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Left Behind: The Hypocrisy of Normalising Human Rights Violation

In the spring of 2018, Europe recoiled after the brutal murder of a Slovakian journalist in the safety of his own home. From London to Riga, men and women congregated to hold candle-lit vigils for the young man; in the streets of the Slovakian capital, crowds marched to protest the terrible injustice of the murder of someone who was attempting to expose corruption of the local government, and esteemed newspapers contemplated the nature of the right to free speech. Yet just shortly before that, a political murder of another Russian journalist was treated with pity, but also acceptance: those things just happen, went the general consensus. And the fates of many other men and women living under authoritarian regimes in the Middle East or Caucasus went largely unnoticed: if they were reported at all, no one was really surprised. For these people, political murders and persecution became expected: normal, even. This shocking indifference to human rights violation of particular groups of people exposes the hypocrisy of our current society: and what is more, it is actually a dangerous precedent to set. In this essay, I will first examine the notion of universal community as in today's globalised world. After that, I will proceed to argue that although we should understand human-rights as a man-made construct, it does not mean they are any less real than if we were to conceptualise them as a natural fact of human existence. I shall continue with an observation regarding the relative value of human rights as it is currently often understood in the Western society, and argue that this approach fundamentally undermines the notion of equality and devaluates the importance of human rights to our society because of its nature as an artificial construct. Finally, I shall argue that this hypocrisy results in relativization of universal morality and weakens the integrity of Western society. First of all, let us examine Kant's notion of a universal community. Arguably, this concept is more relevant today than ever before: with the emergence of modern globalised world, we are connected on a truly unprecedented scale. The 'universal community' no longer consist of just cosmopolitan intellectuals: everyone with a connection to the internet is able to and should have a right to access a tremendous amount of information and participate in global intellectual discourse. This, however, has resulted in a peculiar paradox: although we are more aware than ever before of the injustice in the world, our response to it became strangely relative. That is, of course, quite surprising: one might expect that a society in which we can communicate with everyone else and

almost viscerally experience these human rights violation (whether it be by watching videos or communicating with those affected by it), transgression of one person's right will be felt everywhere – we should all be able to comprehend that everyone is a human being just like us, and the violation of human rights anywhere is equally as terrible. However, we have come to realise that quite the opposite has happened: we have stumbled into a world where human rights are routinely trivialised and the violence committed on individuals has a certain value assigned to it, according to the nationality or the societal status of the victims. The universal community of today seems to be fractured. However, what justification there is for human rights and why should we care about them at all? Arguably, if we could dismiss human rights as a concept, the relativization of value of the human life shouldn't bother us much: indeed, it would be a logical outcome. Without the concept of human rights, we could easily end up with an individual-centred system of morality where it is natural to relativize value of each and every individual, depending on their relation to us. So what really is the justification for human rights at all? In the current increasingly atheist approach to philosophy, it is no longer enough to simply argue that human rights are natural, unalienable and given to us by God or Nature. Our present scientific knowledge seems to suggest that it is quite the opposite, and that human rights are by no means a natural property of us as individuals: it seems that we should instead approach them as a result of a long development in our society and that their emergence was hardly assured. They are a result of historical accident: a human construct, instead of a God-given right. However, does that make them any less real? I argue that this is not the case. Human constructs are infinitely powerful tools of our society. They form the very basis of our civilisation: it is only thanks to human constructs such as the concept of a state or the concept of a religion that we were able to start cooperating together and progress from tribes to kingdoms and empires to the current states and global organisations. Human construct may be an artificial idea: but it is an idea that allowed the emergence of a society of any kind. This is what our societies are like: we work together because we share a belief in the idea of a 'state', because we all believe that we are 'Americans' or 'Nigerians', we believe in 'democracy' or 'liberalism', in 'market economy' or 'the Church' or anything else. These are all constructs: there is no such thing as Nigeria or market economy if there's no one willing to believe in it. If we all one day collectively decided to stop believing in the tiny slips of paper that we call 'money', they would cease to have any value whatsoever. And that does happen in our society: the stories we tell each other and our constructs change. Although we might

