The Oxford Handbook of Economic and Social Rights

Malcolm Langford (ed.), Katharine G. Young (ed.)

No cover image https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197550021.001.0001

Published: 2022 **Online ISBN:** 9780197550052 **Print ISBN:** 9780197550021

Search in this book

available

CHAPTER

Moral Grounds for Economic and Social Rights 3

James W. Nickel

https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197550021.013.83

Published: 22 May 2023

Abstract

This chapter considers possible moral grounds for recognizing and realizing economic and social rights (ESRs) as human rights. It begins by suggesting that ESRs fall into three families: (1) welfare-oriented ESRs, which protect adequate income, education, health, and safe and healthful working conditions; (2) freedom-oriented ESRs, which prohibit slavery, ensure free choice of employment, and protect workers' freedoms to organize and strike: and (3) fairness-oriented ESRs, which require nondiscrimination and equal opportunity in the workplace along with fair remuneration for one's work. To accommodate the normative diversity found in these three families, the chapter suggests a pluralistic justificatory framework that appeals to three kinds of moral reasons: human welfare, freedom, and fairness. A final section considers the possibility of subsuming all three of these approaches to justification under the idea of human dignity or the associated idea of equal respect for persons.

Keywords: human rights, human welfare, fairness, freedom, agency, human dignity

Subject: Constitutional and Administrative Law, Law and Society, Human Rights and Immigration, Law

Series: Oxford Handbooks

Collection: Oxford Handbooks Online

Are there plausible moral grounds for taking economic and social rights (ESRs) seriously as human rights? To answer this question positively, this chapter reviews a number of attempts to provide moral grounds for ESRs and sketches a pluralistic justificatory framework. Familiar objections to ESRs such as those offered by Cranston 1967, Frederick 2010, and O'Neil 2005, 2010 are not addressed. Responses to such objections are found in Beetham 1995, Beitz 2015, Nickel 2006, 2019, and Shue 1996.

The idea of economic and social rights, in the form that it takes today, can be found in the declarations and treaties of the international human rights movement, 1940–1999. For example, the 1948 American Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the same year advocated

rights to an adequate standard of living, social security, health services, education, access to work and economic opportunities, and safe and fair working conditions. To make these norms part of international human rights law, the United Nations created in 1966 the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. This treaty has been ratified by about three-quarters of the world's countries. Regional ESR treaties also exist within the European and Inter-American human rights systems.

If we take the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights as our guide to the list of specific ESRs, we find rights to:

- · adequate income or services to cover food, water, clothing, and shelter
- · basic health conditions and services
- free public education
- · freedom from slavery and forced labor
- freedom to work, choose one's occupation, and have adequate opportunities for remunerative employment
- · fair pay and decent conditions of work
- equality for women in the workplace, including equal pay for equal work
- · adequate rest and leisure
- · freedom to form trade unions and to strike
- · social security
- · special protections for mothers and children
- · nondiscrimination in respecting, protecting, and fulfilling these ESRs.

A careful look at these specific ESRs reveals that they cover a wide variety of normative areas. It is illuminating to group these ESRs into three families:

- (1) welfare-oriented ESRs, which protect adequate income, education, health, maternal and children's health, access to opportunities for remunerative work, safe and healthful working conditions, and adequate rest and leisure
- (2) *freedom-oriented ESRs*, which prohibit slavery, ensure free choice of employment, and protect workers' freedoms to organize and strike
- (3) fairness-oriented ESRs, which require nondiscrimination and equal opportunity in the workplace along with fair remuneration for one's work

If lists of ESRs were to be revised today, they might also address sustainable economic development in low-income countries and include rights to a safe environment; sanitation; consumer protection; equality of opportunity; economic liberties beyond working, striking, and consuming; and possibly even a right to a universal basic income (Van Parijs 1998).

Many philosophical discussions of ESRs have focused exclusively on "subsistence" (for example, Shue 1996, Rawls 1999, Orend 2002). This approach arguably focuses on the most important ESRs. But an exclusive focus on subsistence is incomplete because it neglects the second and third families of ESRs previously mentioned. Once we recognize that ESRs involve issues of freedom, nondiscrimination, equal opportunity,

and fair wages, it becomes clear that ESRs are not just concerned with provision for basic needs or income transfers. In consequence, it is not plausible to think of ESRs as just "welfare rights" and to hold that the main moral ground for these rights is an altruistic concern for the welfare of all human beings. ESRs are grounded in several different moral values and norms that generally work together but which also can generate conflicts.

For ESRs to be human rights in the standard sense, they must share the main characteristics of human rights generally. These general features, I submit, are: (1) being *rights* where this includes having a mandatory character that is present or emerging; (2) being universal in the sense of applying to all people everywhere; and (3) having high priority or weight. I will argue that most ESRs can satisfy these criteria. Further, good justifications for ESRs must be capable of supporting all three of these features.

ESRs as rights. For ESRs to be human rights, it must be plausible to formulate them as rights, that is, as norms that prescribe the availability of some freedom, protection, status, or benefit to some party or parties. Let's call these beneficiaries the *right holders*. Most if not all human rights are "claim rights"—ones that impose duties on some person or organization. Let's call these parties the *duty bearers*. The associated duties direct the duty bearers to act in specified ways—such as complying, protecting, and promoting the availability to the right holder(s) of the freedom, protection, status, or benefit that the right prescribes. Finally, rights typically give the right holder control over whether the right is activated or waived in situations where it applies. This power gives most rights, including most ESRs, an inherent freedom dimension. So does the power to invoke remedies when one's ESRs have been violated or insufficiently fulfilled.

