

2. *Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth of system of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.*

- John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, p. 1

John Rawls, one of the most influential moral philosophers in modern times, insisted on the fundamental importance of *justice* when discussing societal issues. This is, however, not a very new idea. The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato were extremely concerned with justice as the basis for political thought. After all, what is Plato's *Republic*, the first work on political philosophy in Western history, but a book on justice and a just society? In the modern world, however, it might be argued that pragmatism and the emphasis of *practical* solutions to social problems are relevant. Instead of pursuing some abstract form of justice, politicians and activists in the Western world are usually occupied with economic and fiscal matters, placing the "practical" over the "moral". Recently the Norwegian fiscal minister published the suggested State budget, and in her speech, she argued why the budget was economically feasible rather than "virtuous" or "just". Similar attitudes are present all over the world. Rawls tells us that this way of thinking is wrong, and that justice is a greater value than economic efficiency. Is he right? How should we think about justice compared to other ends and values?

First, we must identify and analyze justice itself. In this quote, Rawls states that justice is the *first virtue* of social institutions, comparing it to the role of truth in intellectual exercise and thought. A virtue, as Aristotle put it, is a habit which is considered good. A virtuous person is thus not someone who engages in a good action at a certain moment but doing good *regularly*. If you assist an old lady in crossing a road once, you are performing a deed, but if you do these seven hundred times, you are performing virtue. In societal terms, this means that members of society in general, either collectively or individually, do moral or good habits. It should be noted that being virtuous is not doing what you *believe* is good but doing what *is* good. Hence, it could be argued that virtue, and consequently justice, presupposes an *objective moral standard* to determine which actions are good or bad. Now, if justice is a virtue, as Rawls insisted, then a person is considered just if he regularly engages in certain actions that are inherently *good*, i.e. just actions. A *just* society is thus a society embodying habits which together forms justice.

As Rawls clearly implies, justice is inherently good. When a person tells you that “I was treated unjustly by that bureaucrat.” we intuitively understand that to be something wrong. If something is just, it is necessarily moral and good, and if the thing is unjust, it is consequently wrong and unethical. Hence, regardless of the specific *content* of justice, it would be reasonable to suggest that justice is, by nature, inherently good and moral. However, this understanding, it may be argued, does not exclude the possibility of it coming into conflict with other valued ends. Some actions or events might be considered materially pleasurable or practical, but simultaneously unjust. So, what should a person or society do when there is a conflict between justice and say, economic progress? Rawls says that the answer is clear, justice should always be the top priority. If certain laws and institutions are unjust, they must be eliminated, regardless of how essential they may be to fulfill some practical or economic end.

On the other side, one could answer that justice, while certainly desirable, should sometimes be *compromised*. In other words, there are simply some cases in which the practical and pragmatic is more important than the just. Even Plato, famous for his works on justice, states that while his description of a just society is desirable in theory, it is reasonable to reject it in our non-theoretical, practical world. That is, while an idea might work in theory, it does not properly function in our own societies. In our world, practical solutions are important. Justice belongs to the intellectual world. Today, many right-wing politicians use this reasoning when opposing socialists and communists, that these left-wing ideals might be theoretically just, but they are unrealistic and impractical, and should therefore be dismissed.

However, one could make the case that such an objection is *self-refuting*. If you insist that “this course of action, although just, ought to be rejected on pragmatic grounds.” you have, in that sentence, a *moral judgement*. By stating that justice or goodness should sometimes be discarded, you are implying that it is sometimes good to reject the just. Hence, ironically, you are claiming that it is *just* to reject *justice*! By attempting to criticize justice itself, you are making your own values the content of what you supposedly reject. As I explained earlier, justice is necessarily something which is good and moral. Thus, to state that sometimes you ought not to do the just, you are implying that it is sometimes moral to do the immoral, and the contradiction is revealed.

Let me demonstrate with an example. Jens Stoltenberg, the former Norwegian prime minister, is currently the General Secretary of the military alliance NATO. In Stoltenberg’s earlier years, he was opposed to Norwegian membership to this organization, possibly on moral

grounds. By working as its secretary, his position has obviously changed. Now, let's say that you debate Stoltenberg on whether Norway ought to be a member of NATO or not. You take the negative stand, and Stoltenberg the affirmative. Stoltenberg might argue: "Although I agree with you that soldiers have acted unjustly in many wars throughout the decades in the name of NATO, and I can therefore agree that NATO is morally unjust, Norway ought still to become a member because this secures peace and harmony for the Norwegian people. True, I reject justice on this matter, but sometimes we ought to do that for the wellbeing of our people." You, eager to respond, can thus point out that Stoltenberg has committed a contradiction in his very words. You may ask him: "If the just is inherently good, and we ought sometimes to reject justice for the wellbeing of our country, are you not arguing that it is good, and therefore just, to prioritize the wellbeing of our country? That it is sometimes just to discard justice?" If Stoltenberg argues that we ought to become a member of NATO, he is necessarily implying that it is *good and just* to enter that membership. He thinks that "securing peace and harmony of the Norwegian people" is *itself* a good. True, he might still argue that NATO commits regularly unjust actions, but he is simply making a compromise between what is *less* just and what is *more* just. What Stoltenberg is actually arguing is that it is *more* just for Norway to be a member compared to *not* be a member of NATO. In other words, it is, according to Stoltenberg, deeply unjust to put the Norwegian peace and harmony at risk, *more so* than the unjust actions of certain NATO soldiers. True, you both would disagree on *which* course of action is just, i.e. the specific *content* of justice, but you do agree that justice *itself* should be valued.

The conclusion is that John Rawls' statement could be rationally defended in the face of pragmatistic objections. The just must always be prioritized over other goals and arguing the opposite leads one into self-refutation and contradiction. Thus, we might respond to the pragmatists that they do value justice above other goals, it is simply the case that they consider the pragmatic and the practical *itself* to be just. Defending a course of action implies a normative proposition, something that you *ought* to do, which itself implies that such action is *just* or *good*. Justice is, by definition, something that *ought* to be valued.