The growing consensus in the West that human rights are universal has been fiercely opposed by critics in other parts of the world. At the very least, the idea may well pose as many questions as it answers. Beyond the more general, philosophical question of whether anything in our pluri-cultural, multipolar world is truly universal, the issue of whether human rights is an essentially Western concept ignoring the very different cultural, economic, and political realities of the other parts of the world cannot simply be dismissed. Can the values of the consumer society be applied to societies that have nothing to consume? Isn't talking about universal rights rather like saying that the rich and the poor both have the same right to fly first class and to sleep under bridges? Don't human rights as laid out in the international covenants ignore the traditions, the religions, and the socio-cultural patterns of what used to be called the Third World? And at the risk of sounding frivolous, when you stop a man in traditional dress from beating his wife, are you upholding her human rights or violating his?

This is anything but an abstract debate. To the contrary, ours is an era in which wars have been waged in the name of human rights, and in which many of the major developments in international law have presupposed the universality of the concept. By the same token, the perception that human rights as a universal discourse is increasingly serving as a flag of convenience for other, far more questionable political agendas, accounts for the degree to which the very idea of human rights is being questioned and resisted by both intellectuals and states. These objections need to be taken very seriously.

The philosophical objection asserts essentially that nothing can be universal; that all rights and values are defined and limited by cultural perceptions. If there is no universal culture, there can be no universal human rights. In fact, some philosophers have objected that the concept of human rights is founded on an anthropocentric*, that is, a human-centered, view of the world, predicated upon an individualistic view of man as an autonomous being whose greatest need is to be free from interference by the state free to enjoy what one Western writer summed up as the right to private property, the right to freedom of contract, and the right to be left alone. But this view would seem to clash with the communitarian one propounded by other ideologies and cultures where society is conceived of as far more than the sum of its individual members.

* centered on the human being
Relativism and universalism

The UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) enshrines universal rights that apply to all humans equally, whichever geographical location, state, race or culture they belong to. However, in academia there is a dispute between scholars that advocate moral relativism and scholars that advocate moral universalism. Relativists do not argue against human rights, but concede that human rights are social constructed and are shaped by cultural and environmental contexts. Universalists argue that human rights have always existed, and apply to all people regardless of culture, race, sex, or religion.

More specifically, proponents of cultural relativism argue for acceptance of different cultures, which may have practices conflicting with human rights. Relativists caution that universalism could be used as a form of cultural, economic or political imperialism. The White Man's Burden is used as an example of imperialism and the destruction of local cultures justified by the desire to spread Eurocentric values.[145] In particular, the concept of human rights is often claimed to be fundamentally rooted in a politically liberal outlook which, although generally accepted in Europe, Japan or North America, is not necessarily taken as standard elsewhere.[citation needed]

Opponents of relativism argue that some practices exist that violate the norms of all human cultures. A common example is female genital mutilation, which occurs in different cultures in Africa, Asia and South America[citation needed]. It is not mandated by any religion, but has become a tradition in many cultures. It is considered a violation of women's and girl's rights by much of the international community, and is outlawed in some countries.

The former Prime Ministers of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, and of Malaysia, Mahathir bin Mohamad both claimed in the 1990s that Asian values were significantly different from Western values and included a sense of loyalty and foregoing personal freedoms for the sake of social stability and prosperity, and therefore authoritarian government is more appropriate in Asia than democracy. Lee Kuan Yew argued that:

What Asians value may not necessarily be what Americans or Europeans value. Westerners value the freedoms and liberties of the individual. As an Asian of Chinese cultural background, my values are for a government which is honest, effective, and efficient.