ESRs as universal. For ESRs to be human rights, they need to be universal in roughly the same way that other human rights are. Part of the general idea of human rights is that all living persons are the right holders. One does not need to be a particular kind of person, a member of some group or religion, or a citizen of a country with appropriate laws to have human rights.

ESRs as high priority. For ESRs to be human rights, they must have sufficient priority or weight to prevail most of the time when they compete with other rights and with important considerations such as national security, prosperity, and economic sustainability. To have high priority, human rights need to prescribe freedoms, protections, status, or benefits that are extremely important and valuable to people. Having high priority does not, however, require being absolute in the sense of being able to outweigh all other considerations.

1. Moral Grounds for Human Rights

Moral justifications defend ESRs by appeal to widely accepted moral norms and values such as welfare, agency, freedom, fairness, equality, and dignity. Moral defenses of ESRs presuppose that people in their targeted audience are friendly toward the moral point of view and to some basic moral values and norms. Moral groundings for human rights, including ESRs, aspire to explain the moral appeal and normative power of these rights. Of course, people who are moral skeptics are likely to be unmoved by these defenses. And there seems to be little hope of coming up with a knockdown argument for adopting the moral point of view

Not all defenses of ESRs are based on *moral* values and norms. One kind of non-moral justification appeals to a person's enlightened self-interest. It says, "Sometime in your life you or your loved ones are likely to need the protections and assistance that ESRs provide so it would be prudent for you to support these rights now." This justification is akin to attempting to persuade someone to buy an insurance policy. Another type of non-moral justification for ESRs focuses on benefits to countries that recognize and adequately

implement them. This kind of justification might suggest, for example, that having a well-realized system of ESRs is likely to prevent unwanted emigration and promote domestic harmony, political stability, economic development, and prosperity (Schultz 2001).

Still another type of non-moral defense of ESRs assumes the acceptance of civil and political rights and claims that the successful realization of ESRs is logically or practically indispensable to the successful realization of one or more civil and political rights. These "linkage" arguments have been the most prominent way of defending ESRs since the 1960s. An early appearance of such arguments is found in the 1968 Proclamation of Teheran: "Since human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible, the full realization of civil and political rights without the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights is impossible." Henry Shue's book, *Basic Rights*, used linkage arguments to defend the right to subsistence (Shue 1996). He argued that subsistence plays such an important supporting role for other rights that without its full realization no other rights can be fully realized. Shue understood the right to subsistence to include basic nutrition, hydration, shelter, and basic health care. He claimed that a well-realized right to subsistence provides such indispensable support to the realization of other rights that even if a person endorses the realization of only one civil and political right that person consequently has very strong reasons to endorse the right to subsistence.

Linkage arguments do not necessarily provide *moral* grounds for rights. They can be based entirely on acceptance, on the fact that the people to whom the argument is directed endorse one or more civil and political rights. Perhaps the person to whom the argument is directed endorses ESRs for prudential reasons like the ones mentioned previously, or just because they sound good. Linkage arguments can, however, be given a moral basis by building it into the initial premise about acceptance. For example, that first premise might say, "You endorse the right to due process of law in criminal cases on the grounds that this right provides very important protections of freedom and fairness." The argument could then continue: "To avoid logical or practical inconsistency, you must endorse the realization of a right to an adequate income because the right to due process cannot be adequately realized without it. Your moral grounds in freedom and fairness for the right to due process apply indirectly via this linkage to the right to an adequate income."

In spite of the simplicity, popularity, and usefulness of linkage arguments, I submit that they should not be the main defense of ESRs. First, it is unlikely that linkage arguments can successfully be used to defend all three families of ESRs. They work best for subsistence and other rights clearly necessary to survival and basic functioning. Second, there is much that can go wrong when one uses linkage arguments. The most common mistake is making false or exaggerated claims about the strength of a linkage between two rights. The support an ESR provides to civil and political rights may be useful but not indispensable. A related mistake is failing to attend to levels of realization and their effects on the strengths of supporting relations (Nickel 2008). Rights with low levels of realization provide and need less support from other rights. And the realization of a supporting right often needs to reach a medium level before it begins to help much with the realization of the supported right. If one tries to avoid these problems by assuming full realization, as Shue did, one's linkage arguments will not apply at present to very low-income countries in which the full realization for everyone of human rights is only a distant possibility. Rights that are highly interdependent under full realization are often much less interdependent at lower levels of realization (for further discussion of linkage arguments and their pitfalls and limits, see Nickel 2008, 2016, and 2022 forthcoming).

Let's now return to defenses of ESRs that directly invoke underlying moral values and norms. Potential moral grounds for ESRs should have features such as universality, ability to support duties, and high priority. These norms and values should already be part of most people's moral views so that one does not have to make a case for them before moving on to use them in defending human rights. These norms and values should be reliable in the sense that rational, reflective, and morally sensitive people continue over time to find them plausible. And they, alone or together with several others, should be powerful enough to cover the full range of human rights including ESRs.

