

The Origin, Differentiation and Role of Rights

1. Rights originate where existence originates. That which determines existence determines rights. *Rights* is defined as giving every being its due.
2. Since it has no further context of existence in the phenomenal order, the universe is self-referent in its being and self-normative in its actions. It is also the primary referent in the being and the activities of all derivative modes of being.
3. The universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not of objects to be exploited. As subjects each component of the universe is capable of having rights.
4. The natural world on planet Earth gets its rights from the same source that humans get their rights, from the universe that brought them into being.
5. Every component of the Earth community, both living and non-living, has three rights: the right to be, the right to habitat or a place to be, and the right to fulfill its role in the ever-renewing processes of the Earth community.
6. All rights in living forms are species specific and limited. Birds have bird rights. Insects have insect rights. Humans have human rights. Difference in rights is qualitative, not quantitative. The rights of an insect would be of no value to a tree or a fish.
7. Human rights do not cancel out the rights of other modes of being to exist in their natural state. Human property rights are not absolute. Property rights are simply a special relationship between a particular human "owner" and a particular piece of "property" so that both might fulfill their roles in the great community of existence.
8. Since species exist only in the form of individuals, rights refer to individuals and to those natural groupings of individuals into flocks, herds, packs, not simply in a general way to species.
9. These rights as presented here are based on the intrinsic relations that the various components of Earth have to each other. Planet Earth is a single community bound together with interdependent relationships. No living being nourishes itself. Each component of the Earth community is immediately or mediately dependent on every other member of the community for the nourishment and assistance it needs for its own survival. This mutual nourishment, which includes the predator-prey relationship, is integral with the role that each component of Earth has within the comprehensive community of existence.
10. In a special manner humans have not only a need for but a right of access to the natural world to provide not only the physical need of humans but also the wonder needed by human intelligence, the beauty needed by human imagination, and the intimacy needed by human emotions for personal fulfillment.

Thomas Berry, 01/11/01