

## CONCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE

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The term justice is as old as man. The minds of the masses, the oppressed, the down-trodden and the slaves are yearning for justice. Justice is a legal, ethical and ontological term. It is a common and living concept. The question of justice is a perennial one.

The primary aim of this paper is to examine some conceptions of justice. For a good understanding of what justice means, a proper analysis and understanding of what it means from the perspective of different schools and philosophic periods (from classical, medieval, modern to contemporary periods) will be attempted. Though this may not be an exhaustive analysis of the concept of justice, it will at least analyse some propositions about the concept.

The enterprise of the analysis and elucidation of the concept seems to me to be a very difficult one because of cluster of varying notions of it. Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, saw the ambiguity and the cluster of meanings associated with this concept. He says, "Now it appears that the words justice and injustice are ambiguous; but as the different senses covered by the same name are very close to each other the equivocation passes unnoticed and is not comparatively obvious as to where they are far apart"<sup>1</sup>. It is really difficult to arrive at a universal understanding of the concept. It can be seen to be an unanalysable concept just as G.E. Moore's Concept of 'Goodness'. According to G.E. Moore, "The term 'good' is meaningful yet undefinable; it refers to an independently existent quality, yet it is unlike the natural qualities of the sensory world, and finally, certain propositions containing the term 'good' are true by self-evidence, even though they may not be known by any individual"<sup>2</sup>. My concern is whether the concept of justice can be defined in this way, that is, like the concept of 'goodness'. Whichever is the case, 'justice talk' is a talk

about fairness in relation to human beings, rights and liabilities. In other words it is a societal issue or question. In every society, people have conflicting claims and interests. It is in the attempt to settle and reconcile these conflicting claims and interests that the issue of justice arises.

Some major formulations of justice are based on formal equality. A considerable analysis of justice is also based on considerable social ideals like merit, work, need, rank, legal entitlement and others. In the same vein, the Greek word for justice means "observant of custom or of duty, righteous; fair; honest; legally right, lawful; what is due to or from a person, deserts; rights; what one ought to do"<sup>3</sup>. Some see justice as synonymous with law or lawfulness or fairness. David Hume, J.S. Mill and others contended that justice presupposes conflict of interests. They construe it as being different from benevolence, charity and generosity because it presupposes pressing claims and justifies them by rules and standards. Justice from this perspective arises from individual's competing interests and claims. According to Edward Allen Kent, "Justice seems to entail the conflict of competing claims and not infrequently the clash of powerful social interest with the right of individuals ensured from time to time in the mechanism of reason d'etate"<sup>4</sup>. The history of philosophy, embracing ethics, politics and jurisprudence has shown that no particular analysis of justice seems to suffice without qualification and exceptions.

Philosopher's age-long interest in the concept of justice and the attendant formulations of the concept does not mean that we human beings do not have our individual intuitive, *a priori* knowledge of what justice is all about. However, philosophers' interest could be accounted for on the basis of their desire to explore and search for a universally consistent criterion or standard of justice. For example, John Rawls' theory of justice and welfarism are a reconstruction of liberalism which has complete trust in man while democratic socialism is a reconstruction of marxism which does not trust man, but regards him as a species which needs to be tamed and controlled. It is the desire to set the criteria or standard of justice that led to the recent formulations of what is called procedural justice. This "consists in employing correct methods to develop rules of conduct, to ascertain the facts of a particular case, or to devise a total dispositive judgement"<sup>5</sup>. In recent times, judicial procedure has undergone noteworthy reforms in terms of the formulation of "due process of law" in United States and other democracies. The requirement of the process is that "no one must be

accused of violating a rule of behaviour unless he could have ascertained the existence and meaning of the rule before he committed the challenged act”<sup>6</sup>. In any case, due process is the modality of implementing the formula of justice. I consider it pertinent at this point to consider some major views on the analysis of the concept of justice.