In offering moral defenses of human rights, including ESRs, philosophers have appealed to a very wide variety of moral values and norms. These include urgent individual interests (Beitz 2009); basic needs (Miller 2012); human welfare (Talbott 2010); natural rights (Nozick 1974); respect for human dignity (Gewirth 1978, 1982, 1992, 1996; Gilabert 2018; Tasioulas 2015); human agency (Gewirth 1982, 1996; Griffin 2008); positive freedom and capabilities (Gould 2004, Nussbaum 2000, Sen 2004); fairness and equality (Dworkin 1977, Nickel 2008); and justice (Rawls 1999; Waldron in this volume). Many of these grounds for ESRs overlap, and it may be possible to run several of them in tandem.

What this long list shows is not only that philosophers frequently disagree but also that there are plenty of plausible candidates for the moral grounds of ESRs. If ESRs are hard cases for moral theories (Langford 2017), it is not due to a shortage of good starting points for justifications. Trouble, if it arises, is likely to come later in the justificatory process when we address questions such as the identification and justification of the normative burdens the right imposes and the right's feasibility (on steps in the justificatory process, see Nickel 2006, and on feasibility, see Gilabert 2018). As this suggests, there is more to justifying a human right than just identifying some plausible moral grounds for it. Fully defending ESRs as human rights requires interpreting and defending their character as rights rather than goals, their universality, their high priority, and their duty bearers. Further, it needs to be shown that the ESR being defended addresses important and recurrent threats, that dealing with these threats requires a universal right rather than some weaker norm such as a value or goal, that the right's realization is feasible in most of the world, and that the right's worldwide application through international law and politics can be justified (on this last step, see Buchanan 2013).

The next four sections take a closer look at several possible moral grounds for ESRs. These grounds are human welfare, agency, fairness, and human dignity.

2. Human Welfare as a Moral Ground for ESRs

Since ESRs are often called "welfare rights," the value of promoting human welfare might be thought to be the most obvious moral ground for ESRs. Why would one want to ensure the availability of adequate income, housing, education, health care, access to remunerative employment with safe working conditions, and so forth if not to mitigate severe poverty and misery and generally improve people's welfare?

Welfare-based defenses of ESRs often view these rights as providing everyone with highly useful protections and provisions for their welfare. Many ESRs prescribe services or income support in order to protect people against severe economic hardships that are caused by illness, disability, workplace injuries, unemployment, disaster, and advanced age. For example, when people are unable to support themselves by working, ESRs ensure adequate income and access to medical care. And knowing that one's basic welfare is protected against major threats often yields a welfare-enhancing sense of security. Concern for people's welfare includes protecting them against untimely death. When ESRs are successfully realized, people have a very good chance of both *having* a life (by not dying of childhood diseases, for example) and having a life worth living (by not living a life of hunger, misery, and poor health, for example).

Perhaps the most plausible welfare-based grounding of ESRs is the basic needs approach. Well-realized ESRs are justified as ways of ensuring that people have their basic needs met and are thereby able to live a decent life. David Miller offers the following list of basic needs: "food and water, clothing and shelter, physical security, health care, education, work and leisure, freedoms of movement, conscience, and expression" (Miller 2007 and 2012; see also Streeten 1981). "Basic human rights," as Miller calls them, give a central place to ESRs. ESRs against slavery and for free choice of employment are also considered basic. Less clear, however, is whether fairness-oriented ESRs such as nondiscrimination and fair remuneration for one's work can be grounded in the basic needs approach.

Utilitarianism is a view that sees general human welfare (utility) as the ultimate moral good and calls for welfare's maximization. It evaluates all rules, norms, and institutions by their net impact, positive or negative, on human welfare. A utilitarian defense of ESRs would address at least three topics. The first is the positive contribution (the benefits) that a particular ESR makes to human welfare when well realized. For example, when people are guaranteed an adequate income, need income assistance, activate their right to such assistance, and actually receive benefits, how much does this improve the general welfare? In estimating these outcomes, it is necessary to take into account the frequency with which the right is activated and the degree of compliance with the right by the duty bearers. The second topic is the financial and administrative costs of adequately realizing the economic right. Also falling under this heading are likely bad consequences of realizing the economic right in question. A third topic is opportunity costs: Could the resources spent on realizing the economic right be better spent (in terms of generating more utility) than on some other project or form of protection? (see Wellman 1982). A utilitarian case for an economic right succeeds when the benefits of recognizing and implementing the right are greater than the costs, including the opportunity costs.

For many norms, getting the information needed to address adequately these three topics will be difficult or impossible. If the benefits of the ESR are enormous, stable, and easily seen, and if the various costs are fairly well known, not too large, and unlikely to increase greatly over time, we can be fairly confident that the right is justified in utilitarian terms. Often, however, both the benefits and costs will be difficult or impossible to estimate in a serious way with the result that the justifiability of the economic right remains uncertain and controversial. Further, it is quite possible that the costs and benefits of ESRs will vary by countries and regions with the result that particular ESRs are justifiable in some countries and unjustifiable in others.

We can use the right to education, a widely accepted ESR, to illustrate utilitarian reasoning about rights. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights sets out a right to education that says: "Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all" and "Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational secondary education, shall be made generally available." A utilitarian moral defense of the right to education can address benefits to the general welfare by noting that publicly-funded education for children and adults frequently improves their ability to support themselves and their families through work, live healthfully and manage health problems, participate in public discourse and politics, provide high-quality care to children, and have adequate knowledge of their rights and how to use them.

