

Justice and the Good Society



Martin Luther King, Jr. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

Justice is that which is most primitive in the human soul, most fundamental in society, most sacred among ideas, and what the masses demand today with most ardour. It is the essence of religions and at the same time the form of reason, the secret object of faith, and the beginning, middle and end of knowledge. What can be imagined more universal, more strong, more complete than justice?¹

—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

OPENING QUESTIONS



1. In what kind of society would you prefer to live? A large urban society; a small rural society; some safe suburb; a bustling commercial city; a quiet, more or less homogeneous town in which people more or less share the same values; a multiethnic neighborhood with many different peoples?
2. Do you believe in the death penalty for the most heinous crimes? Why or why not?
3. Should a president of the United States be impeached if his or her subordinates break the law?
4. Should shelter for the homeless be provided at government (that is, taxpayer) expense? Should this be undertaken at the federal, state, or local level? If you say, “none of the above,” what do you think should be done about the problem?
5. Is political power ultimately nothing but the rule of the strongest, the most powerful, the most persuasive on TV? Is a government anything more than the power of those who run it? Why are there governments at all?
6. Does the government have the right (rather than merely the power) to demand a percentage of your paycheck as taxes? Why or why not?
7. What is justice? What aspects of our society make it a just society? What aspects of our society are unjust?
8. Are there any reasons for paying one person less than another for the same measurable productivity?
9. Is there a “human right” to an education? Who (if anyone) has the obligation to make sure that you get one—your parents, the government, you yourself?

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- 10: Do you believe that “all men [and women] are created equal”? What does this mean? In what respects are they equal?
11. We are a nation ruled “by laws, not men.” What does this say about our view of “men”?

Morals and Society

The Greeks had a saying: “To live a good life one must live in a great city.” What counts as a “great city,” of course, is always a matter of considerable dispute: New York or Omaha, Los Angeles or Austin? But what the Greeks had in mind was the idea that to live a good life one had to live in a good community—one in which people respected one another and obeyed the rules, one that flourished and was not overwhelmed with problems of crime and poverty, one in which the happiness of one person was not to be gained at the expense of others. Aristotle’s *Ethics* described the ideal citizen of such a community, and Bentham’s and Mill’s utilitarianism provided one description of the ultimate goal of such a community—the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. Indeed, even Kant, in his final formulation of the categorical imperative, suggests that one should always act in such a way as to bring about a “kingdom of ends,” an ideal community. There seems to be no doubt about it: for almost all of us, the good life presupposes residing in a good place to live with other people, and our ability to be a good person depends at least in part on those with whom we share our world and the society in which we live.

But although we can perhaps imagine a society in which everyone is wealthy and healthy, in which everyone at least respects everyone else and there is no crime and no poverty and plenty of everything for everyone, the world we live in is just not like that. It is worth noting that the imaginary perfect societies that some of the great philosophers and social thinkers have dreamed of and written about have been called utopias. The word *utopia* is derived from Greek roots, meaning both “good place” and “nowhere,” and referring to an imaginary, ideal place. Human life as we know it is burdened with misfortune and tragedy. There is not plenty for everyone, and sometimes there is not even enough to go around. People are born into poverty while others are born into riches. Some people are born with physical or mental disabilities, and most of us become seriously ill at some time or another. People of one race or religion look down on people of other races and religions, and crime runs rampant, not just in the streets of the city but all over the country, and not only because of poverty or need.

So the idea of living in an ideal society remains but a dream; meanwhile, we have to figure out how best to live in the world we actually do inhabit. Given the fact that people are born into very different circumstances and enjoy or suffer very different fates during their lives, how should society take this into account? What could we do with those who break the law and intentionally or irresponsibly

harm others? How should we organize society, and who should have the power to run things? Just as we asked in Chapter 8 how we ought to live as individuals, we must now ask how we ought to live as a society. Of course, the questions can never be kept wholly apart.