### **Plato**

Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher was one who put in writings all the thought of Socrates. In the *Republic*, he examined then current views on justice and criticised them as inadequate. According to Plato, in an imaginary conversation with Socrates, Cephalus defined Justice” as honesty in need and deed”. He seems to imply that justice is identical with telling the truth and paying back what one has received from anyone. Socrates however argued that telling the truth and returning another man’s property are not always just. This is because, according to him, many a time what belongs to one might be harmful to him. It is also clear that telling the truth is not always just; although in majority of the cases, it is just. Take as an example a hypothetical situation in which Mr. ‘A’ goes to Mr. ‘B’s house to kill Mr. ‘C’ who killed his brother ‘D’ on a highway. Mr. C is actually hiding in Mr. ‘B’s house. It will not be fair for Mr. B to let Mr. A know that Mr. C is in his house. Also because only few can determine what is good or harmful to them, Socrates, suggests that the society can better be ruled by philosophers in a communist way. This kind of communism would imply the abolition of private property and family. In para-phrasing Plato, Leo Straus says “to the extent to which there is a connection between private property and family, we would even be compelled to demand the abolition of the family or the introduction of absolute communism, that is, of communism not only regarding property but regarding women and children”<sup>8</sup>. In his further quest for the meaning of justice, Socrates engaged in another dialectic argument with Polemarchus the son of Cephalus. Cephalus was quoted as saying that justice must be salutary to the receiver and at the same time consist in giving to each what belongs to him. This is contradictory because what belongs to somebody might be harmful to him. In any case, it is controversial because it is sometimes difficult to define what is harmful and what is not,. It is left for one to decide on what is harmful to one, Polemarchus attempted to

improve Cephalus' definition of justice by defining it as consisting "in helping one's friends and harming one's enemies"<sup>9</sup>. This concept of justice is parochial and isolated, for according to Leo Straus; "Justice thus understood would seem to be unqualifiedly good for the giver and for those receivers who are good to the giver"<sup>10</sup>. Again if justice consists in giving to others what belongs to them, then, a just man must know only what belongs to those with whom he has any dealings, Again "if the just man must give to his friends what is good for them, he himself must judge; he himself must be able correctly to distinguish friends from enemies; he himself must know what is good for each of his friends"<sup>11</sup>. According to Socrates, justice, following this line of reasoning, must therefore consist in knowledge of a higher order. But Polemarchus has failed to prove his case. A just man, according to Socrates will help a just man rather than his friends and will harm no one. Justice "must be an art comparable to medicine, the art which knows and produces what is good for human bodies"<sup>12</sup>. But justice according to Polemarchus consists in helping one's friends and fellow citizens and harming one's enemies. Socrates was trying to give a more universal conception of justice.

Thrasymachus was another person in the *Republic* who had discussion with Socrates on the question of justice. He defined justice "as the interest of the stronger"<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, the just is synonymous with the lawful or the legal, that is what the customs or laws of the city prescribe. This thought is what is now known as legal positivism. Thrasymachus' view can hardly be upheld because, according to Socrates, the rulers, just like the subjects, can make mistakes. To Socrates, a just city will be an association where everyone is just. The city will be construed in such a way that every man will have one job.

After constructively criticising the various views on justice, Socrates draws an important parallel between the city and the individual. According to him justice can be detected more easily in the city than in the human individual because, the former is larger, than the later. The parallel between the city and the human individual "is based on certain abstraction from the human body"<sup>14</sup>. The three virtues in the individual psyche are wisdom, courage and moderation while those of the political state are the money-makers, the warriors and the rulers. Justice achieves harmony and maintains equilibrium on both set of virtues. To achieve these things, reason must rule with the psyche and each element specialises in a task. Critics have argued that the *Republic* does not portray Plato

as a liberal democrat. Of course, there is no doubt about that. He is rather a communist, but not in the sense of Marx. "Marxist communism and fascism are incompatible with the rule of philosophers, whereas the scheme of the *Republic* stands or falls by the rule of Philosophers"<sup>15</sup>. Christian Communism also differs from Platonic Communism for the same reason. All in all, the justice which Plato envisaged in the *Republic* might not after all be a reality because man is not always propelled by reason. Fascist, totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in contemporary times at least attest to what would become of Plato's *Republic*.

