

Rights Versus Wishes

Wed Mar 11, 2020, by Walter Williams



Going beyond the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Sen. Bernie Sanders said: "I believe that health care is a right of all people." He's not alone in that contention. That claim comes from Democrats and Republicans and liberals and conservatives. It is not just a health care right that people claim. There are "rights" to decent housing, decent food, a decent job and prescription drugs. In a free and moral society, do people have these rights? Let's begin by asking ourselves: What is a right?

In the standard usage of the term, a "right" is something that exists simultaneously among people. In the case of our U.S. Constitutional decree, we have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our individual right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness imposes no obligation upon another other than the duty of noninterference.

As such, a right imposes no obligation on another. For example, the right to free speech is something we all possess simultaneously. My right to free speech imposes no obligation upon another except that of noninterference. Similarly, I have a right to travel

freely. Again, that right imposes no obligation upon another except that of noninterference.

Sanders' claim that health care is a right does impose obligations upon others. We see that by recognizing that there is no Santa Claus or tooth fairy who gives resources to government to pay for medical services. Moreover, the money does not come from congressmen and state legislators reaching into their own pockets to pay for the service. That means that in order for government to provide medical services to someone who cannot afford it, it must use intimidation, threats and coercion to take the earnings of another American to provide that service.

Let's apply this bogus concept of rights to my right to speak and travel freely. In the case of my right to free speech, it might impose obligations on others to supply me with an auditorium, microphone and audience. It may require newspapers or television stations to allow me to use their property to express my views. My right to travel freely might require that others provide me with resources to purchase airplane tickets and hotel accommodations. What if I were to demand that others make sacrifices so that I can exercise my free speech and travel rights, I suspect that most Americans would say, "Williams, you have rights to free speech and you have a right to travel freely, but I'm not obligated to pay for them!"

A moral vision of rights does not mean that we should not help our fellow man in need. It means that helping with health care needs to be voluntary (i.e., free market decisions or voluntary donations to charities that provide health care.) The government's role in health care is to protect this individual right to choose. As Senator Rand Paul was brave enough to say, "The basic assumption that you have a right to get something from somebody else means you have to endorse the concept of theft."

Statists go further to claim that people have a "right" to housing, to a job, to an education, to an affordable wage. These so-called rights impose burdens on others in the form of involuntary servitude. If one person has a right to something he did not earn, it means that another person does not have a right to something he did earn.

The provision by the U.S. Congress of a so-called right to health care should offend any sense of moral decency. If you're a Christian or a Jew, you should be against the notion of one American living at the expense of another. When God gave Moses the Eighth Commandment — "Thou shalt not steal" — I am sure that He did not mean, "Thou shalt not steal — unless there is a majority vote in the U.S. Congress."