



The Ancient and Religious Roots of the Idea of Human Rights

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Keywords	Abstract
Human rights democracy Pericles philosophy Epicurus Stoics	This text examines the historical and philosophical development of the concept of human rights from antiquity to modern times. It argues that human rights have evolved in close connection with social, political, cultural, and intellectual conditions of each historical period. Beginning with ancient Greek and Roman thought, the text highlights early democratic ideas, the contributions of the Sophists, and the contrasting views of philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who prioritized the state over the individual. It further explores religious perspectives that grounded human dignity and equality in divine or natural law. Modern liberal democracy is presented as a system that limits majority rule through the protection of fundamental human rights. The text emphasizes the international character of human rights, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while also stressing the importance of cultural and historical specificity. Ultimately, it concludes that human rights can only be sustainably protected in societies that consciously understand, accept, and actively struggle for them (UN, 1998).

Introduction

Human beings, as the highest and most advanced stage of living creatures on Earth, are the subjects of social activity and culture. For this reason, they constitute one of the eternal problems of philosophy. This is because every era has left its own imprint on the content of the concept of “human.” In the modern age as well, under conditions of scientific and technological progress and social dynamism, the human problem acquires even greater significance. The concept of “human”

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has emerged as a result of the long-lasting evolution of social development and the intellectual history of humanity.

The historical roots of the idea of human rights go back approximately to the 6th–5th centuries BCE. Even at that time, such ideas began to emerge in Athens and Rome. Although these ideas were not then called “human rights,” in essence they were the first rudiments of today’s human rights. As examples, one may cite the reforms carried out for the benefit of the people by Pericles of Athens, one of the earliest democrats, or the struggle between plebeians and patricians in Ancient Rome. However, at that time, what were understood as human rights applied only to slave owners, and slaves had no rights at all.

It is very likely that the idea that a person possesses rights that cannot be violated either by society or by the state emerged from the earliest periods of human societies. The ancient Greek philosophical schools associated with the Stoics and Epicureans, as well as the Roman thinker Cicero and his followers, placed human freedom, rights, and personal life above public interests and the political interests of the state.

In religious societies where belief in gods dominated social consciousness, the idea of human rights arose from “divine law,” or, as it was later emphasized, from “natural law.” “Divine law” stood above the ruler’s decrees and the rules established by society. In this case, a person acquired the right not to obey the unjust decree of an earthly ruler, because he or she was subject to the just judgment of “divine authority.” In monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—it is stated that human beings were created by God and that their lives depend solely on the will of the Great Creator. God created human beings “in His own image,” and humans reflect within themselves a particle of the Great Creator. It is also proclaimed that God created all people equal, and in the sacred books the oppression of human beings and the trampling of their dignity are declared great crimes (Huseynov et al, 2025).

Thus, in ancient Athens, in a fully “democratic” manner, based on the majority vote of the city’s population, the great philosopher Socrates was sentenced to death for irritating everyone with his critical ideas. The Athenian state deprived Socrates of his right to life. If we do not take the idea of human rights into account, this was entirely lawful (Huseynov, 2025). Similarly, in the 1930s in Germany, anti-Jewish decrees were issued in a legal manner, or in the USSR, people who expressed their opinions about the government were imprisoned or sent into exile. The main essence of the historical struggle for human rights is to ensure that the state is not given the opportunity to encroach upon or restrict a person’s rights to live, to freely express opinions, to own property, to appeal to a lawful and just court, and so on.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theoretical, and comparative methodological approach grounded in philosophical and historical analysis. Primary and secondary philosophical texts from ancient,



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religious, and modern traditions are examined to trace the evolution of human rights concepts across different historical periods. The method involves interpretative analysis of key thinkers—such as the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Hegel—to identify how their ideas reflect changing social and political conditions. Comparative analysis is used to contrast ancient democratic models with modern liberal democracy, particularly regarding the limitation of state power and majority rule through human rights. Normative analysis of international legal frameworks, especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is applied to assess the universal versus culturally specific dimensions of human rights (Aliyev, 2007). Throughout the study, contextualization is emphasized, situating philosophical ideas within their socio-political environments. This integrative approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of human rights as historically conditioned yet normatively universal principles.

Results and discussion

The ideas and thoughts that prevailed in every historical period, along with the socio-political conditions and modes of thinking of that era, have influenced the formation of human rights. For this reason, the criteria, level of thought, and accepted principles concerning human rights in one period cannot be equated with the views on human rights of earlier or later periods.

In democratic countries, human rights serve to limit the rule of the majority. No majority may adopt a law that violates human rights. Modern democracy differs from ancient Athenian democracy precisely in this respect. Therefore, today a democratic regime means that, through properly conducted elections, the rule of the majority is established in a country, but this rule is restricted by human rights. Such a form of democracy is called liberal democracy.

A violation of human rights in one state is sometimes not considered a rights violation in another. In general, it should be noted that in the modern era human rights have reached such a level that this term now implies the same rights in all states. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights envisages not the application of human rights to different individuals in varying degrees, but their equal and uniform application to everyone (UN, 1948). Thus, the unambiguous understanding of human rights in all states—regardless of their geographical and cultural affiliation, or their social and political systems—proves the international character of these rights.

