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# Social Justice: Nobody Knows

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Davis Wadley

Dr. Houser

Intro to Social Justice

5 December 2016

## SOCIAL JUSTICE: NOBODY KNOWS

At the beginning of this year in intro to Social Justice, Dr. Wight had us sit in groups and attempt to answer some questions, such as, “what is justice?”, “what types of justice can you name?” and “how best do you correct deviations from justice?” The list of inquiries went on and on. As we sat there in our groups trying to answer these questions, I was just hit with this realization that I have absolutely no clue what justice is or how to answer any of these questions. This epiphany was troubling at first because I felt as if there was no hope for me in this class. But, thankfully, this class has taken me on a journey to get a better understanding of what exactly Social Justice is. This journey was guided by great novels and articles, great discussions, and some self reflection. After taking this journey for a full semester, I believe that social justice is applying justice to unjust situations in all parts of society; however what is unclear to me is what exactly is “justice”.

The first thing I have learned is that humans are social creatures, and that we desire and need to live in community. Also, I have learned that in order for humans to be able to be social there has to be a sense of justice. We all want to be around people. History gives evidence to support the socialness of humans. Since the dawn of man, we have lived in groups to survive. Over time people began to settle down, and change from being nomadic to staying in one place bringing about settlements, towns, cities, and nation states. History supports the concept that

humans come together to form society. It is what we have always done. According to Dr. Wight, what has stayed constant throughout all of these societies, from hunting groups to nation states, is each of them in order to exist they “had to have a sense of justice or trust.”(Wight) We need to be able to trust one another and know that things will pan out how we have agreed for them to. Thus, justice serves a supreme purpose in every society. The question is then, what is social justice for a society? Every society has to define this in order for it to exist because if they do not then there will be no sense of justice, and that society will struggle to exist.

For me, social justice in its most basic element is the attempt to bring just to the unjust in all parts of society. The hard part is figuring out what is just and unjust because it is not always black and white. I believe social justice is the application of justice to unjust situations because of what we have studied in class this semester. In reading about race issues, environmental issues, and identity issues we have had to answer personally for ourselves whether or not this treatment of people, or this issue within a society is just or unjust. We have been studying issues all year that required us to figure out whether or not it was just. Thus, if we have been studying issues and trying to see whether they were just or unjust, then this must be what social justice is. Thus, social justice is about answering whether something is just or not, and if it isn't just then it becomes about how to bring about change. The reason we must bring justice to injustice is because recall that society needs justice in order to exist. If we do not have a sense of justice, then society will struggle to exist.

One of the issues that we have covered that caused us to inquire whether it was just or unjust was the civil war that occurred in El Salvador. We studied this issue by reading, *The Massacre at El Mozote*. This book covers the heinous murders that were committed during the civil war in El Salvador by the El Salvadoran government on its own people, and how the United

States government knew of these atrocities yet continued to support the unjust government, so that El Salvador would not become a communist country. So, the U.S knowingly supported the killings of hundreds of civilians. All for the sake of keeping a country from turning to the “dark side.” No matter where you sit, this true story is sad, but were the murders committed by the government just? If it was unjust, was it just for the U.S to support such unjust actions?

These are questions that have to be answered in order to decide whether or not social justice needs to be applied. If it was unjust, then from the standpoint of social justice, justice needs to be applied to what has occurred in El Mozote. From my view, I see the government of El Salvador acting unjustly. In reading the book, the evidence supports that the government was acting unjustly. There was no proof that the people of El Mozote were supporters or sympathizers with the rebel army. And yet, the government army came in and murdered men, women and children. Why did they do this? What did it gain them? There seems to be no real justification for why they would do this. So, from my view the El Salvadoran government acted unjustly. Another question to ask is whether the acted U.S. unjustly by supporting such a vile government. This I do not know. It could be argued either way. Part of me sees that the U.S did act unjustly because they knowingly supported the murder of innocent people. But, part of me also feels that the U.S acted justly because they were trying to protect the ultimate welfare of this country by trying to stop them from becoming communist. This dilemma is ultimately what I still have to figure out. What is just and unjust.

An example that I do know that is unjust is how minorities have been treated in America. We covered the race issue in America by reading *The Scholar Denied*. This book is about W.E.B Du Bois and his struggle in academia. Du Bois was black and also a genius. He created the first sociology school in America and truly was miles ahead of anyone in that field,

but because he was black, he never got any recognition for his success and even today many do not know his significance, all because he was black. This book shows that racial tensions have affected society in many ways, including academia. From the standpoint of social justice it needs to be asked whether this treatment was just or not. If it was unjust, then justice needs to be applied. To me this was unjust because Du Bois like all of us in this world had no control over what color we would be when we entered the world. Judging someone off something they cannot control themselves is unjust to me.

There are situations where I believe I know what is just, like how the El Salvadoran government killed innocent civilians or how minorities have been treated in America. However there are still situations where I do not know what is just, like whether or not the U.S was unjust in supporting such an atrocious government for the sake of maximizing welfare. In covering all of these issues, I have learned that social justice is the application of justice to unjust issues because we have covered issues that caused us personally to answer whether or not the act was just or not.

