WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?
THE FOUR-SCHOOL MODEL

This may sound surprising, but people think of human rights in different ways!

A close study of academic and other writings suggests that they are alternatively conceived as:

- A given – by God, nature, the universe (Natural School)
- Agreed – good principles of governance (Deliberative School)
- Fought for – the outcomes of social struggles (Protest School)
- Talked about – and often falsely proclaimed (Discourse School)

See illustrations on the right.

Each school holds a slightly different position on the foundation, universality, possible realisation, and legal embodiment of human rights – as hinted by the quotations included on the far-right of this poster.


Many people locate themselves in the model ‘squarely’ in one of its four quarters; others feel their position cuts across a number of orientations.
In this case, all kinds of permutations are possible, as suggested by the drawings below, collected from members of audiences to whom Marie has presented her model.

So, where would YOU locate yourself in Marie’s four human-rights school model?
There is no wrong answer, and Marie would be happy to hear your thoughts on her model. Feel free to email her:

Model and text: Marie-Bénédicte Dembour
Professor of Law and Anthropology
Brighton Business School
m.dembour@brighton.ac.uk

Illustrations and design: Con Chisoulis
BA (Hons) Graphic Design student
Faculty of Arts
www.facebook.com/con.chisoulis.artist

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NATURAL SCHOOL
‘If human rights are the rights one has simply because one is a human being, as they usually are thought to be, then they are held “universally.”’ by all human beings.
‘[Human rights claims rest on a moral (and international legal) entitlement.’
Jack Donnelly

DELIBERATIVE SCHOOL
We need to stop thinking of human rights as trumps and begin thinking of them as a language that creates the basis for deliberation...
[Rights are not the universal needs of a global society, but the shared vocabulary from which our arguments can begin…’
Michael Ignatieff

PROTEST SCHOOL
It is axiomatic that the historic mission of “contemporary” human rights is to give voice to human suffering, to make it visible, and to emancipate it.
‘[The origins of human rights are people in struggle and communities of resistance.’
Ugurzhan Epp

DISCOURSE SCHOOL
‘A lazy reliance on human rights absolves us from examining structural aspects of injustice and suffering and how we are implicated…’ It diverts us from a more difficult but more creative politics, which would examine global and local power relations and privilege, seek redistribution of power, authority and resources, and forge new alliances.
Jare K. Cowan

Please note that each school can be considered to have a flip-side:

Not so natural, after all
Deliberation is an exclusionary process
Things can get nasty – and violent
Something is better than nothing