In addressing the second topic (costs), a utilitarian justification for free public education must admit that high-quality implementation of this economic right is very expensive, particularly since this right in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights is accompanied by a duty to require by law that all elementary students make use of educational services. And a utilitarian defense of this right can address the third topic (opportunity costs) by arguing that there are few alternative ways of spending public resources that have a better payoff for the general welfare than education. The overall conclusion is that because of the many benefits to the general welfare that flow from having an educated population, the benefits of this economic right exceed its admittedly high costs.

Interestingly, Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights concludes with a liberty right that requires states to respect "the liberty of parents ... to choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities ... to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions." Strong parental control over their children's education, with whatever qualifications such a right surely requires, is a matter of liberty rather than welfare.

A problem with an exclusively utilitarian approach to finding moral grounds for ESRs is that it either ignores other values and norms such as freedom and fairness or tries to find them within the utilitarian framework. If it ignores these considerations, it just seems morally obtuse. And if it makes the more plausible move of trying somehow to find adequate grounds for freedom and fairness within utility or of adding independent fairness restrictions, it risks unwanted internal or external pluralism and their accompanying potential for conflicts within utility and having to rely on intuition to resolve them.

This section suggested that concern for human welfare and the avoidance of misery have large roles to play in providing moral grounds for ESRs. All of the ESRs requiring governments to provide income or services are directed to improving human welfare. So are the rights to safe working conditions and rest and leisure. A big worry, however, is that a welfare-based approach alone is too narrow, that it only covers some ESRs, and, in particular, is ill-equipped to ground ESRs that are concerned with nondiscrimination and fairness in the workplace.

3. Grounding ESRs in Human Agency

A historically important alternative to welfare-based justifications holds that it is mainly the distinctive human capacity to deliberate, choose, plan, and act intelligently and morally—that is, having and using human agency—that makes humans suitable subjects of universal rights. The job of human rights, on this view, is to ensure moral, political, and economic conditions in which human agency can develop, be maintained, and operate. Fully operative human agency includes being free to act in accordance with one's own choices and plans in a wide range of areas—provided, of course, that those choices and plans are not destructive of the similar freedoms of others. This approach is found in the work of important contemporary philosophers such as Alan Gewirth (1978, 1982, 1996) and James Griffin (2008). Let's call this approach the Agency, Freedom, and Welfare (AFW) grounding for ESRs. Operative agency is the primary value in AFW theories, and concern for freedom and welfare follows from it.

Grounding human rights in AFW has sometimes been thought unfriendly to ESRs as human rights, but both Gewirth and Griffin argued that their approach supports at least some ESRs. Indeed, both writers endorsed normative protections for people's survival and basic welfare as necessary conditions of their being able to develop, maintain, and use their agency.

Gewirth argued that denying the value of successful agency and action is not a live option for a person. Having a life as a person who inevitably chooses and pursues goals requires recognizing the indispensable conditions of agency and action as necessary goods. Abstractly described, these conditions are freedom and welfare. Gewirth's conception of welfare is something like satisfaction of basic needs. A rational person who recognizes the necessity of having freedom and welfare will assert a "prudential right claim" to them. Having demanded that others respect her freedom and welfare, consistency requires her to recognize and respect the freedom and welfare of other persons. Since all other agents are in exactly the same position as she is of needing adequate freedom and welfare, consistency requires her to recognize and respect their claims to freedom and welfare. She "logically must accept" that other people as agents have equal rights to freedom and welfare.

Gewirth's two abstract rights (freedom and welfare) work together to generate ESRs such as free choice of occupation and to basic health services. Gewirth's aspiration was to provide a knockdown argument for human rights that applies to all human agents (Gewirth 1982; for criticisms and defenses, see Beyleveld 1991 and Boylan 1999). We can imagine Professor Gewirth engaging in dialogue with a university student who claims not to believe in human rights. Gewirth might have said to the student, "You will probably live a long time, and in order to live your life with some success you are going to need strong protections both for your welfare and your freedom, are you not? To develop your capacity for agency—which as a university

student you have already mostly done—you needed nurturing, protection, and education. To use this capacity, you need ample areas in which you are free to act as you have chosen. And to maintain and use your agency and freedom, you are very likely to need assistance in sustaining your life and health."

The student thinks about this challenge and eventually concedes that living her life will inevitably depend on making evaluations, choices, and plans. Also necessary will be the liberty and welfare necessary to form, revise, and act on them. Gewirth then suggests that the student must see her freedom and welfare as necessary goods and demand that they be respected by everyone. The student reluctantly agrees.

Gewirth then reminds the doubtful student that there is nothing distinctive about her needing freedom and welfare; she is in exactly the same situation as everyone else. Accordingly, consistency requires her to recognize that other people will make the same demands and that if her claims are valid, so are theirs. Here Gewirth is not invoking the contractarian idea that she must agree to respect the freedom and welfare of others in order to get them to agree to respect her freedom and welfare. His claim is rather that when she makes the demand that others respect her freedom and welfare, she must, as a matter of logical consistency, also agree to respect their freedom and welfare. Notice that Gewirth starts with prudential claims to rights and then turns them into moral requirements by demanding on logical grounds that they be applied to all persons.