We will pursue these questions first by discussing various conceptions of who should rule, noting that philosophers have typically sought to justify the organization of their own societies. We will then consider challenges to the idea that any government is necessary. Because the nature of justice is, perhaps, the central question of political (or sociopolitical) philosophy, we will devote the majority of the chapter to this topic, addressing the question of what justice is, the meaning of equality, and the theory of the social contract as the origin of justice. We will then consider issues of justice toward members of other societies and different philosophical views of individual rights. We will conclude with a brief discussion of African-American and feminist critics of conditions within the status quo, both in social practices and in their philosophical underpinnings, suggesting that their insights might help us rectify past injustices and reshape our institutions accordingly.

The Nature of Society

People have always lived in groups, in large families or tribes that evolved into great cities and nations. “Man is a social animal,” wrote Aristotle 2,500 years ago. If some caveman 25,000 years ago had been asked his opinion, he probably would have said pretty much the same thing. Apart from an occasional (usually fictional) hero alone in the wilderness, we are mutually dependent creatures. We need to live together. And with the exception of that one noisy neighbor, we usually *like* to live together. But any group of people, no matter how large or small, needs some form of organization, and organizations of people have not implausibly been compared to living organisms, in which a collection of individuals happen to live in one place. Every society has its own structures, its own culture, its history, its mode of organization, its rules. The questions are what kind of structures and rules these ought to be and what kind of people we are, such that we need these structures and rules.



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Some Key Contrasts in Social Philosophy

Person as a social function	↔	Individual free to define him/herself
Social status/privileges (by virtue of birth, power, talent, skill, achievement)	↔	Equality
Obligations to society	↔	Rights (demanded of society)

The nature of the societies people have built and grown up in vary enormously, from the peasant- and family-based agrarian cultures we still find in many parts of the world to the bewilderingly mobile and fast-paced cities of New York, Paris, New Delhi, and Beijing. In some of these societies, a person is viewed strictly in terms of his or her place in the society—as a member of a certain family, as a member of a certain class, as one who will be trained to be a soldier, a shoemaker, a farmer, or a diplomat. In others, the concept of “the individual” is all-important, and a person’s self-identity is to be distinguished from all of these “accidents” of birth and functions. In some societies, it is taken for granted that some people are “better” than others, by virtue of their birth or their abilities or their accomplishments; in others, it is said that everyone is equal and due equal respect and consideration.

The nature of society and the role of the person in society are essential considerations in social philosophy. It is not surprising that, as one reads the different philosophers who have written about the nature of society, philosophers tend to reflect or project the perceptions, preferences, and dissatisfactions with their own societies. Plato’s imaginary Republic is easily recognizable as a variation on Greek society, and the philosophers of the late Middle Ages who lived under monarchies defended the “divine right of kings.” The philosophers of eighteenth-century England—living during the Industrial Revolution and the boisterous birth of capitalism—not unnaturally defended the right to private property that capitalism presupposed. And most contemporary social philosophers in America defend first and foremost the rights of the individual, such as freedom of speech and religion. This is not necessarily because of any cowardice or lack of imagination on these various thinkers’ parts, but rather because we are, no matter how free thinking and imaginative, a part of the society in which we were raised. Our conception of the good society and its structure is usually based on values we digested along with our mothers’ milk. There will always be the occasional conversion—the repentant communist who turns into a vehement anticommunist and the successful capitalist who devotes the rest of his life to advocating socialism—but these are special stories just because they are so rare. Sometimes an entire society may undergo such a conversion—China rebelling against its Confucian heritage and embracing communism in the 1940s—but the enormous difficulties that such societies face in carrying out their conversion just goes to show how deep-set the old ideas will always be.

Who Should Rule? The Question of Legitimacy

What kind of a society do we want? Who should run things? Since prehistoric times, it seems that someone—usually the strongest or the wisest of the group—has taken charge, given orders to the others, and taken on certain privileges and status himself or herself. Looking beyond ourselves to the rest of nature, we can see similar high-status roles. A wolf pack is led by the strongest, smartest wolf, and without such a leader the pack usually perishes. A hive of bees or a nest of ants each has its queen, without which there could be no hive or nest. So it is easy to presume

that the emergence of a leader in human society is just as “natural.” Who the leader is, of course, will depend on the nature of the society. In a warrior society, it will probably be the best soldier; in an intellectual society, it may be the wisest scholar. In a society where money is power, the rule will be by the rich (a plutocracy). In a society that depends on certain specialized skills (for example, intimate knowledge of computers), power will depend on merit and ability (a meritocracy). In some societies, religion rules and those who hold power are the most powerful religious people (a theocracy; literally, “rule by God”). In some societies, those who rule come from the highest caste or class in society (an aristocracy; literally, “rule by the best”)—whether one is born into this position or comes to adopt it by virtue of certain credentials, such as a sufficiently prestigious university degree. In some societies, the ruler will be one person (a monarchy); in others, it will be a few (an oligarchy); in others rule is shared, at least in theory, by everyone (a democracy).

