Distributive Justice

A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

H. Gene Blocker

The question of justice—what is it, and how should it be implemented—is a perennial philosophical problem that goes back at least as far as Plato’s *The Republic*. In that work, Plato sought mainly to answer the question, “What *is* justice?” This question is still generating intense debate, despite supposedly being answered in 1971 in John Rawls’s book *A Theory of Justice*.

In ancient Greece, Aristotle had suggested that justice, at its most basic level, is a matter of identifying equality and inequality, and responding accordingly. That is, we “treat equals equally and unequals unequally.” (For example, we would provide equal pay for two people doing the same work, and unequal pay for two people doing different, unequally valuable work.)

Distributive justice addresses a more specific question: what is the fairest (or most just) way to divide the economic “pie” among everyone in society? If we were to follow Aristotle’s formula, we would treat equals equally and unequals unequally. However, what does this mean, exactly? Aristotle’s formula does not tell us whether we should give equal pay for equal volume of work accomplished—or for equal effort, job qualifications, seniority and job experience, talent, or need.

Historically, there have been two main viewpoints on this question of distributive justice. The libertarian “right” position says that we should reward individuals *unequally*, on the basis of merit. In other words, if person A is more skilled than person B at a particular job, then person A should be paid more. The egalitarian “left” position states that we should reward individuals *equally*, on the basis of similar human wants and needs. For example, everyone should have adequate food, shelter, and health care. These contrasting positions raise the question of whether it is fair that some people have more than others. Someone who supports the libertarian “right” would say that it *is* fair because some people have greater ability than others. These more talented individuals have more of the “right stuff” that our society
needs to prosper, so they deserve to have more money, luxuries, food, etc. Someone from the egalitarian “left” position would say that no one has a right to or deserves more than what anyone else has.

In the last hundred years, both sides in this debate have acknowledged weaknesses in their own arguments and strengths in their opponent’s position. Through this process, each has edged closer to the other in their viewpoints. Libertarians, for example, have come to acknowledge the hardships—social unrest and poverty, etc.—spawned by enormous discrepancies in wealth. At the same time, egalitarians have realized that a strict equality of benefits and rewards fails to motivate able individuals to take on difficult tasks and work their hardest. Nowadays, most discussions about distributive justice center on various forms of compromise between these two extremes. Participants in the debate look for ways to achieve greater economic equality in a single, stable social system and at the same time reward those who work harder than others and/or who have superior talents needed by society.

This century’s Cold War was largely instigated by this question of equality and justice. During the conflict, the Western capitalist democracies supported the libertarian “right” position, and the Communist-bloc nations backed the egalitarian “left” position. However, since the collapse of Communism in the former Soviet bloc in the late 1980s, every nation in the world now struggles to decide how to meet its citizens’ basic needs and still provide enough economic incentive to motivate its more talented members.

As you read the selections that follow, think about your own views about this profound and universal dilemma. Should every person in the United States have medical coverage, for example? If so, who should pay for it? How much can we tax the wealthier members of our society without destroying their incentive to produce more and better? Can we “have it both ways”—and if so, how?

**Suggested Further Reading**