Our doubtful student might well resist the idea that her claims for herself must be applied to everyone who is equally situated. She might say to Professor Gewirth, "There's no contradiction in my demanding moral and legal protections for *my* agency and welfare while denying them to others who are in exactly the same position. Practically speaking, other people won't tolerate my privileging myself in this way, but there's no contradiction." She is probably right about both points. What is needed here, I suspect, is not a logical principle requiring universalization, but a moral principle of fairness that requires extending to everyone protections for freedom and welfare that one demands for oneself. It would be very unfair of the student to demand that others respect her freedom and welfare while refusing to respect theirs.

Gewirth defended the full range of ESRs but Griffin defended a more modest right to "minimal material provision" (Griffin 2008). For example, Gewirth defended the right to work and free choice of employment as found in Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. This article says that countries ratifying this treaty "recognize the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts." This article should be read together with Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which demands: "No one shall be held in slavery ...," "No one shall be held in servitude," and "No one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour." Access to work and economic opportunities has an important welfare dimension. But there is a very strong freedom dimension to the prohibition of slavery, servitude, and forced labor and to the liberty to take up and quit work with a particular employer. An AFW justification for ESRs is well suited to provide justifications for the inclusion of work-related liberties.

An important question about the AFW grounding for ESRs is whether it can adequately account for their universality, equality, and for prohibitions of discrimination. Article 3 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights prescribes an "equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights." The idea that ESRs are to be respected and protected without discrimination seems to be most centrally a matter of fairness rather than one of agency, freedom, or welfare. Discrimination often harms and hinders its victims, but even when it doesn't, it is deeply unfair. To consider another example, the ESRs that explicitly refer to fair wages and equal pay for equal work (Articles 3 and 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights) seem to be much more about fairness than about agency, freedom, or welfare.

4. Fairness and Fairness-Based Equality as Grounds for ESRS

A fairness approach to grounding ESRs holds that one important justification for recognizing and implementing ESRs is making social and economic relationships less unfair for workers and people at lower economic levels. This approach aspires not only to provide justifications for some or all specific ESRs but also to ground the egalitarian dimensions of ESRs and, more grandly, the idea that all human rights are equal rights of all people that are to be enjoyed without discrimination.

Let's first look at specific ESRs that are explicitly about fairness. Parts of Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights provide the clearest examples:

"The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work which ensure...."

"Fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, in particular women being guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work...."

"Equal opportunity for everyone to be promoted in his employment to an appropriate higher level, subject to no considerations other than those of seniority and competence."

As suggested earlier, these specific ESRs are best explained in terms of an underlying principle of fairness, not mainly in terms of welfare or liberty. When effectively implemented and used, the whole family of ESRs put forward by the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights reduces unfairness in economic and social conditions. First, these ESRs forbid humiliating differences in status. They forbid slavery, forced labor, marginalization of groups, and wages that are insufficient for decent living and participation in public life. Human rights, including ESRs, are equal rights of everyone to be enjoyed without discrimination. Unequal possession or administration of basic rights generally reflects very badly on equal status and risks undermining self-respect—one's confidence in being equal to others as a person and citizen (on self-respect, see Dillon 2018 and Etinson 2020).

Second, ESRs promote equal concern by public officials for the interests of all (rather than just for some favored parts of the population) by requiring attention and action directed to assisting workers, women, and people in poverty (see Dworkin 1977 and Scanlon 2018). Lest we exaggerate the amount of equal distribution that equal rights require, we need to heed Ronald Dworkin's observation that treating people as equals (that is, showing them equal respect and concern) does not always require treating them equally (Dworkin 1977). Equal rights to provision on the basis of need or contribution can yield different distributions of the object of the right (what the right is to). When the right to medical care is administered on the basis of need, the needier will get more care than the less needy. Sickly Sam will get more medical care (and expenditure) than Healthy Harriet. And under the economic right to equal pay for equal work Productive Polly will benefit more from her right to equal pay for equal work than Unproductive Eunice. Fair treatment under equal human rights is not always perfectly equal treatment—but it must be nondiscriminatory.

Third, ESRs promote social and economic fairness by prescribing equal opportunity (or at least, reduced *inequality* of opportunity) both explicitly in the context of work—and also by requiring access to basic education for all (on equal opportunity, see Arneson 2015 and Scanlon 2018).

ESRs in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights are not explicitly egalitarian in the sense of calling for reductions of differences in income and wealth (on egalitarianism, see Arneson 2013). They require provision of a floor of income and services but say nothing about an income ceiling or constraining the political and economic power of the most privileged classes. Nevertheless, creating a floor

of income and services significantly reduces economic inequality. It does this, first, by pulling up everyone below that income floor so that the lowest are not so low. And, second, when taxation is used to cover the costs of providing the floor, this usually transfers significant amounts of income and wealth from the top and middle to the bottom. Theories such as "justice as fairness" require the justification to all of avoidable inequalities of income and power. This requires that these inequalities really do work to the advantage of people in the lower economic rungs (Rawls 1971). Making this true will require creation of some sort of redistributive scheme such as extensive legal rights to public services and/or an income floor such as a Universal Basic Income (see the chapter by Michelman in this volume).

Today's egalitarians will insist that more should be done to promote fairness and equality than ESRs require. Realizing ESRs will reduce but will not eliminate extreme differences in wealth and power. Accepting this, however, does not require one to denigrate the significant contribution that the realization of ESRs makes to social fairness and human equality. "Not enough" is compatible with having done a lot.

