, 2001: 263)

As such, the search for Simorgh is an existential quest for excellence; which means, being human pertains to an essential quality for transcendence and going beyond. Suhrawardi employs the metaphor of a bird, for the soul that has become free from the fetters of the body. He considers the soul to have the innate ability for embarking on an ascending curve toward perfection, where he would move from sheer potentiality to the level of Aql Mustafad and divine soul. Owing to the soul’s potential and necessary dimensions, Suhrawardi considers it as resembling a coin, with one side to the divine world and the other to the world of sensuality. The more one strives toward perfecting his soul, the more one becomes a mirror for reflecting the divine realities.

Heidegger, on the other hand, contends that “man” has not been properly pondered in the history of western thought. To him, the



metaphysical outlook has failed to grasp man's proper status. In his view, modern humanism, as a continuation of the metaphysics, has also fallen into the same trap:

Metaphysics thinks about man from his animal side rather than his human side..... [On the other hand,] [T]he highest humanist definition of human nature has yet to experience man's special value. [It] fails to accord man a lofty enough status. (Heidegger, 1946: 322, 329, 330)

Heidegger, instead offers an outlook which entails a different way of thinking about man. In his human ontology he uses the five notions of *Dasein*, *Eksistenz*, *Entschlossenheit*, *Geviert*, and *Gelassenheit*. According to the notion of *Dasein*, man is not independent from the world in which s/he lives. For, before anything else, man is a "being-in-the-world", meaning that s/he has an apriori ontological relationship with the world which conditions his being what it is.

Heidegger describes *Dasein* as being (*seinde*) for whom Being (*Sein*) is a matter of essential concern. In Heidegger's words: "Dasein" is the most fundamental characteristic of being and the ultimate aspect of being. *Dasein* is the possibility of freedom for the most certain power of being (*Seinkoennen*). (Heidegger, 1962: 135) So the truth is not discoverable but it is "dis-covering of being"; it is free appearance of beings i.e., entrance of beings to the clear sphere of the non-beings. Hence, *presence* is not the truth of being, because whence there is no chance for manifestation devoid of any domination, the truth of being remains covered. (Heidegger, 1979: 128) Therefore, whenever Man takes his position in relation to Being in a way which gives the chance of appearance to the being, the truth occurs in the clearness:

Freedom is not merely what is determined by ordinary understanding. It is not only a whim or impulse which appears sometimes in choice and moving this or that way. Freedom is not just the credential for what we can do or what we cannot. It is not just surrounding to the necessities on the other hand. But prior to these negative and positive bounds, freedom is participation in manifestation of Beings as such. (ibid)

Accordingly it can be said that freedom is the common territory of "Man" and "Being". Man realizes freedom via participating in manifestation of the Truth and meaning of Being. So, *Dasein* can behave as

a medium for Being, and help in realization of possibility of the manifestation of Being. Hence, freedom is participation in manifestation. (Heidegger, 1979).

Heidegger also explicates the structure of Dasein as being constituted by “givenness”, and Language, and in turn itself constitutes his life by understanding. Understanding is “projecting” the way to be. This happens constantly and man lives accordingly by actualizing certain possibilities. Dasein therefore always exists as a “not yet”. As such, Man, who, depending on the kind of his being, is a being who can manifest the meaning of Being. (Ibid: 381-383)

As such Dasein exists in a way that in its “being in the world” it continuously projects (*verstehen/understanding*) its possibilities (*Seinkoennen/competence*):

Dasein always has understood and will always understand himself according to possibilities. .... But as being possible... it is existentially that which it is not yet in its potentiality of being. (Heidegger, 1962: 37-56)

As such, and distinctively, man is the only being whose characteristic is “being possible”. In fact, possibility is manifested in man, whose identity is not in “possessing” but in “possibility”. It is according to such characteristic that one's own most possible way of living can be thought of as excellence.

As such, individualism, self-centeredness, and possessiveness are certain possibilities for Dasein's existence, but, according to Heidegger, they are not authentic existence, for they do not come from man himself. It is only in Resoluteness (*entschlossenheit*) that man understands being in accordance with “the meaning of being”. Resoluteness is neither the extension of an external determination, nor manifestation of a “will to power”; but it is an existential hosting (*Gelassenheit*); a “hosting” in which the relationship between man and his world is that of reception and not domination. *Gelassenheit* is, as such, experiencing the “coming to light” of beings. It, therefore, is the establishment of mutuality instead of an attempt to exercise mastery.

## 2. The Right to Excellence

As such, “Red Reason”, as a God-endowed capacity, is in fact an extension of a divine attribute. Man, in spite of his terrestrial nature, can strive to partake of this divine quality in proportion to his capacity.

Suhrawardi's Tahaghugh (realization) and Heidegger's Gelassenheit (Letting be) entail the Idea of Excellence as a “right”. These two notions pertain to Man's differentia in being oriented towards achieving “what it yet is not”. By the same token, it can be said that for these two thinkers, “excellence as a right” is what possession is for modern individualist-utilitarian thought. In other words, it is what any one, due to its humanity, has the right to be.