have once believed that there was a thing called the Soviet Union, that story changed: and so practically from day to day, the Soviet Union ceased to exist just because someone told its citizens to stop believing in it. So it is only the fact that a large amount of people believes in these things that makes them very real: and indeed, I may decide one day that I don't believe in a state and try to walk across the border because there is obviously no such thing as a border – but the guards there believe in it, and so they will stop me and I may be punished for committing a crime that is arguably not real. So human constructs are powerful and shape our everyday existence: but a significant number of people has to believe in them. That brings us back to human rights: and we can now conclude that even though human rights are an artificial construct, they are still incredibly powerful – as long as we choose to believe in them. And obviously we do: we teach children about them in school, sign documents that refer to them, judge people in the courtroom from violating them, and sanction those countries who do not respect them. As long as we will continue to do this, human rights are as real as capitalism or the state of France – and even if you personally choose not to believe in them, they will still have an enormous effect on your life. The last remaining question that we have to answer is why we should choose to believe in this construct: and the answer is obvious. If we desire to live safely, happily and freely, it is necessary to respect the rights of others to do so as well. It is impossible to demand fair treatment while not being willing to give one in return: our society depends on our willingness to treat each other morally, and human rights provide a comprehensive framework for individuals, states and international organisations in order to ensure that. But the construct of human rights is a complicated one – for once, they are supposed to belong to each and everyone one of us. In other words, we all have equal rights, precisely because that is the one condition necessary to ensuring fair treatment for everyone. But as we noted in the beginning of this essay, that doesn't seem to be quite true in the current society. The atrocities routinely committed on inhabitants of Burma, Iraq or Nigeria is largely accepted as a matter-of-fact: indeed, we have come to comprehend as normal in those particular circumstances. Just compare the outcry that followed the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 – and the shrugs that accompanied news of massacres of Shiite Muslims in Iraq roughly at the same time. Similarly, the reactions to the suppression of freedom of speech of numerous Azeri are fairly muted: imagine the chaos that would ensue if a British citizen was treated the same way they are. That, of course, does not apply for everyone: there are many exceptions to this rule, human rights organisations who persist in reminding us of

the violations of human rights happening right now all around the world or individual voices that point out to the hypocrisy of it all, but the overall agreement seems to be clear: our society apparently has decided that there is a difference between the right to life of a young German woman and that of a Somali one. Arguably, there are numerous reasons behind this trend: we can point out to the information overload accompanying our existence on social media, the cognitive biases that affect the way we look at tragedies depending on their closeness to our everyday life, or the lack of power many people seem to feel when it comes to these human rights violation. One could argue that the rarity of these events in particularly developed parts of the world makes them so publicised. We could even say that the general population can't do otherwise – if they were to feel each tragedy in such magnitude, it would be incredibly damaging to their everyday life, especially if we consider the routine nature of many of those human rights violations. And some of these points might be even true: however, the fact is that although we may understand why this is happening, it does not make it justifiable. Normalisation of violence and human rights violations against anyone goes against the very principles behind human rights and their universality, and results in a hypocritical morality where we are willing to accept violence committed on others that we would not tolerate in our own group. Moreover, this phenomenon undermines the very integrity of our society: and to understand why that is true, we need to go back to the notion of human rights as a construct, and the weaknesses it has as such. As we have already observed, human rights have certain properties: for once, they are unalienable to each one of us, but they also carry certain implications, one of them being the assumption that they are necessary for a happy, fulfilling life. Both of these concepts – equality and a fulfilling life – are essential to the western approach to political and societal theory, so let us examine them both in a bit more detail. We have already thought a bit about the notion of equality as it applies to an individual, and that is of course crucial to our understanding of our society: after all, if we believe in equality, we have to conclude that democratic governance is the best model we have so far come up with to solve the question of 'how are we to govern ourselves'. The belief in democracy and equality naturally ties in with the concept of personal freedom and liberty, which is also connected to human rights, and as such, it forms the basis of the contemporary statehood theory: if we are all equal, we also deserve to be all free and have equal chances to participate in our governance – it is our right. Transcending the personal aspect of equality, this notion also forms the basis of the current international relations.