5. Can Human Dignity Serve as a Unifying Ground for ESRs?

This section explores equal human dignity as a unifying ground for human rights, including ESRs. Like many human rights declarations and treaties, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights invoked human dignity as the ground of rights. It says that ESRs "derive from the inherent dignity of the human person." Conceivably, all three of the previous justifications for ESRs could be subsumed under a dignity approach. In recent decades, numerous books and articles have been published that explore or advocate dignity approaches to explaining the normative grounds of human rights (Gilabert 2018, Kateb 2014, McCrudden 2013 and the many essays therein, Tasioulas 2015, Waldron 2015a and 2015b).

Dignity as a normative ground for rights has also had many critics (for example, Den Hartogh 2013, Green 2010, Macklin 2003, and Sangiovanni 2017). Etinson (2020) argues that dignity can only be a partial explanation of the grounds of human rights. Dignity, he suggests, always concerns an agent's social standing, and it is violated only when an agent or group is humiliated or degraded. While many human rights—such as the right against cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment—do reflect such concerns, "few human rights are exclusively grounded in concerns about social standing, degradation, and humiliation" (Etinson 2020). Other grounds may include values and norms such as welfare, fairness, and autonomy. If Etinson is right, dignity cannot offer as much unification to human rights as is often thought.

Defenders of ESRs sometimes speak of creating conditions in which everyone can have a "decent life"—or at least a very good chance of having a decent life in this uncertain world. This idea can be part of a conception of dignity: it can be thought of as an outcome of effective respect for persons under favorable conditions of social, economic, and political development. The idea of achieving a decent life for all is not, however, necessarily tied to dignity. It could just as easily be about basic human welfare, about making possible a minimally good life for as many people as possible.

Full conceptions of human dignity frequently have three parts. (I say "full" conceptions because there are also more minimal conceptions that will be discussed later.) One of these components is a claim that there is some sort of special worth that all living human persons share. Let's call this claim the Special Worth Thesis. The second part is an explanation of what it is about people that gives them this special value. For example, capacities for rational agency and vulnerability to suffering have frequently been used to explain people's special worth. Let's call the second part the Explanatory Grounds. The third part—the workhorse of the trio—is a duty of people and governments to treat people in ways that respect their dignity. Let's call the third part the Equal Respect Principle (ERP).

The Special Worth Thesis is about value or worth, not duty. It says that all living human persons are equally of great value. In each and every one of us, it claims, there is a special worth that makes us morally considerable, gives us equal basic moral status, and sets us above other animals. This value is not our merit, our individual good qualities and accomplishments, nor is it lost when we behave badly and deserve criticism and punishment. "Dignity" and "human worth" are the names of this special value. It is sometimes claimed that this worth is intrinsic and priceless.

It is easy to have doubts about the Special Worth Thesis. One might worry that in claiming special worth, we humans flatter ourselves, particularly in light of the horrible wrongs such as genocide, massacres, and torture that humans regularly commit (Rosen 2018). One might also worry that this thesis works against extending moral standing to nonhuman animals or even to severely disabled humans. Explanations of the grounds of this special worth attempt to relieve our doubts. The general idea is to identify one or more very valuable features that all human persons share, that nonhuman animals mostly do not possess or have at lower levels, and that make plausible the Special Worth Thesis.

Finding such features is difficult because actual human persons are extremely varied in their characteristics. The good-making features identified will need to be "threshold concepts" so that people can vary in how much of the feature they have while all being above some minimal level. Finding grounds for special human worth is also deeply philosophical and/or religious—and inevitably controversial. One-line answers like "agency" or "the ability to suffer" are too simple. And explanations like "beloved children of God," "made in the image of God," and "created by God as free and equal beings" will only appeal to people with particular religious beliefs.

Plausible secular candidates for the grounds of human dignity include: having basic moral capacities including abilities to know and follow moral values and norms and to reason with reference to them; rationality, thought, and imagination; agency, deliberation, and purposive action; self-consciousness and reflective capacities, including self-evaluation; social capacities and needs; temporal awareness including memory and planning for the future; use of complex languages and symbolic systems; use of very complicated technology; having urgent interests and needs; and vulnerability to pain, suffering, and cruelty.

The explanatory grounds of special worth that are offered can provide guidance in understanding what equal respect requires. For example, conceptions of dignity that explain the ERP's grounds, wholly or partly, in terms of agency, deliberation, and purposive action will emphasize duties to respect people's freedom. And conceptions of dignity that explain its grounds in terms of vulnerability to pain, suffering, and cruelty will emphasize protections against torture, disease, and miserable poverty.

The third part of a conception of dignity is the Equal Respect Principle. The ERP is a normative principle requiring equal respect for all people (see Dillon 2018). The ERP takes us from the special worth of humans to appropriate attitudes and actions, to high-priority and universal duties and rights. If human dignity yields human rights, including ESRs, the ERP will be the source. Satisfying the ERP requires an attitude of respect to be applied equally to all living human persons. This attitude is a recognition of the humanity and fundamental moral status of people—including those most beaten down by oppression, poverty, illness, addiction, and bad luck. It does not require ignoring people's personal merits and demerits, but it does require recognition of shared fundamental moral status.

