

Rights Versus Wishes

BY WALTER E. WILLIAMS



Critics of the U.S. health-care system often suggest that we should adopt the single-payer universal systems of other countries. The serious problems encountered by those systems are increasingly documented and well known, such as the long waiting lists, restrictions on physician choice, and rationing in countries such as Canada, Italy, Greece, and the United Kingdom.

People often suggest that our health-care system's problems stem from the fact that we have a free market; hence, their solution is to move to socialized medicine, where everyone has a right to a certain level of health care. The problem with that assessment is that our health-care system is not a free-market system. Over 50 percent of health-care expenditures are made by government at various levels, and there is extensive government regulation and control. Most of the problems of health care can be directly connected to that fact.

But there is a much more important question, not given much discussion, that will be the focus of this article.

Do people possess a right to health care whether they can afford it or not? If you believe the 2008 presidential aspirants, the answer is yes. In a Wisconsin campaign speech Senator Hillary Clinton said, "I believe health care is a right, not a privilege. And I will not rest until every American is covered." In a campaign speech in Iowa, Senator Barack Obama said, "I believe that every American has the right to affordable health care." While Senator John McCain has not said health care is a right, he nonetheless proposes greater government involvement. Many

Americans share the vision that health care is a right. Let us try to decide what is or is not a right.

Imagine that I meet an attractive young lady and ask her to date me. Suppose she refuses. Have my rights been violated? Or suppose I ask to live in your house, and you say no. Have you violated my rights to decent housing? Finally, suppose I knock on your door and tell you I am hungry and wish to share dinner with you and your family. If you refuse, have you violated my rights? I am sure that most Americans, including Senators Clinton, Obama, and McCain, would agree that I have no constitutional, human, or natural right to date someone, or to live in someone's house, or dine with him. But why?

Rights and Obligations

True rights, such as those in our Constitution, or those considered to be natural or human rights, exist simultaneously among people. The exercise of a right by one person does not diminish those held by another. It imposes no obligations on another except those of non-interference. I have a right to ask a lady for a date, but I have no right to impose an obligation on her to actually date me.

Similarly, I have a right to ask you to permit me to live in your house and dine with your family, but I have no right to impose such an obligation on you. Moreover, since I do not have these rights, I do not have a right to delegate authority to government to impose such obligations on another. In other words, from

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a moral point of view, one can delegate only those rights that one possesses.

To argue that people have a right that imposes obligations on another is absurd. This can be readily seen if we apply such an idea to my rights to speech or travel. Under that vision, my right to free speech would require government-imposed obligations on others to provide me with an auditorium, television studio, or radio station. My right to travel freely would require government-imposed obligations on others to provide me with airfare and hotel accommodations.

For government to guarantee a “right” to health care, or any other good or service, whether a person can afford it or not, it must diminish someone else’s rights, namely his rights to his earnings. The reason is that government has no resources of its own. Moreover, there is no Santa Claus or Tooth Fairy giving the government those resources. The fact that government has no resources of its own forces one to recognize that for government to give one American citizen a dollar, it must first, through intimidation, threats, and coercion, confiscate that dollar from some other American. In other words, if one person has a right to something he did not earn, it of necessity requires another person not to have a right to something that he did earn.

A better term for these new-fangled rights to health care, decent housing, and food is “wishes.” If we called them wishes, I would be in agreement with Clinton, Obama, McCain, and others. I also wish everyone had adequate health care, decent housing, and nutritious meals. However, if we called them wishes, there would be confusion and cognitive dissonance among people calling for socialized medicine. The average American would cringe at the thought of government punishing

one person because he refused to make someone else’s wish come true.

For example, if I simply had a wish for a palatial house and a Rolls Royce in my driveway, and Congress told its agents at the IRS to take other people’s money to make my wish come true, I am sure the average American would be offended. Americans would find it easier to live with their consciences, and find congressional initiation of force against others more palatable, if it were alleged that I have a constitutional “right” to a palatial house and a Rolls Royce. After all the primary job of government is to protect rights.

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We can evaluate the morality of rights versus wishes another way. Suppose someone initiated force to prevent another from exercising his speech rights and another stepped in to protect that person’s right to speak. Would the intervener be seen as a hero or villain? Most people would answer hero. Then suppose someone saw a homeless person in need of health care and did privately exactly what government does—initiate force to take someone else’s money to provide that homeless person with medical services. Would that person be seen as a hero or villain? Most people, at least I hope so, would see that person

as a villain. That is, taking the rightful property of one person to give to another, to whom it does not belong, is considered theft, and it is theft even if the proceeds are used for selfless purposes. It is theft whether two people or 300 million people agree to taking another’s property.

Finally, charitable efforts to help one’s fellow man in need are noble. Reaching into one’s own pockets to help is praiseworthy and laudable. Reaching into someone else’s pockets to do so is despicable and worthy of condemnation.

