

Downward Mobility: Rediscovering a Narrative of Justice

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In this paper, social justice is defined by examining key perspectives of what it is from philosophy, theology, and biology. We will note where it is absent in order to discover *what people deserve* in a society governed by social justice. All of this will be evaluated in light of the *Carmen Christi*, the Hymn of Christ from Philippians 2. The example of Christ's self-emptying (*kenotic*) refusal to consider equality with God (*harpagmos*) a thing to be grasped provides a crucial framework that enables us to emulate self-sacrificial altruism.

The innovations of modern man have brought the world as we know it to a mystifying, often mind-bending, threshold of the future. In less than 15 years, the Internet has drastically modified the way we work, the way we shop, the way we communicate – even the way we think. Within the last year, we've landed a spacecraft from earth on the face of a comet travelling at greater than 100,000 kilometers per hour at a distance of 510 million kilometers away.¹ At the Whitehead Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, scientists have enzymatically and genetically modified red blood cells to carry drugs and other substances for delivery to specific sites in the body.²

An alarming conundrum exists therein, however. Never in the history of mankind have we relished such an abundance of wealth, resource, and economic power; and yet countless numbers of the world's citizens are still ravaged by hunger and poverty on a daily basis. Indeed, as the science-fiction writer William Gibson keenly notes, "The future is here – it's just not very evenly distributed."³ It is out of this identification of inequality in the world that we discern a need for justice in the world.

Throughout this paper, I will first define social justice through an examination of its nature and by taking note of where it is markedly absent. Subsequently, I will briefly survey the history of social justice, by highlighting the key perspectives on justice from philosophy, theology, and biology which have shaped the way that we have come at this matter of *what people deserve* for centuries. Finally, I will show how the *Carmen Christi*, the Hymn of Christ from Philippians 2, provides a crucial framework that enables us to approach justice in a well-rounded, holistic manner that will serve to empower us to be difference makers in our own lives.

Social Justice

Before we can even begin to talk about social justice, it is necessary to define it. John Rawls, one of the most widely regarded American philosophers of the 20th century, proposes a theory on social justice widely referred to as "justice as fairness." His political philosophy, aptly dubbed Rawlsianism, begins with the argument that "the most reasonable principles of justice are those everyone would accept and agree to from a fair position."⁴ Similarly, Michael Sandel, whose work entitled *Justice: What's*

¹ Kramer, 2014

² Fearer, 2014

³ National Public Radio, 1999

⁴ Rawls, 1995, p.774-75

the Right Thing to Do? posits plainly that justice is a matter of people getting what they deserve.⁵ Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II:57) defined justice as an egalitarian relationship in a social fabric and with an innate nature that was social.

While none of these definitions are by any means an exhaustive description of what it means to do justice, it is ultimately these views that will provide a framework for our understanding of what social justice means.

The need for justice is predicated by the awareness that our world contains a disturbing presence of injustice. Thus, to appreciate the need for justice, we must be exposed to specific examples of injustice that occur in the world. Among the most rampant pathologies of our world today is poverty. In his 1964 Nobel Laureate address, Dr. Martin Luther King powerfully describes the issue of poverty thusly:

Like a monstrous octopus, [poverty] projects its nagging, prehensile tentacles in lands and villages all over the world. Almost two-thirds of the peoples of the world go to bed hungry at night. They are undernourished, ill-housed, and shabbily clad. Many of them have no houses or beds to sleep in. Their only beds are the sidewalks of the cities and the dusty roads of the villages.⁶

Wage Inequality

In the United States, this issue of poverty is exacerbated by a rapidly increasing income inequality. The extent of this inequality is noted in the Economic Policy Institute's 2012 report, which revealed that from 1978 to 2011, CEO compensation increased more than 725%; yet, worker compensation during the same time period increased by a meager 5.7%.⁷ This information translates into an equally unjust reality: in 2007, CEOs of major corporations were paid an average of 344

times the average worker's pay.⁸ This continually widening gap in compensation presents some rather unfortunate implications. While pay scales are not inherently unjust, when monetary compensation is thought of as an implicit judgment of worth (e.g. your time is worth \$X/hour to me), the root of the injustice is discovered. Are CEOs inherently 344 times more valuable than those cleaning the hallways and the bathrooms? If they are, then perhaps such a discrepancy is justified, but if they are not, then something must change.