### ***Aristotle***

Aristotle regarded justice as a particular virtue and one most necessary to a state of welfare. According to him "just means lawful and fair, and unjust means both unlawful and unfair"<sup>16</sup>. He tries to analyse the concept at the level of particular act or decision. He made a distinction between distributive and rectificatory justice. Distributive justice is shown "in the distribution of honour or money or such assets as are divisible among the members of the community"<sup>17</sup>. Rectificatory justice rectifies and corrects the condition of transaction, while distributive justice is based on geometrical proportion, that is treating equals equally and unequals unequally (as shown by the principle of assignment according to merit). Rectificatory justice remedies an inequitable division between two parties by means of arithmetical progression. Here the parties are regarded as equals and the question asked is "whether one has committed and the other suffered an injustice"<sup>18</sup>. In Aristotle, what is just on the rectificatory sense is the mean between loss and gain. Proportional reciprocation is the basis of all fair exchange. Proportional reciprocation and equality go together. According to him, "if proportional equality is first established and then reciprocation takes place the stated requirement will be achieved; but otherwise the transaction is not equal and breaks down"<sup>19</sup>. The Concept of Justice is not restricted to the economic sphere alone. It is also applicable to other spheres, like the political sphere. Aristotle's analysis of justice includes also political justice which "obtains between those which share a life for the satisfaction of the needs as persons, free and equal either arithmetically or proportionately"<sup>20</sup>. There are two kinds of justice, one natural

and the other legal. The natural justice “is that which has the same validity everywhere and does not depend upon acceptance; the legal is that which in the first place can take one form or another indifferently, but which once laid down is decisive”<sup>21</sup>.

The contribution of Aristotle to the meaning of Justice is very illuminating. His analysis encompasses various senses of Justice, like the distributive, the rectificatory, the natural and the legal justice. In a sense Aristotle is a natural law theorist and in another sense he is a positivist. As a positivist, political and legal experiences have shown that not all laws are just. An act can be legal but unjust. Again his conception of justice in the distributive sense, that is in accordance with merit, has the implication of justifying slavery. We have various views about merit. There is the oligarchic whose criterion is wealth or good family and the aristocratic view which is based on excellence. In a society which is oligarchic there will be the stratification of the society which invariably justifies slavery. Slavery is an unjust act and slaves are unjustly treated.

### ***Conventionalist Conception of Justice***

A conventionalist approach to justice is the view that what is just is what is conventional. In other words, justice is a relative concept. This relativity of justice is also called positivism. Infact, most of the protagonists of the conventionalist approach to justice were the fathers of legal positivism. This conception of justice arose in opposition to the natural law theorists. According to Cicero, a political writer and Roman Lawyer of the middle ages, “the theory of natural law is in the form of theory of Justice in Society and it is also the groundwork upon which the whole structure of human society rests”<sup>22</sup>. John Locke says that natural law is the universal test of the justice of the positive law. According to him, “there is a natural law or the law of reason which commands that no one shall impair the life, the health, the freedom or the possessions of another”<sup>23</sup>. Opposed to this natural law doctrine were conventionalists and positivists.