As noted, in general, a person is understood as a social being whose rights are realized in social practice. An individual isolated from society and from the socio-political environment as a whole is deprived of the possibility of realizing his or her rights. Since human rights are realized within socio-political, economic, and cultural relations, the existence of democratic principles in these relations results in the highest level of protection of human rights (Sagikhanli, 2003).

Genuine democracy contradicts the notion of human rights being exported from a single center and imposed on peoples and societies as “universally accepted standards” in the form of schematic projects. Both logically and in reality, democracy and human rights cannot exist outside specificity,



including national-cultural, historical-traditional, and religious characteristics. Perhaps deeply understanding the importance of these characteristics, Bernard Shaw once said that the level of democracy cannot be higher than the “human material” of a society.

On the other hand, it must be noted that if the state has obligations toward the individual, the individual also has duties toward the state. The existence of such mutual rights and obligations characterizes citizen–state relations, which are more progressive than mere individual–state relations. Naturally, in return for the rights whose fulfillment the citizen demands from the state, he or she must serve the state with honor and dignity (CID, 2005). Defining the boundaries of rights is extremely important. The limits of human rights are mainly enshrined in international legal documents and in the normative legal acts of states (Huseynov et al, 2025).

Undoubtedly, if a person exceeds the limits of freedom, he or she may be punished and deprived of liberty. But what is freedom? What constitutes its socio-philosophical essence? Research and analyses conducted in this direction have not produced a unanimous view; on the contrary, they have deepened the diversity of opinions. In this regard, Montesquieu once said: “No other word has been given so many different meanings and left such varied impressions in people’s minds as freedom.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau devoted almost his entire work *The Social Contract* to clarifying the idea that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

Reflecting on the historically widespread master–slave relations that were accepted by the majority, and considering them incompatible with law, the modern state, and civil society, Hegel wrote: “In general, a human being becomes the object of law only as a being. At the foundation of law lies the freedom of the individual taken separately, and law consists in the fact that I treat others as free beings. Reason demands the observance of law. Everyone is essentially a free person; to respect another means to respect oneself. It is precisely this that leads to the conclusion that when the right of one person is violated, everyone is offended.” Although concepts such as freedom, individuality, equality, and rights were alien to people of the ancient world, the roots of ideas such as free thought and humanism go back to ancient Greek civilization. Thus, in Greek philosophy—which for a long time sought answers to questions such as the origin of nature while remaining indifferent to human beings and their problems and needs—a new movement emerged: Sophism. The Sophists believed that it was meaningless to investigate endless hypotheses about the creation of the universe and argued that human beings should stand at the center of thought. According to them, the state was created by people in order to provide for them; that is, the state is a means to ensure human happiness.

Among the Sophists, Protagoras emphasized that knowledge of the state should not belong to a specific group but to all citizens; Antiphon opposed the aristocrat–commoner distinction and put forward the claim that everyone is equal by birth. Alcidas, in turn, objected to the concept of master and slave with the assertion that “God has given freedom to everyone; nature has made no one a slave.” Two particularly important points are emphasized in Sophist thought:



- “The human being is the most important goal. The state may be limited for the sake of human goals.”
- “People are equal and free. Discrimination among them is not justified.”

These two points, which encompass the idea of human rights, posed a threat to the already established way of life in Greece and were met with hostility and criticism. In order to restore the authority of the state that had been shaken by the Sophists, new philosophical currents began to emerge. The most prominent representatives of these currents were Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates.

For Socrates, the fundamental value is the *polis* (used in the sense of the city-state; here it refers to the politically and socially organized part of the people). In the struggle against surrounding injustices, no harm should come to the *polis*, and its laws should be obeyed even if they are unjust.

Plato, on the other hand, divided society into three classes: rulers, workers, and warriors. The workers should produce, the warriors should protect society, and those at the top—the rulers—should govern society. According to Plato, the duties and rights of each class are clearly defined, and they must not go beyond their established boundaries. He believed that what is “just” is “that which serves the interests of the state.” Similarly, Aristotle, like Plato, gave precedence to the state over the individual and considered the whole more important than the part.

In one of his famous works, *The Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel notes: “The fact that the freedom of one person exists in another unites these people inwardly. By contrast, needs and necessities bring them together only outwardly. Therefore, people strive to find themselves in one another. However, this cannot occur so long as they remain in their naturalness and immediacy, for it is precisely these qualities that separate people and prevent one from being free in relation to another. Therefore, freedom requires that everyone who becomes self-conscious neither allows their own naturalness to assert itself nor tolerates the naturalness of others. Thus, freedom can be attained only through struggle.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to state that the only solution to problems in the field of human rights within society is to increase society’s sensitivity toward them. That is, it is not possible to solve the problem by fully implementing human rights in a society that is not ready for them. The solution lies solely in this factor being understood and accepted by all people. This understanding must be voluntary; otherwise, the foundation of the values that are meant to be understood will be undermined. Finally, let us keep in mind that human rights remain lasting and stable only in those societies that have struggled for their rights.



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