Human Trafficking

Another issue that illustrates the depth of injustice that can be found in the world is human trafficking. To avoid falling into the semantics of what is and is not technically considered human trafficking, I will simply adopt the definition put forth by the Polaris Project, which defines human trafficking as "a form of modern slavery where people profit from the control and exploitation of others."⁹ This trafficking takes place in various forms, such as sex trafficking and labor trafficking.

Understandably, human trafficking is a secret underground crime, so quantifying the extent of its effect is rather difficult. However, it is estimated that 12.3 million adults and children are in forced labor and forced prostitution around the world. Between six and eight hundred thousand people are trafficked across international borders each year; 14,500-17,500 of those enter into the United States.¹⁰ The conclusion is evident: human trafficking is not someone else's issue. It is here in our own backyards.

⁵ Sandel, 2009, p.19

⁶ King, 1964

⁷ Mishel and Sabadish, 2012

⁸ Francis, 2009

⁹ Combating Human Trafficking and Modern-day Slavery. Polaris Project.

¹⁰ Human Trafficking | North Carolina, 2011.

Social Justice in History Jewish Perspectives

Now that we've taken the time to define social justice and to look at two specific instances of injustice that have made themselves evident in modern society, we must engage in a dialogue with history. As the brilliant English writer H.G. Wells once said, "Human history in essence is the history of ideas," and indeed, we must consider first where we (and our ideas) have come from in order to provide some context not only to where we are, but also to where we are going.

The earliest conception of justice that we will explore takes its form in the Year of Jubilee, an event that took place in Jewish culture once every 50 years during which debts were forgiven, slaves were freed, and liberty was proclaimed for all people. Unlike the other approaches to justice we will discuss, the Year of Jubilee embodies an understanding of justice rooted not only in cultural norms, but also in legal ones. The original command for observing the year of Jubilee can be found in the book of Leviticus, the third book of the Jewish Torah, which contains laws about sacrifice, the institution of priesthood, sanctions concerning uncleanness, regulations for the Day of Atonement, and instructions for holiness.¹¹

The central text concerning this year of liberation comes from Leviticus 25 which allows for a period of every forty-nine years when on the Day of Atonement it is announced that the next year, the fiftieth, shall be a year a jubilee. Part of the celebration of this jubilee involved returning to their homelands and their clan. During this time, no one planted, harvested or gathered grapes from the undressed vines. It

was a holy time when all debts were forgiven: the slate of inequality was wiped clean.

The Gospel of Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry (4:18-19) is clearly informed by this interpretation of justice, as Jesus invokes the language of Jubilee when he quotes the prophet Isaiah on Yom Kippur. Standing in the synagogue of Nazareth on the Sabbath, he read to the people:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

This powerful statement of purpose sets the tone for a ministry that leans heavily on principles of justice, and is one of the more distinct themes found throughout the Gospel of Luke. Having found the Jewish notion of justice well established in the year of Jubilee, we move on to a set of moral philosophies that portray social justice as a reflection of cultural norms.

Greek Perspectives

The first of these perspectives comes from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose system of virtue ethics informed his idea that justice is both teleological and honorific.¹² Aristotle discusses teleology (from the Greek *telos*; end, purpose, or goal) from an understanding that in order to determine who deserve what, we must first understand the purpose of the good being distributed.

In an appearance on the Philosophy Bites podcast series, Michael Sandel describes more intuitively the teleological approach to justice in this manner:

Suppose a Stradivarius violin is up for sale, and a wealthy collector outbids Itzhak Perlman (a world-famous violinist) for it. The collector wants to

ideation of distributive justice finds its end in the understanding that justice discriminates according to the appropriate virtue.