The conventionalist generally believes that Justice is rooted in emotion and vary from one person to another and from one context to another. According to Alf-Ross “to use the word just or general order, rather than of a particular

decision in accordance with rule, is merely to express emotion, like banging on the table''<sup>24</sup>. To Alf-Ross, legal justice is non-existent. If ethical justice exists it is relative. Thomas Hobbes and Thrysmarchus in Plato's *Republic* were conventionalists and positivists in their approach to the understanding of justice. Glaucon in the *Republic*, Callicle in *Geogias* and Epicurus maintained that justice is conventional. David Hume is also a conventionalist as well as a positivist. According to him, the rules of justice are set up to end contention and discord than questions of fitness and suitability. According to him, justice is a virtue because it is beneficial to society and the fundamental object of government is the administration of justice, that is, the protection of property and the enforcement of contract. Again the conventionalist position is illustrated by John Rawls' view of a just order as that body of principles that anyone might recognise as in his interest to maintain, given that other on whose acquiescence he depends, have interests that conflict with his own''<sup>25</sup>. According to him, the duty of justice or fair dealing would emerge from the reciprocal recognition by a community of rational egoists that they had a similar and competing interest and that no one could count on getting his way against all the rest. However, Rawls should defend a situation where a powerful state gets its way against all other states and have no obligation to deal justly with them.

The conventionalist approach to the concept of justice has not been able to account for a substantive meaning of it. It sees justice as a sociological concept. The conventionalists and positivists were mostly materialists and empiricists who could not assign a metaphysical entity to the concept of justice.

### ***The Golden Rule***

The Golden Rule is an ethical injunction that has been preached and espoused by religious and ethical books for ages. Simply put, it says that one should not do to others what one would not like any other person to do to him, and that one should do to others as one would like them to do to him. The Golden rule as it is, is a precept of justice, though it might not cover all we construe justice to be. The rule has been thought in various ways. It is thought by the Bible, the Koran and other holy books. Del Vecchio's arguments on justice are similar to those of the Golden Rule. Del Vecchio had his argument in a transcendental form:

“consciousness of oneself as a subject of experience implies the awareness (and therefore the existence of objects of experience (not self), but it implies, too, the possibility that one is oneself the object of experience of other experiencing subject”<sup>26</sup>.

Del Vecchio obviously is emphasising equality here. It also implies moral reciprocity, that is doing to others as one would have them do to oneself and giving an equal return for benefits received.

### *The Utilitarian Conception Of Justice*

The doctrine of Utilitarianism is a creed that holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. It holds that good is pleasure or happiness. The founding fathers of this doctrine were people like John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. The act-utilitarians and rule utilitarians have also taken a number of positions on justice. According to the act-utilitarian, we should “always perform that action which will have the best overall result and if there is no optimistic act, perform one of the set which will have equally desirable result”<sup>27</sup>. The Rule-Utilitarians, also known as the universalists, believe that the important question for a moral agent takes this form “what will happen if I do X, or Y, or Z”<sup>28</sup>. All these views on the rightness and wrongness of an action border on what justice is. Can each of them make a legitimate demand of Justice?

Some ethicists have argued that justice is logically independent of and may conflict with other moral demands. Others have denied that it is independent of such moral imperatives as obligation to be kind and never to take a human life. Some have also argued that justice cannot conflict with benevolence, that is the obligation to maximise overall satisfaction. A hedonistic act-utilitarian in asserting the importance of happiness and satisfaction solves the problem of clash between benevolence and justice but treats the latter as morally irrelevant. But it has been argued that justice concerns the proper distribution of goods and evils, and hence the happiness and misery of some human beings. Some assert that justice is built into utility or can be deduced from it. Therefore it is a morally relevant concept. “Disputes over relevance in ethics are moral or normative controversies and not mere logical or linguistic Squable.”<sup>29</sup>



It could be recalled that act-utilitarian expects one to perform that action which will have the best overall result. Rule utilitarianism entails a demand for justice because if everybody lies or cheats, the moral and social fabric of the society will crumble.

What is the relationship between equity and utility? The utilitarians would like to argue that an equitable distribution may depart from equal distribution on grounds of need, merit or ability. According to the utilitarian, "Actions and dispositions that are called Meritorious or deserving of reward, are usually beneficial to society, and those that are said to deserve punishment are usually harmful to society"<sup>30</sup>. They say that the principles of justice derive their moral force from the fact that they are general interests.

