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Are sustainability and human rights frameworks for understanding the ethical obligations of corporations compatible?

Reasons for thinking they are not:

- 1. Their normative logics are incompatible**
 - **consequentialist vs deontological**

- 2. Corporations have no problem casting their ethical obligations in the language of sustainability.**
 - **Compatible with the language of science and social science**
 - **Progress capable of measurement**
 - **Open to locating a firm on a continuum which allows for negotiation and progressive improvement**

- 3. In contrast, the corporate sector strongly resistant to the idea the corporations have direct non discretionary human rights responsibilities**
 - **Incompatible with the language of science and social science**
 - **Measurement irrelevant**
 - **Not open to negotiation**

Is it possible that the discussion of human rights is logically and ethically unconnected to or perhaps in conflict with discussions focused on the ethical obligations of corporations to future generations?

Why?

Focus of sustainability
Future generations

Focus of human rights
Those currently alive

Human rights trump other moral
obligations

Part I: What human rights are

Human beings

- rational, autonomous moral agents
- uniquely capable of making decisions guided by moral deliberation
- morally responsible for their decisions and actions.

The exercise of moral agency requires:

Freedom from morally arbitrary constraints limiting, blocking or preventing its exercise

Status as moral agent entails

A right to equality of access to resources and opportunities

A right to be treated with dignity in pursuit of values of one's own choosing

**Human rights are those rights
required to secure human freedom
equality and dignity**

**Respect for human rights confers
intrinsic and instrumental value
on human rights bearers**

Human rights as just described are:

- fundamental or core moral values
- universal
- intimately linked to human wellbeing
- overriding

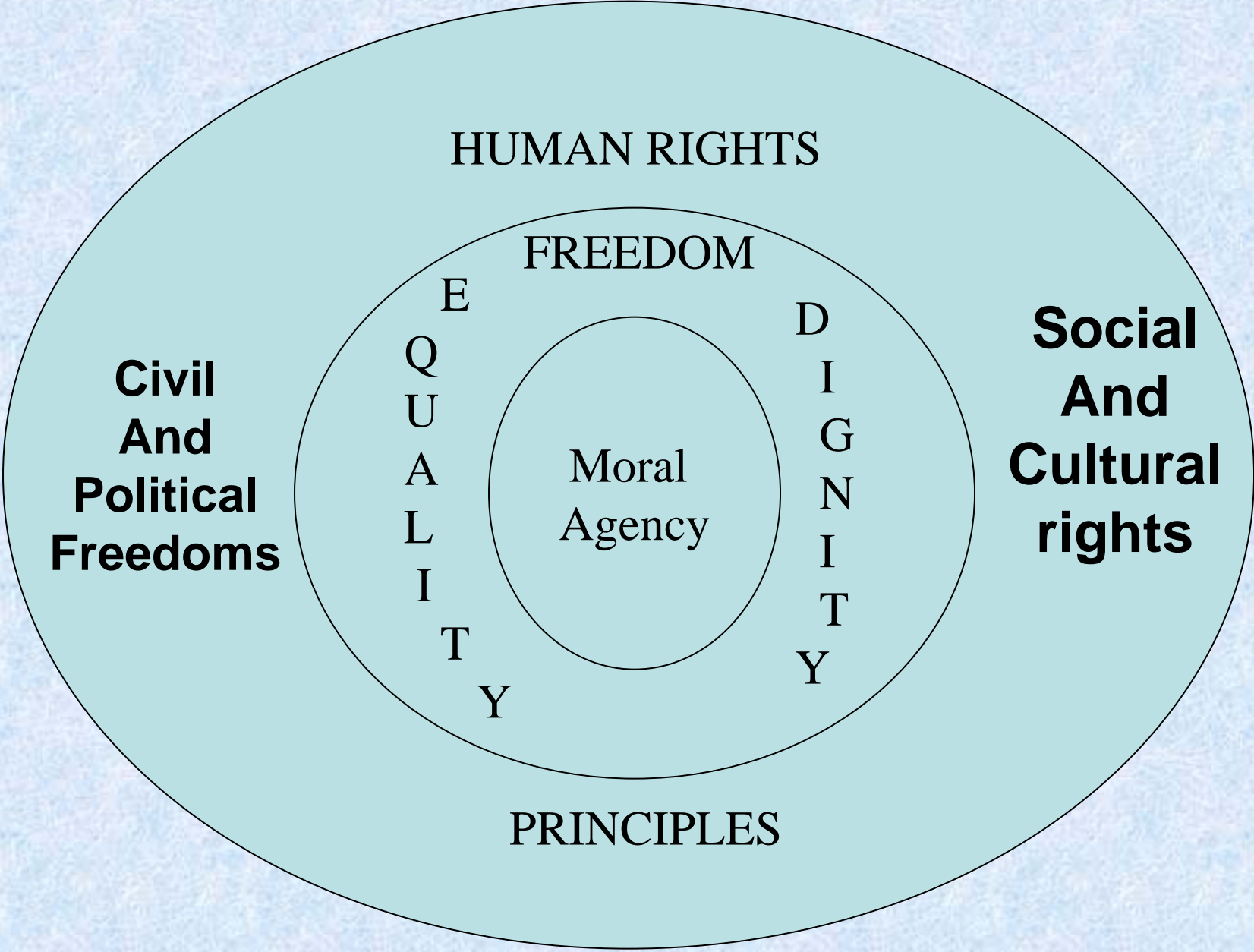
Finally

**To be claimed as a human
right a principle, value or
rule must be
institutionalizable**

It cannot be the case that there exists a human right that is universally worthy of respect unless that right is capable in principle and practice of being embodied in a matrix of rules and practices capable of guiding human behaviour.

Where rights are threatened

**There is an obligation to
institutionalize their protection**



HUMAN RIGHTS

FREEDOM

**Civil
And
Political
Freedoms**

**Social
And
Cultural
rights**

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Moral
Agency

PRINCIPLES

Part II: Human rights and future generations

The focus of human rights is the well being of those currently alive. Only existing persons can be human rights bearers.

However:

- human beings have moral obligations to future generations**
- It makes perfect sense to claim that those currently alive have an obligation to ensure that they do not undermine the capacity of future generations to create conditions required for the enjoyment of human rights in their life time**

Put positively

It makes perfect sense to claim that those now alive have an obligation to build and maintain conditions required to ensure that future generations are able to maintain and advance respect for human rights at a level equal to or greater than that enjoyed by people now alive.

There is an obligation to protect human rights where they are threatened.

It follows that there is an obligation to foster practices and institutions that protect and advance respect for human rights in the continuing present.

To undermine existing practices and institutions to achieve short term gains for people now alive would be to breach this obligation.

Part III:

Business, sustainability and human rights

The contribution that business can make to meeting the human rights obligations of those currently alive to future generations

- participate actively and in morally responsible ways in the building of patterns and practices designed to ensure the on-going protection of respect for human rights
 - Governments
 - business entities
 - themselves, competitors, associations, financial institutions
 - civil society organizations