¹¹ Wenham, 1979, p.3-4

¹² The term "honorific" is meant to imply that it is concerned primarily with what virtues or excellences should be honored and rewarded. Therein, Aristotle's

display the violin on the wall over his fireplace in the living room as a prestige conversation piece. Wouldn't we regard this as something of a loss, perhaps even an injustice – not because we think the auction is unfair, but because the outcome is unfitting? A great Stradivarius does not belong inert on the wall of a rich man's house. It belongs in the hands of a great violinist, as it was meant to be played.¹³

This teleological understanding of justice is a vital part of our modern interpretations of justice, though few consciously acknowledge it. In fact, our understanding of nature as a whole has tended to shift from a teleological understanding (the universe as having a divinely ordered purpose) to a more mechanistic one (the universe as being subject to the natural laws that govern it). As Sandel keenly notes, despite this paradigm shift, the temptation to see the world as teleologically ordered – to understand the cosmos as a purposeful whole – is not entirely absent.¹⁴

Teleological ideas of justice are also ingrained in virtue ethics. However, Aristotle's moral philosophy serves as a crucial mediator between the next two philosophical informants of social justice: Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian calculus and Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative.¹⁵

Utilitarian Ethics

Jeremy Bentham, one of the most influential English moral philosophers of his time, is widely considered to be the father of utilitarianism. The premise of utilitarianism is quite simple, and superficially appealing: the right thing to do is whatever will maximize happiness for the most people. A rather ambiguous proposition in itself, Bentham substantiates his idea by

suggesting that we are all governed by two “sovereign masters”: pleasure and pain. We all enjoy pleasure and are averse to pain, and thus, whatever decision maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain is the morally right decision. Bentham calculates the overall utility of a particular action based on his model referred to as felicific (or hedonic) calculus.

This methodology calculates utility based on seven discrete variables including intensity (How strong is the pleasure?), duration (How long will the pleasure last?), and extent (How many people will be affected?).¹⁶ As one might expect, there was a rather forceful push back against Bentham's ideas, especially by philosophers such as Immanuel Kant.

One of the biggest objections to utilitarianism is that it utterly fails to respect individual rights in its evaluation of utility as more important than human rights and dignity.¹⁷ Another point of contention with utilitarianism is the fact that it attempts to reduce all moral goods to a single value of currency. Those with objections along this line tend to submit that you simply cannot calculate happiness, especially using such narrow parameters. Bentham's utilitarianism is not entirely devoid of redeeming qualities, however. Taken to its logical conclusion, utilitarianism makes a resounding call to justice by charging each individual to engage in those actions that bring pleasure to the greatest number of persons and to avoid those which bring about suffering. The application of this ideology to social justice is fairly straightforward: be excellent to one another, acting as an agent of pleasure rather than a harbinger of pain.¹⁸

¹³ Sandel, 2011

¹⁴ Sandel, 2009, p.189

¹⁵ For more on Aristotle's virtue ethics, see Sandel, 2009, p.184-207.

¹⁶ The Hedonistic Calculus, 2009.

¹⁷ This is a criticism that Bentham did not seem to mind too much, as he dismissed natural rights outright, calling them “nonsense upon stilts.”

¹⁸ For more on Bentham's utilitarianism and a variation proposed by John Stuart Mill, see Sandel, 2009, p.31-57.

Kantian Ethics

As mentioned previously, there was a significant reaction in response to Bentham's cold utilitarian calculus. One of the most significant opponents to the utilitarian moral philosophy was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Resisting the idea that happiness can be calculated on the basis that this leaves human rights vulnerable, Kant instead links justice to freedom – acting autonomously in accordance to a law that I give myself. To clarify his understanding of autonomy, Kant invents a contrasting word: heteronomy. To act heteronomously is to act according to determinations imposed outside of the self.¹⁹ The outworking of Kant's conception of freedom leads him to a number of categorical imperatives that necessarily influence the way that justice ought to be done from a Kantian perspective.

The first formulation of Kant's categorical imperative states: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction."²⁰ This first formulation essentially asks the question, "What would society look like if everyone did that?" This universalization of the moral maxim is Kant's way of ensuring that the goodness of a moral proposition is not tied to any particular set of conditions or to the benefit of any particular person.