### ***The Intuitionist Conception of Justice***

Intuitionism is the view that "terms like 'good' and 'ought' do not stand for observable qualities or relations and moral judgements are inferences from any form of empirical generalization"<sup>31</sup>. It implies that the goodness of an activity like artistic creation or rightness of a principle such as that of justice of liberty is a matter of seeing or grasping a quality. This is an attempt to ground moral knowledge on some kind of indubitable and self-evident proposition. Some intuitionists would say that "we simply recognise the rightness of actions having certain empirical properties and then generalise the result of these isolated moral intuitions"<sup>32</sup>. Others say that we recognise the truth of the injunction of the form, "actions of type X are prima-facie right (or wrong)"<sup>33</sup>. It has been argued that justice is entailed logically by utility and so they do not conflict.

The intuitionist assert a prima-facie obligation to be just and do not assimilate it to other alleged moral goals. They made the useful distinction between duties of benevolence and duties of justice. However, intuitionism is epistemologically questionable and it seldom departs from common sense moral judgement .

### ***Formal Justice***

We observed some elements of formal justice in Aristotle as well as in

the conventionalist conceptions of justice. The concept of formal justice is related in two distinct ways to the moral, social and legal rules of the community. In one sense, "the existing rules in a community may be said to determine, at least, *prima-facie*, which actions are just"<sup>34</sup>. In this sense, 'justice' is used to cover the whole field of principles and procedures that are to be followed. In this aspect, a demand for justice is often a demand that rules be consistently applied. On the other hand, a demand for justice is a demand that rules themselves must meet with certain standards of justice. While some philosophers see this as natural principle of justice other see it as principles of fairness. Daniel Sullivan says:

"I suggest then, that rules create moral obligation, that we characterise violations of rules as unjust, because rules establish co-operative schemes which render an act of non-conformance to the rule unfair. Thus, the sense of justice in which justice may be said to be the rule of rules, that is that which gives a moral value to respect for regulation of every kind even when these are not in themselves specifically moral is in fact accurately reflected in the principle of fairness and it is in conjunction with a principle of fairness that many rules become reasons for action and can be used in the moral justification or condemnation of action"<sup>35</sup>.

Daniel Sullivan, distinguished between fairness as the 'rule of rule' and formal justice. Formal justice tells us that rules should be followed and that we should behave consistently and it would seem that both Perelman and Frankena agreed on this point. Fairness, on the other hand "tells us not only that certain rules should be followed but also why those rules should be followed"<sup>38</sup>. And the reason it is wrong to break rules is that it is unfair. The principle of fairness is therefore substantial in a way which formal justice is not. According to Perelman, formal justice consists in observing a rule which lays down the obligation to treat in a certain ways all persons who belong to a given category.

D.D. Rapheal maintained that "the idea of justice, both in legal and in moral thought, is plainly concerned with the general ordering of society. A breach of that order is called a breach of justice, and penalties for the breach are invoked in the name of justice"<sup>37</sup>. What D.D. Rapheal is implying is that justice involves rules which if breached would constitute an injustice. He also talks of Conservative justice and Reformative justice. According to him conservative

justice protects the established order of society with its established distribution of rights and in the event of breaches it requires restitution of the status-quo<sup>38</sup>. Reformative justice "calls for revisions of the social order and a redistribution of rights to suit current ideas of fairness"<sup>39</sup>. D.D. Raphael does not seem to believe in the existence of permanent structural framework for determining the rights and liabilities of citizens. A marxist while describing this type of thesis as reformist would advocate a permanent social basis for the society.