Organisations like the United Nations are founded on the assumptions that all states are equal and should have a say in the global politics: and their equality does not stem from their resources or their industry, but from the fact that their power comes from the people – and those all have the same right, whether they live in New Guinea or Canada, are rich or poor, Buddhist or atheist. Moreover, let us consider the concept of happiness. Whether we subscribe to Locke's or Hobbes' idea of the social contract, the idea behind existence of a state is to create conditions essential to a happy, fulfilling life. Both of these gentlemen may disagree on what exactly those conditions are, but the idea behind human rights is that they are this necessary ingredient for a good life: if you are unable to get an education, profess your faith without being persecuted or even live, your ability to choose and live a fulfilling life is severely limited, if not non-existent. And again, the idea that you should be able to do that is essential to the Western idea of a state – and international organisation operate at this principle as well, when they try to fund education or lobby for the release of political prisoners. This means that when we as a society start to relativize the value of individuals and their rights, we implicitly say that although we believe in equality and in a right to live a fulfilling life, there are certain degrees to this: and that some people are less equal than others, and some deserve to live better lives than the others. That undermines the very base of our political system – and results in a hypocritical morality that weakens our society, because it undermines the very concepts it stands upon. We have already observed that human constructs are specific in the way they function: namely, they are changeable and subject to universal belief. This, of course, applies to our political system as well – and it is necessary to address this in the context of the previous analysis of the connection between human rights and the concept of governance in contemporary global society. If we compromise on the universal nature of human rights as they are usually conceived of, it directly affects the way our political system works. Our belief in democracy is based on the notion of equality - however, if we value each individual's rights differently, this fundamentally undermines the efforts of establishing democratic governance in formerly authoritarian countries. One might argue that those efforts are often misguided – however, it is necessary to state that democratic governance, although it may be problematic, is so far the best model that allows for the most personal freedom, equality and human rights. Moreover, this also affects the way international organisations work: if we do not perceive individuals from different backgrounds as equal, that undermines the idea that all countries should be treated equally and be allowed to participate in the

global governance. Again, global governance is indeed desirable even if we note its issues: it allows for cooperation between countries to prevent war, famine or organise disaster relief on a previously unprecedented scale, and creates mechanisms that can be used to pressure individual countries into protecting individuals' right. So if our society is willing to compromise on equality, it undermines the mechanisms behind the working of these organisation, the efforts behind development aid and the drive to participate in these bodies. The last point is especially relevant in the relation to the concept of individual happiness – after all, why it should be necessary to participate in aid programs if we accept that life in some countries is simply worse than in the others, and that the inhabitants of other countries have a right to live better than them? These constructs need belief to function: but if our society behaves in a way that undermines their universality, there is no reason to believe in them for those who are left behind. Moreover, it also devaluates them in eyes of everyone else – and it is quite hard to believe in something you are aware has flaws of such magnitude. And finally, we have to observe the effect this relativization of morality has on the integrity of western society both on individual and global level. The constructs that create our society only work as long as we believe in them: if we regularly compromise on the basic principles of human rights, we weaken the concept itself. Indeed, why should anyone respect human rights of western citizens if they are willing to sacrifice the rights of others? And why respect democratic governance and international bodies, if they are being hypocritical about the very principles they are founded upon? For these reasons, it is necessary to comprehend human rights as universal: we cannot compromise on them if we all wish to live freely, equally and happily. Any transgression of human rights is a transgression of the ideals that constitute the base of our society, and an attack on the moral fabric of our world. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about Britons killed in Tunisia, young girls raped in India, defaced synagogues in the US or a persecuted dissident in China: we cannot pity one and normalise violence against the other without compromising our personal morality and the integrity of our society. The different reaction to the violation of human rights around the world shows the hypocrisy of our approach to the concept of human rights and weakens our moral and political integrity. In this essay, I have examined the existence of universal community in today's world and considered its relation to individual rights. I argue that although human rights are ultimately a societal construct, that itself does not mean it is not an influential one and moreover does not affect its validity, and have shown how compromising on the crucial

aspects of human rights such as equality is detrimental to the stability of our political system as well as to the notion of universal morality specifically because of its status as a human construct. I have also examined the relation between human rights and the democratic form of governance to show the effect relativization of individual rights has on our society, and concluded with refuting the hypocrisy of normalising violence against specific groups of people. Violation of human rights can never be treated as normal or ordinary without us compromising on the concept itself: either all of us are equal or no one is.