Kant's second formulation reads: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity... never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."²¹ It is the second formulation of the categorical imperative, which is derived

from the first that inspires a pointed philosophy of justice. By treating others as ends in themselves, we are compelled to further not only our own ends, but the ends of others as well. If any person should desire something for himself or herself, it would thus be their moral duty to seek that same end for all others equally.

This consideration is invoked, albeit not explicitly, by the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes*²², which reads: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."²³ And indeed, human progress in the area of social justice cannot be effectively achieved without identification with the poor, a bold concept that I will discuss in more detail later.

Social Justice: Biological Perspectives

Before we consider justice from a predominately Christian perspective, there is one important contributor left to consider: the biological perspective. There is perhaps nothing more basic about us than our biology and its innate chemistry, and so it is well worth considering what biology has to contribute to the conversation about justice. Initial conceptions of justice from the biological perspective seem to be rather bleak. Richard Dawkins, an English evolutionary biologist and author of *The Selfish Gene*, describes the most fundamental biological truth to be "the gene's law of universal ruthless selfishness."²⁴ In Dawkins' view, organisms

¹⁹ An example of this cited by Sandel (2009) is the idea of falling. If I fall from a height, I am not acting freely, but the law of gravity (a thing outside myself) is governing my motion.

²⁰ Kant, 1993

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965. Latin for *Joy and Hope*, this work was written by The Pastoral Constitution

on the Church in the Modern World; it was a product of the Second Vatican Council promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Dawkins, 1989, p.3.

behave so as to benefit themselves at cost to others. Limited resources necessitate competition in this understanding of the world, and so the selfish choice is the one that makes possible the passing of one's genes to the next generation. As it relates to justice, the end goals of social justice are in their very nature anti-Darwinian.

Evolutionary biology tells us that the strongest, most "fit" individuals leave more progeny behind than the weaker, unfit individuals and thus their progeny die out. The bottom line of social justice, however, asks us to advocate for the disadvantaged, the powerless, the marginalized – those who, under strict selection or "Darwinism," are destined to be removed from the gene pool by natural selection. Indeed, this understanding of the way the world ought to work is colder than even Bentham's methodically calculated moral system.

As with Bentham, though, all is not irredeemable. We evolved via adaptation to be competitive, to seek out mates, and to garner resources; individuals who did this survived long enough to produce offspring who behaved in much the same way. Once society started to develop and cities formed, however, we discovered that so-called "ruthless selfishness" could only get us so far. The only way to truly get ahead, it seemed, was to cooperate with one another – social altruism.²⁵

There are a number of philosophers such as Ayn Rand, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume who tend to reject the concept of altruism entirely, claiming it to be an impossible illusion. Thinkers aligning with these philosophers contend that we are by nature egoists in pursuit of our own gain, even when we are performing seemingly

selfless acts. Following this thinking, those who argue for altruism are either trying to deceive us, or are themselves deceived into the practice of this maladaptive behavior.

An Intersection of Science and Religion?

Careful exegesis of the New Testament love command and research on altruism in the field of sociobiology, however, point towards a well-known phenomenon known as *pro-social behavior*. There are three basic motifs found at this intersection of sociobiology and the New Testament:

- 1) An *Awareness of Expanding Inclusiveness*, which incites us to look beyond the most immediate neighbor in the outworking of love and/or altruistic behavior. (cf. Luke 10:25-37)²⁶
- 2) An *Awareness of Excessive Demand* that deals with the question of the capability of human beings to meet what seems to be an excessive demand for altruism (e.g. altruism's self-sacrificial quality, cf. Matthew 18:21-22).²⁷
- 3) A *Threshold Awareness*, a radical turn of human beings towards one another and towards God in response to the radical turn towards human beings by God (cf. John 13:34).^{28, 29}

Working from this understanding, it would seem that altruistic or pro-social behavior is not only possible, but also compulsory to a mature and complete expression of faith.

Christian Social Justice

Any of these approaches to justice, it seems, is not enough in and of itself to give a complete vision for doing justice. Justice functionally requires every human being to privilege a defining narrative that shapes at

²⁵ The definition of altruism that I will use is "other-regarding behavior that benefits the other without expectation of reciprocity or reward to the self".

²⁶ This is the story of the Good Samaritan.