According to Daniel Sullivan, there are two senses of justice. There is a sense of justice which gives moral justification to rules which are themselves not specifically moral and which is reflected in the principle of fairness. And the other sense is formal justice which tells us that rules should be followed and that we should behave consistently. It seems that the first sense, that is, justice as fairness is the most fundamental. This sense of justice is the ideal or standard which, I think, the formal justice should and must try to meet. The attempts to formulate a formal justice arises out of the need to reconcile the conflicting interests of the individual in the society and to see what standard of justice is realisable.

D.C. Emmon's conception of formal justice is interesting. It touches on vital issues like equality, merit and relative deprivation for the overall interest of the community. According to him "an action (or class of actions, or institution) is just if (and only if) it results in an equal distribution of goods and or evils to equals"<sup>40</sup>. He says that this definition is abstract and covers all forms of distributive justice. Also it must be supplemented by a criterion for equality before it can be applied. According to him, justice is in a special sense parasitic on notion of benevolence (or maleficence). He refined his concept of justice into perfect justice and imperfect justice. Perfect justice is the distribution of goods and evils in direct proportion to merit where each receives a share while the imperfect justice is the distribution of limited and, or non-divisible goods and evils as follows : (a) Since all cannot have a share, some are neglected. But those who are also deprived are chosen by lot. (b) The randomness of deprivation is extended overtime, for example, a unit good is awarded to an individual, after the first lottery, he is excluded from further lotteries until every member of the population has received such a good.

### ***Conclusion***

The difficulty in defining the concept of justice is obvious. The current meanings so far given to it by scholars seem to be characteristically difficult to reconcile. Chaim Perelman adumbrated a few examples of the current meanings of justice which seem to be irreconcilable:-

- (1) To each the same thing;
- (2) To each according to his merits;
- (3) To each according to his works;
- (4) To each according to his needs;
- (5) To each according to his ranks;
- (6) To each according to his legal entitlement.

Each of these ideas of justice is upheld by different schools and scholars. Our examination of the concept in Plato, Aristotle, Utilitarians and so on showed each and every one of the above examples of justice. No. 1 emphasises equality as explaining what justice means in social terms. No. 2 and 3 are liberal views on justice. John Locke is one of the fathers of this thought, that is liberalism. No. 4 is a marxist view on justice. In addition to this, Marx says that everyone should contribute to the welfare of the generality of people according to his/her capacity. No. 5 is very close to Nos 2 and 3. It is also very aristocratic and one will not hesitate to dismiss that because there might be no sound basis for stratifying the society into ranks. No. 6 is a legal positivist doctrine of justice which is a controversial issue.

Each and everyone of these conceptions is weak in one way or the other. For example the idea of justice as the equality of mankind is an arbitrary choice because men should not be treated alike without regard to their merits. To each the same thing formula, though it seems egalitarian is not an egalitarian humanism. It may restrict its application to a particular class. "To each according to his merits" is weak also because it is difficult to measure the degree of merits and perhaps demerits. To each according to his works crumbles when there is no attempt to establish a common measure for all tasks rather than remaining content with comparing those for which a similar criterion is accepted. To each according to his needs has the psychological problem of determining what is somebody's essential needs since it is not going to be every need that is to be

considered. To each according to his rank implies that classes are treated in different ways. Privileged classes enjoy more rights than others. To each according to his legal entitlement implies that an individual is not free to choose the conception of justice he prefers. He is bound to observe the established rules. This is a juridical conception of justice quite different from ethical conception which allows an individual to choose any formula.

Given all these differing conceptions of justice it is necessary to find a formula which is common to all of them, that is a variable, which will represent formal justice. According to Chaim Perelman, formal justice is a "principle of action in accordance with which beings of one and the same essential category must be treated in the same way"<sup>41</sup>. Apart from the fact that this does not take concrete justice into account, it is extremely difficult to categorise human beings according to their intellectual artistic and manual expertise without passing some meritorious and talented individuals unnoticed. At best a conception of justice must emphasise equality supplemented with merit, work and needs.

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