

Handout

Perspectives on Human Rights: Big Paper Quotations

Quotation 1:

Charles Malik (Lebanon):

Malik, who believed that the individual is born, at least in principle, with a number of natural rights, challenged the “collectivist” view: “The ‘human person [comes before] any group to which he may belong, whether it be class, race, or nation; his ‘mind and conscience’ were the ‘most sacred and inviolable things about him; the group can be wrong, just as the individual can be.”¹

Malik later added: “I’m not arbitrarily setting the state against the individual. But which, I ask, is for which? I say that the state is for the individual.”² The danger, in his view, is that the individual’s mind, creativity, expression, and freedoms could be subsumed by the collective. The collectivist approach, Malik felt, granted the state the power of “snuffing out any real personal liberty.”³

¹ Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), 52.

² Lash, *The Years Alone*, 53.

³ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), 39.

Quotation 2:

American Anthropological Association (United States):

“Because of the great number of societies that are in intimate contact in the modern world, and because of the diversity of their ways of life, the primary task confronting those who would draw up a Declaration on the Rights of Man is thus, in essence, to resolve the following problem: How can the proposed Declaration be applicable to all human beings, and not be a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America?”⁴

⁴ American Anthropological Association, “Statement on Human Rights,” *American Anthropologist* 49, no. 4 (1947): 539.

Quotation 3:

In June 1947, UNESCO set up a Committee on the Theoretical Bases of Human Rights to study the world's cultures, sending questionnaires to experts around the globe. Replies from scholars, philosophers, and political activists indicated that some rights were protected by all cultures.

Confucian philosopher Lo Zhongshu (China): "The problem of human rights was seldom discussed by Chinese thinkers of the past, at least in the same way as it was in the West. There was no open declaration of rights in China, either by individual thinkers or by political constitutions, until this conception was introduced from the West. . . . [However], the idea of human rights developed very early in China. . . . A great Confucianist, Mencius (372–289 BC), strongly maintained that a government should work for the will of the people. He said: 'The people are of primary importance. The [ruler] of least importance.'"⁵

⁵ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), 73–74.

Quotation 4:

Valentin Tepliakov (Soviet Union): “[M]ay I say that I have to make a short observation in regard to the four principles [personal liberty, freedom of speech and opinion, freedom of information and of the press, and freedom of religious worship] presented by the representative of Lebanon [Charles Malik]. . . . I would say I oppose such principles or the adoption of such principles for the Bill of Human Rights. . . .

First of all, these principles are wrong from the point of view that we are living as individuals in a community and a society, and we are working for the community and the society. The community has provided the material substance for our existence.”⁶

⁶ “Commission on Human Rights, Verbatim Record, Fourteenth Meeting [excerpt], February 4, 1947,” in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers*, ed. Allida Black, 506–509.

Quotation 5:

Hansa Mehta (India): “[T]his question should not be a matter of dispute. The Charter of the United Nations has already said that we are to uphold the dignity and worth of the human person. We are here to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, whether the human person comes first or the society. . . . Our object should be to uphold the dignity and worth of the human person. What are the rights which we should recognize, which will carry out this purpose? I think we should not enter into this maze of ideology at this stage. . . .”⁷

⁷ “Commission on Human Rights, Verbatim Record, Fourteenth Meeting [excerpt], February 4, 1947,” in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers*, ed. Allida Black, 506–509.

Quotation 6:

Eleanor Roosevelt (United States): “Many of us believe that an organized society, in the form of a government, exists for the good of the individual; others believe that an organized society, in the form of a government, exists for the benefit of a group. We may not have to decide this particular point, but I think we do have to make sure, in writing a bill of human rights, that we safeguard the fundamental freedoms of the individual. If you do not do that, in the long run, it seems to me that you run the risk of having certain conditions which we have just tried to prevent at great cost to human life, paramount in various groups.”⁸

⁸ “Commission on Human Rights, Verbatim Record, Fourteenth Meeting [excerpt], February 4, 1947,” in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers*, ed. Allida Black, 506–509.