For Suhrawardi, the truth lies in the manifestation of the light of existence and Man is the site of that manifestation. The way of being which puts man in that site is pointed toward the being which Man can be. This is a rupture from the being which is predetermined for Man and instead achieving the place which is his right to be.

To Suhrawardi thus one's degree of humanity is commensurate with his existential relationship with God. Here, the “creatures” immutable ontological link to God is denied in exchange for an existential scheme where the degree of existence of a phenomenon is proportional to the amount of luminosity it receives from God (*Nur al-Anwar*: the Light of Lights). Thus, the extent of man's proximity to God – i.e. the possibility of his existential realization – is contingent upon his own endeavor.

This means that, as the topos of light, man is an existential “possibility”. Distortion or negation of this “possibility” is the denial of the right to be human. Man's being, therefore *implies* “rights”, *not necessitating* them. As such, existential realization (tahaghugh) is the link between “man” and “right” (hagh). Hagh, which comes from the Semitic word *Hoqq* and means “ruling”, is an “existential rule” coming to light through man. As such, “Right” is neither power, nor possession; neither domination, nor obligation.

Therefore, to the extent that man is the bearer of “ultimate light”, s/he is the media for unfolding the Being. To deny this potential is to deny a human right. Here, the *raison d'être* of right (hagh) is being a human, or being that which a man is potentially capable of. In fact, right is a

dialectical mediation for such ontological imperative. Hagh mediates the actualization (Tahghugh) of human being, the meaning of being human. Man's deprivation of such mediation is an ontological distortion of man's being. According to *eshraghi* anthropology, therefore, "right" is the manifestation of the authentic being of man. As such, authenticity is both "the right of being" and "being right".

Similarly, Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit*, which he has borrowed from the German mystic Meister Eckhart, means "ontological hosting" which itself can be interpreted as relating to other in such a way which is free from any inklings of domination. It is the establishment of a free relationship, instead of an attempt at mastery or desire to exercise power. As such, *Gelassenheit* is being in the world as to-let-be-with others. It is an acceptance of things not as we want them to be, but as being together as the meaning of being. With *Gelassenheit* man can have an authentic abode on earth, an abode in which man lives free from "will to dominate".

The cultivating of such a relationship is made possible within the context of the Foursome (*Geviert*), within the framework of a life free from the shackles of any form of domination. Being free from domination and exploitation calls for an excellence. It means to bask in the light of Being and to be the locus of the actualization of Being. In other words, it is man's right to guard Being:

..Being is never the merely precisely actual ... . Guardianship is vigilance, watchfulness for the has been and coming destiny of Being, a vigilance that issues from a long and ever-renewed thoughtful deliberateness, which heeds the directive that lies in the manner in which Being makes its appeal. (Heidegger, 1971: 149, 179)

The safeguarding of Being requires freedom from any inclination towards economic exploitation, and from individual, partisan, or ethnic agendas. Economic domination, political hegemony, destructive technology, and the like lead to a shattering of Being. To protect Being against such destruction is the right of being a human being. This right mediate man's rupture from its entangled preciseness to its actualization. As such it is The Right to Excellence, namely a maximal right for being human.

### Conclusion

While in its pre-modern connotation, "right" implied *a way of being*, its modern version has implied *possession*. The modern interpretation of man – with its overt or implicit definition of man – has placed emphasis upon that which *belongs* to man. So, right has become contingent upon man. In the Illuminationist understanding, however, the man/right relationship is inverted, and right is the manifestation of being, i.e. *humanness*. A comparison of the modern and the Illuminationist interpretations of man leads to the conclusion that modern man is an attenuated man. Individuality, willfulness, the lust for domination and possession, and the like have reduced man to a particular aspect of his being, which are not of necessity his preeminent characteristics. Thus, theories of rights deriving from such a view are bound to suffer from its inescapable reductionism. As a result, the rights they carve out for modern man, though being among the most essential (natural, rational, and normative), are nonetheless minimal human rights. The right to life, security, social equality, political openness and struggle against oppression, and welfare, should neither be seen as objects to be owned as human property, nor viewed as defining the sum total of what makes a human being. "Individuality" has a possessive relationship to right, thus it distorts the nature of human rights and dilutes them. Such reduction leads to a reification of human rights and transforms them into commodities. This outlook may be summed up as defining rights for man as that which he is in possession of. Contrary to such conception of *rights*, which advocate individualistic theory of human rights, the possibility of rights, which confer on man the potential for her/his realization, can be envisioned. Hence, notwithstanding rights such as self-preservation, freedom from domination, security, and welfare, which emanate specifically from the modern theory of "possessive man", human rights can be supplanted with different set of rights.

The "animal" in the "rational animal" and "the natural" in the Natural Right are consistent and both emerged from classical and modern reductionist anthropology. Suhrawardi and Heidegger, however, regard Man more than an animal and, therefore, his or her Right other than "natural". The reciprocity of Man and Being is realized in the symbolic "*neverland*" of Suhrawardi and the "poetic dwelling" of Heidegger, where,

Man's existence is free of dominations, free from subjugating and being subjugated. "Taking care of being" implies being free from economic, political and corrupted technological domination. "Sheltering being" from such a corruption is the Right of being human, which is, the right to excellence.

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