This biggest struggle I have still is what is just and unjust. Thankfully though in this intro class we surveyed the field of how justice has been defined. So, I have a greater understanding of these approaches, but I still have not figured out which one I agree with. Let's take a look at how has justice been defined thus far. Justice has been broken up into many types and categories. For the sake of this paper we are going to focus on three types of justice covered in Michael Sandel's book, *Justice*. These three are the utility view of justice, the freedom view of justice, and the virtue view of justice. The utility view of justice is basically founded on the idea that, "morality consists in weighing the cost and benefits."(Sandel pg. 33) The founder of the utilitarianism view was Jonathan Benathan. (pg.34) His reasoning for why he believes in this

concept is, “we are all governed by the feelings of pain and pleasure.” They are our “sovereign masters.” (pg.34) Thus, we all have moments of pain and pleasure. Most would say that they would like to do what will bring about more pleasure than pain. Bentham believes we all are guided by this desire for pleasure over pain. Because of this notion within us all, whatever brings more pleasure than pain is the decision you should make. This goes as well for institutions. Lawmakers should look at a bill and decide whether this will bring about more happiness for more people or pain. This is a very interesting way of looking at justice and how to make decisions. One of the major benefits in looking at morality like this was that in theory it allowed decisions to become an equation.(pg.35) Thus, making the decision objective and easier.

However, there are some flaws in utilitarianism. A major one is that utility offers to put all costs and benefits on one standard scale. Basically, “everyone’s preferences count equally.”(pg.35) The major flaw in this is, is it “possible to translate all moral goods into a single currency of value without losing something in the translation?”(pg.35) Thus, can you really put everything on one standard? Could it be argued that some things are worth more than another? Sandel shows this argument by looking at the Ford Pinto debacle in the 70’s. The Pinto was a high selling car; however, it had a problem. It was prone to explode. Over 500 people died from these exploding cars. Finally, one family sued Ford for the death of their loved one. During this case, it was found out that this company knew about this problem in the car. But, they did not change it because they had run a cost benefit analysis, and through this study it was concluded that the cost of fixing the car was more than it would cost to pay families for the loss of their loved ones. So, they did not fix them.

Once this was learned in court, the jury quickly forced Ford to pay this family 2.5 million dollars.(pg.44) Sandel offers two thoughts for why the jury acted in this way, “perhaps, the jurors

considered it wrong for a corporation to assign a monetary value to human life, or perhaps they thought \$200,000 was egregiously low.” Either the court did not agree with the utilitarian approach of weighing things equally, or they thought the amount was too little. I believe that the court thought the utilitarian thinking was unjust. Why? Well for many reasons. One being that do we want to live in a society in which as long as this grants someone or a group of people happiness more than it brings about pain it’s okay for them to do it? Can you imagine the atrocities that would occur? This equation is awesome in theory. Yet, in practice you lose the qualitative differences between things. I believe the jury thought it wrong that people weighed money in the same way as a life. The reason for this is that I believe as do many in this world that a human life is on a different scale than what will make me more money. I believe you lose the qualitative differences in things by putting them on one scale and weighing cost vs. the benefits. Thus, I do not agree with Utilitarianism because it tries to simplify morality into an equation in which everything is equal, and in this equation we miss the qualitative differences in things. Such as, the difference between money and a life.

One who does not agree with the utility approach to justice may agree more with the freedom approach. A possible reason why is because they might believe that an individual has rights that cannot be imposed on. They might agree with this approach because they believe that justice should have more to do with freedom for the individual. That justice “means respecting freedom of choice.”(pg.260) This is one of the most heavily debated topics of what is justice. The basic concept of all the debates is that we should respect freedom. However, there are many schools of thought on how to implement this into action, and how far the limits go for respecting one’s freedom. One of the political theories that comes from the freedom approach to justice is libertarianism.

The main claim that libertarians believe in is that “each of us has a fundamental right to liberty, which is the right to do whatever we want with the things we own, provided we respect other people's rights to do the same.”( Pg.60) This means that in being a human you have the right to choose for yourself how you will live and make decisions. No one, including the government, should tell you what you can and can't do. Libertarians believe that the only way to respect the liberty of all is to have a minimal government. Basically, the MAN should not be involved in laws that protect people, moral legislation, or redistribution of wealth.(pg.60) Why? Because any of these laws would infringe on the right of an adult to choose as they please. The main reason they believe that man should be free to choose is because they believe that a man owns himself and because of this ownership anyone that commands a human to do something is infringing on the ownership of another.