The ERP requires more than just an attitude, however. It also requires respectful treatment. The most obvious requirement is refraining from destroying or seriously harming people. Items of special value are generally prized, protected, and restored rather than destroyed. This gives the ERP a welfare dimension. Earlier I described the ERP as the "workhorse" of a conception of dignity because it is the component that generates duties and rights under particular circumstances. To do this work it needs empirical premises

about problems, institutions, and resources. And to increase its determinacy the ERP may need additional normative content that does not derive from the Special Worth Thesis.

The wrong of regarding and treating some people as less than human, as mere machines or bugs, is a central idea in conceptions of dignity. Perhaps protecting people against common manifestations of this kind of wrongful treatment can provide a guide to which human rights and other norms are needed. When individuals and groups were regarded as subhuman, the abuses that have often followed included murder, massacres, and genocide; land theft; forced expulsion of individuals or groups; enslavement and forced labor; allowing individuals or groups to starve; deprivation of basic liberties; forced segregation; denial of all or most legal protections; and restricting employment and economic opportunities to degrading and dangerous jobs that do not pay enough to allow escape from severe poverty. These forms of bad treatment suggest areas in which dignity requires specific human rights.

A well-developed normative conception of dignity might offer guidelines or maxims for applying the ERP. Kant famously offered several such guidelines, including the maxim of never treating people as mere means to one's ends (Kant 1785/1996). Other possible maxims for applying the ERP include maxims forbidding humiliation, degradation, deprivation of basic liberties, and severe cruelty (Kaufmann et al. 2011). Adding such maxims to the ERP makes it less indeterminate, more useful, and a better source of human rights, but it is unclear whether in adding such maxims we are simply explaining its implicit content or bringing in other values and norms to fill in its otherwise indeterminate scope. This raises the unwelcome possibility that norms such as welfare, agency and freedom, and fairness partially constitute the ERP rather than being totally derivative from it (Nickel 1982).

It was noted earlier that there are minimal conceptions of dignity that abandon the first two parts described previously (the Special Worth Thesis and the Explanatory Grounds) and retain only the ERP. Such conceptions have the advantage of avoiding many philosophical controversies and allowing people to provide their own grounds for endorsing the ERP. These conceptions may even abandon talk of dignity and simply proceed under the banner of equal respect for persons. To give the ERP more content, Ronald Dworkin explicitly expanded it to be "respect and concern for persons," where "concern" added an explicit welfare dimension (Dworkin 1977). A difficulty with stripped-down versions is that the loss of the first two components means less guidance in developing the content of the ERP and greater indeterminacy.

There are both indirect and direct ways of deriving ESRs from the ERP. One is the use of linkage arguments (recall the discussion of such arguments in the first section). This kind of indirect argument would assume that some civil and political rights can be derived from the ERP, and then claim that acceptance and realization of some ESRs is indispensable to adequate realization of the civil and political rights. Another indirect argument is found in Griffin's defense of "minimum material provision." Griffin held that all human rights are based on the value of normative agency, but that such agency cannot be developed and maintained by everyone without guarantees of subsistence. The grounds of rights to normative agency indirectly support a minimal set of ESRs (Griffin 2008).

In contrast to these indirect approaches, direct derivations of ESRs from the ERP and its associated maxims attempt to show that slavery, dangerous working conditions that treat workers as disposable resources, discrimination, and severe poverty and misery are simply incompatible with treating people with equal respect. For example, the Kantian maxim that people should never be treated as only a means to one's own ends could be used to justify recognizing rights to safe working conditions.

Overall, the idea of human dignity in either its full or minimal forms may be a useful unifying idea for ESRs and for human rights generally. Whether it generates or simply incorporates other grounds remains an open question.

6. Conclusion

This chapter argued that ESRs are diverse in their normative content because they include rights that are welfare-oriented, freedom-oriented, and fairness-oriented. A straightforward approach to building a framework for justifying ESRs appeals to welfare, agency and freedom, and fairness, although it need not deny that other norms and values are also needed. The framework I sketched included accounts of welfare, agency and freedom, and fairness as grounds of ESRs. These justifications work together, particularly when assembled under the banner of human dignity, to explain the moral reasons we have for endorsing and realizing ESRs of the sort found in the Universal Declaration and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. It is possible, but in my opinion unlikely, that one of these justifications can be shown to be powerful enough to generate fully the others. Nevertheless, if that possibility were plausibly demonstrated, I would not be unhappy.

Linkage arguments have been the historically most prominent way of defending ESRs, and such arguments were briefly explained and assessed. I suggested that linkage arguments have a useful role to play in defending ESRs but should not, for a variety of reasons, be the main way of justifying ESRs. An advantage of substantive justificatory frameworks is that they do not need to piggyback ESRs on the prior acceptance of civil and political rights. And, happily, it turns out that the moral grounds for ESRs are similar to the ones for civil and political rights.