²⁷ This is the response to Saint Peter that he should forgive others excessively.

²⁸ This is the example of loving one another as Jesus had.

²⁹ Brannan, Boyd, and Meisinger, 2004.

the most fundamental level the way that justice is perceived and achieved. All of the narratives and philosophies we've discussed so far are good, and they can even serve as a right foundation for understanding justice, but they simply aren't enough. If Bentham, Kant, Aristotle, and even our very own biology cannot provide a defining narrative to our understanding of justice, what can?

I submit that for Christians, the functional narrative for our understanding of social justice ought to be found in the *Carmen Christi*, the Hymn of Christ contained in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippian church (verses 5-11). The text refers to having the mind of Christ who, despite being God refuses to be equal to God (Greek: *αρπαγμα*; *harpagmos*), and empties himself (*kenosis*) to be a servant in human form so that he could humble himself on the cross. God then exalts Jesus to a level that all creatures will confess him as Lord.

Simply put, the epistle to the Philippians is about conflict management, but its implications are far-reaching. Later in his letter, Paul entreats two women of the church, Euodia and Syntyche, to "agree in the Lord," but he does so only after putting forth concrete examples of how to behave in a self-sacrificing kind of way: live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ,³⁰ count others more important than yourselves out of humility³¹, set your thoughts on those things that are pure, lovely, and excellent.³²

Within the hymn itself, however, we find the narrative that provides a framework for our understanding of justice, and it can be found in the Greek word *harpagmos*. This word, which indicates a refusal to strive after or to violently grasp something, sets forth a principle of non-exploitation that is at the heart of a gospel-centric approach to social justice. The text reveals that though

Jesus was 100% God and 100% man (a doctrine referred to as hypostatic union), he did not consider this innate divinity an advantage to be exploited for gain, but rather, he took the option of vulnerability, knowing that it would lead to death.

N.T. Wright, one of the leading New Testament scholars of the 20th and 21st centuries, explains that "the real theological emphasis of the Philippian hymn is not merely a new view of Jesus, but a new understanding of the character of God; incarnation and crucifixion are to be seen as *appropriate* vehicles for the dynamic self-revelation of God."³³

What is all of this to say? Is power to be approached from a top down perspective? Does God exercise absolutely, as an authoritarian? If the Philippian hymn is a reliable witness to the character of God, these questions are answered with a resounding "No!" On quite the contrary, God seems to work from a place of vulnerability and subsequently, from a place of advocacy.

Conclusion

So the question remains: can *we* be just? Well, probably not. I can speak only for myself, but to love in the radical, self-giving, non-exploitative way illustrated in the Christ hymn seems to be what the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr might call an "impossible possibility."³⁴ True justice by that definition cannot be perfectly recognized in this present human existence. We can, however, reach nearer and nearer approximations of justice by working towards mutual best interest. By couching our understanding of justice in the defining narrative of the Philippian hymn and non-exploitation, we're given the opportunity to engage in advocacy for

³⁰ Philippians 1:27

³¹ Philippians 2:3

³² Philippians 4:8

³³ Wright, 1986.

³⁴ Niebuhr, no date.

justice by looking to the interests of others – by making the conscious decision to act as our brother’s keeper.

The call to vulnerability isn’t to say that we ought to address social issues through charity alone, but it is to implore us to initiate systemic change by opening our hands. The opening of hands positions us to be able to give as we release the things we so desperately cling to, but it also positions us to receive as we learn from the experiences and deep insights of others. This opening of hands to give does not mean I’m trying to not have enough – I’m not attempting to neglect myself or have absolutely nothing – but instead it means that I invite the “other” into such proximity with my own life that I quit throwing away (or hoarding) my possessions. After all, we only give what God has already given us.

While true instances of self-

sacrificial altruism are typically episodic and likely the exception rather than the rule,³⁵ by operating in such a way that I will be vulnerable, I maintain the only effective way to meet the needs of others. Perhaps the poet John Donne thought it best, when he wrote:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for
whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.³⁶

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³⁵ Brannan and Gillett, 2005, 21-22. Self-sacrificial altruism seems reserved for saints and saviors.

³⁶ Donne, 1624.

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