Most democrats and republicans accept some form of libertarianism in their doctrine. Some liberals respect the rights of individuals to choose for themselves, while some republicans respect the right of an individual to be free to choose how to behave in the market. But, neither fully accept libertarian thinking in all of their policy. Many republicans do not agree with the idea that an individual is free to choose who to marry. While many democrats do not believe in a free laissez faire market based off of libertarian thinking. So many find trouble fully accepting the notions of Libertarianism.(pg.247)

The reason I believe this pattern occurs is because both sides have a notion of what the good life is. Both sides to a degree believe that in a sense we own ourselves and are free to choose what we do, but liberals and conservatives realize that we also all have morals and beliefs that affect how we view the world should work. These views come to light in their policies. A majority of democrats respect individual rights socially, but morally they struggle with concepts



of free markets because morally they do not like seeing people being taken advantage of. Therefore, they employ higher government regulation on markets.(pg.247) On the other hand, a majority of republicans believe in unfettered markets, but believe that the government should outlaw abortion and gay marriage because these issues go against their morals.(pg.247) Thus, both sides have morals that play into how they view the world. Basically both sides also believe in the virtue approach to justice.

This is the third category of justice in Sandel's book. According to the author, this approach believes that "justice involves cultivating virtue and reasoning about the common good."(pg.260) This approach opposes the idea of neutrality invoked by Kant and Rawls, and by libertarians. Freedom approach to justice demands that we "separate our identity as citizens from our moral and religious convictions." Basically, the freedom approach to justice from libertarians, kantians, and egalitarians command that what is right and wrong be neutral to any notion of the good life. This means that any law should not invoke any moral belief. So, when it comes to abortion, government should be neutral and allow you as an adult to choose for yourself what to do. The law should not tell you how you ought to live your life.

However, the virtue approach believes that "justice is cultivating virtue and reasoning about the common good."(pg.260) This means that justice should go about figuring out how we all should live. According to Sandel, this theory would in essence cause us to "reason about the meaning of the good life, and to create public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise."(pg.261) Sandel agrees with this approach to justice the most because he believes that justice ultimately cannot be neutral. He says "justice is inescapably judgmental." Thus, at some point justice has to decide what is the right way. He proves this point by citing the abortion debate that plagues modern politics. One side argues that abortion is the legal murder

of innocent children, while the other side argues that government should be neutral on moral issues. Sandel has a problem with the latter argument. His issue is that pro choice is not actually being neutral. They are in fact under the garment of neutrality saying that they do not believe that a life is made at conception.(pg.251) Thus, being neutral is not actually being impartial. Being pro choice in arguing for neutrality is actually making a moral claim just like their counterparts in the pro life camp. Therefore, being neutral is not always possible. If justice cannot be neutral, it has to answer moral problems such as abortion or gay marriage. This is the virtue approach to justice, building justice off what the good life is. And to do that you have to come together and decide what the good life is going to be.

However, I do see a flaw in this approach to justice. Which is, how do you implement that in this world? How does a society set about kindly arguing over what is worthy of virtue and honor in society and actually get anywhere? This virtue approach sounds like it could only happen in an ideal world. In my social justice class, we were able to discuss very difficult things mercifully, but we never answered any moral claims. All we were left with were the differences we had before. So in arguing over what is worthy of honor, could you ever actually find an answer? Or would you still be left with the differences you had before? In practice I do not see how this would get society anywhere.

In recap, the first approach to justice is utility, which is maximizing the general welfare. This view of justice is implemented through utilitarianism. Then, there is the freedom approach of justice, which believes that you have to respect the freedom of choice. This view could be implemented through either libertarianism, egalitarianism, or somewhere in between. Finally there is the virtue approach to justice, which argues that justice should implement what a society decides is the good life. All of these views of justice have there flaws as well. The utility

approach can cause us to lose some of the qualitative differences between pleasures. Like in the Pinto case. Some would say there is a difference between life and money. The freedom approach can cause us to stake a claim on neutrality, which in practice being neutral is not always what you can be. Real world examples of the inability to be neutral would be abortion and gay marriage. And last but not least, the virtue approach could be hard to implement into real life.

Sandel's book, *Justice*, has truly allowed me to survey the field of justice and see how others have answered what is just and how to implement that view. It has been intriguing and confusing, and I do not fully understand all of the arguments given in the book, but what I have learned is that in a society not everyone can agree with what is justice. This book proves this notion. Thinkers over hundreds of years have not agreed and probably will continue to not. This realization that nobody can fully agree on what is justice has been really hard for me. Mainly because if not everyone can agree then how are we ever going to build a truly just society? Maybe, we do not have all have to agree in order for us to achieve a just society.

This book has also allowed me to think a lot about social justice. By surveying how people have defined justice, I have learned how people see what is just and unjust. This helps me in applying social justice because recall that I believe that social justice is the attempt to bring justice to the unjust in all situations. I now know how people see what is just and unjust. What is left for me now is to figure out what I think is just and unjust. I don't agree with any of the three views fully yet because I need to spend more time with them before I can stake my claim on one of them. Also, I need to study more issues and see which view brings about more answers that sit well with me.

There is still more self exploration that I need to do in order to fully understand what is social justice. After taking an intro class to social justice, I believe that social justice is the

attempt to bring justice to unjust situations in all parts of society because we have covered issues that caused us to inquire whether or not it was just. Social justice deals with figuring out what is just and then bringing that justice to unjust situations. This has been a very hard class, and my thoughts on social justice and what is just, could very possibly change throughout the rest of my life, but for now, I believe that social justice is the attempt to bring justice to unjust situations in all parts of society. The struggle is then figuring out what is just and unjust.

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