References

Arneson, Richard. 2013. "Egalitarianism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2013 edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/egalitarianism/. Last accessed January 21, 2022.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Arneson, Richard. 2015. "Equality of Opportunity." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/equal-opportunity/. Last accessed January 21, 2022.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Beetham, David. 1995. "What Future for Economic and Social Rights?" *Political Studies* 43, no. 1: 41–60.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Beitz, Charles. 2009. The Idea of Human Rights. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Beitz, Charles. 2015. "The Force of Subsistence Rights." In *Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights*, edited by Rowan Cruft, et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 545–551.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Beyleveld, Deryck. 1991. Dialectical Necessity of Morality: An Analysis and Defense of Alan Gewirth's Argument to the Principle of Generic Consistency. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Boylan, Michael (ed.). 1999. Gewirth: Critical Essays on Action, Rationality, and Community. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Buchanan, Allen. 2013. The Heart of Human Rights. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Cranston, Maurice. 1967. "Human Rights, Real and Supposed." In *Political Theory and the Rights of Man*, edited by D. D. Raphael, London: Macmillan, 43–53.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Den Hartogh, Govert. 2013. "Is Human Dignity the Ground of Rights?" In *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity*, edited by Marcus Duwell et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200–207.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Dillon, Robin. 2018. "Respect." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/respect/. Last accessed January 21, 2022.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Dworkin, Ronald. 1977. Taking Rights Seriously. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Etinson, Adam. 2020. "What's So Special about Human Dignity?" Philosophy & Public Affairs 353-381.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Frederick, Danny. 2010. "Why Universal Welfare Rights Are Impossible. And What It Means." *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 9: 428–445.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Gewirth, Alan. 1978. Reason and Morality. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gewirth, Alan. 1982. Human Rights: Essays on Justification and Applications. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Gewirth, Alan. 1992. "Human Dignity as the Basis of Rights." In *The Constitution of Rights: Human Dignity and American Values*, edited by Michael Mayer and William Parent. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 10–28.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Gewirth, Alan. 1996. The Community of Rights. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Gilabert, Pablo. 2018. Human Dignity and Human Rights. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Gould, Carol. 2004. Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Green, Leslie. 2010. "Two Worries about Respect for Persons." Ethics 120: 212–231.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Griffin, James. 2008. On Human Rights. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kant, Immanuel. 1785/1996. "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals." In *Immanuel Kant Practical Philosophy*, edited and translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kateb, George. 2014. Human Dignity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kaufmann, Paulus et al. (eds.). 2011. Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization. Dordrecht: Springer.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Langford, Malcolm. 2017. "Socio-Economic Rights: Between Essentialism and Egalitarianism." *Moral and Political Conceptions of Human Rights: Implications for Theory and Practice*, edited by Reidar Maliks and Johan Schaffer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 258–298.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Macklin, Ruth. 2003. "Dignity Is a Useless Concept: It Means No More Than Respect for Persons or Their Autonomy." *British Medical Journal* 1419–1420.

Google Scholar WorldCat

McCrudden, Christopher (ed.). 2013. Understanding Human Dignity. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Miller, David. 2007. National Responsibility and Global Justice. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Miller, David. 2012. "Grounding Human Rights." Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy 15, no. 4: 207–227.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Nickel, James. 1982. "Equal Respect and Human Rights." Human Rights Quarterly 4: 76–93.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Nickel, James. 2006. Making Sense of Human Rights, 2nd edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Nickel, James. 2008. "Rethinking Indivisibility: Towards a Theory of Supporting Relations Between Human Rights." *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 4: 984–1001.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Nickel, James. 2016. "Can a Right to Health Care Be Justified by Linkage Arguments?" *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 37, no. 4: 293–306.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Nickel, James. 2019. "Human Rights." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/rights-human/. Last accessed January 21, 2022.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Nickel, James. 2022. "Linkage Arguments for and Against Rights." Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, forthcoming.

Nozick, Robert. 1974. Anarchy, State, and Utopia. New York: Basic Books.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Nussbaum, Martha. 2000. Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

O'Neill, Onora. 2005. "The Dark Side of Human Rights." International Affairs 82: 427–439.

Google Scholar WorldCat

O'Neill, Onora. 2010. "Rights, Obligations, Priorities." Studies in Christian Ethics 23: 163–171.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Orend, Brian. 2002. *Human Rights: Concept and Content*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Rawls, John. 1971. A Theory of Justice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Rawls, John. 1999. The Law of Peoples. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Rosen, Michael. 2018. Dignity: Its History and Meaning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Sangiovanni, Andrea. 2017. Humanity without Dignity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Scanlon, T. M. 2018. Why Does Inequality Matter? Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Schultz, William. 2001. In Our Best Interest: How Defending Human Rights Benefits Us All. Boston: Beacon Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Sen, Amartya. 2004. "Elements of a Theory of Human Rights." Philosophy & Public Affairs 315-356.

Google Scholar WorldCat

Shue, Henry. 1996. Basic Rights, 2nd edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Streeten, Paul. 1981. First Things First: Meeting Basic Human Needs in the Developing Countries. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Talbott, William. 2010. Human Rights and Human Well-Being. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

 $Tasioulas, John.\ \ 2015.\ \ "On\ the\ Foundations\ of\ Human\ Rights."\ In\ Philosophical\ Foundations\ of\ Human\ Rights, edited\ by$

Rowan Cruft et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Van Parijs, Philippe. 1998. Real Freedom for All. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Waldron, Jeremy. 2015a. Dignity, Rank, and Rights. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

 $Waldron, Jeremy.\ 2015b.\ ``ls\ Dignity\ the\ Foundation\ of\ Human\ Rights?''\ In\ Philosophical\ Foundations\ of\ Human\ Rights,\ edited\ by$

Rowan Cruft, Matthew Liao, and Massimo Renzo. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 117–137.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Wellman, Carl. 1982. Welfare Rights. Latham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.