But we are not, we keep telling ourselves, just animals. We are rational as well as social animals; we can figure things out, whereas most animals cannot. Perhaps it is true that every society needs some authority and organization, but why should such power and direction be in the hands of one man or woman? Why not a group? Why not everyone, working and thinking together? And if there is to be some governing body, why should we simply let nature “take its course” rather than design it ourselves?



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Varieties of Rule

Plutocracy: Rule by the rich

Meritocracy: Rule by virtue of merit and ability

Theocracy: Rule by religion or by God

Aristocracy: Rule by “the best”

Monarchy: Rule by one person

Oligarchy: Rule by the few

Democracy: Rule by the people



FROM THE SOURCE: Less Is Best

The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his subjects.

Next comes the ruler they love and praise;

Next comes one they fear;

Next comes one with whom they take liberties.

(continues)

Less Is Best (continued)

The sage says, I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves; . . . I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of themselves. . . .

Do that which consists in taking no action; pursue that which is not meddlesome. . . .

Therefore it is because the sage never attempts to be great that he succeeds in becoming great.²

—Lao-Tzu, *Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)*, sixth century BCE

That government is best which governs least.³

—Unknown author, 1700s

Even in ancient times, the idea that the strongest deserve to rule was hard to swallow. To be sure, one had to accept such a leader if one wanted to survive oneself. But the idea that such power was legitimate, that such power was justified—that was a different matter. And throughout history, when those who have the power abuse it (tyranny, from ancient Greek, means such abuse of power), some people have banded together (the ruler's own inner circle, a popular uprising) to "throw the bums out" (in our distinctively American political vocabulary). Legitimate power—or authority—is not just a matter of strength or cleverness; it is a matter of justified power. A legitimate government has a right to rule. That is why, for many centuries, monarchs claimed to rule by "divine right." In a religious society, who could provide a more powerful, more unassailable justification?

What makes a government legitimate (that is, justified)? It used to be thought that rulers were justified by God. But although our politicians may often invoke God in support of their own positions (see From the Source: Which Side Is God On? in Chapter 3), we no longer think that God alone justifies a government; in any case, one has to prove God's support by winning an election or two. So, too, it may have once been the case that might makes right—that those who were strongest or otherwise most superior would rule—but we do not accept the idea that simply having and holding power gives one the right to power—that is, legitimate power or authority. We believe, in short, that governments are supposed to serve the people, and the legitimacy of a government depends on this.

But even here, there are hard questions. Does serving the people mean making them prosperous? Is a rich society therefore a good society? And is the ruler who makes people rich therefore a legitimate ruler? Or is there another consideration here—that it is not the overall wealth or well-being of a society that counts first and foremost but rather the prevalence of justice in society (an important concept that we will discuss shortly)? Is a legitimate government one that protects not only the rich but also the very poor as well? Or is a legitimate government

one that defends justice in a different sense, by enforcing the various rules and customs of the society, by punishing wrongdoers and thus protecting the values of the culture? Or is the legitimacy of a government not at all dependent on what the government does for the people, but rather how the government is formed by the people? For example, is legitimate government first and foremost one that has been properly elected in a fair political contest?

Anarchism, the Free Market, and the Need for Government



FROM THE SOURCE: The Benefits of Capitalism

Adam Smith, from *Wealth of Nations*, 1776

Without the assistance and cooperation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to what we very falsely imagine the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated.⁴

One possible, and in one sense not unappealing, suggestion is that no one should run things. We all know that governments typically make a botch of things, often assume too much power, and provide their citizens too little in return. The *Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)* of ancient China suggests that aggressive measures to reform things often end up making things worse, and the *Dao De Jing* encourages rulers to refrain from intervening in the day-to-day operations of the state. It claims that the best ruler would be just a shadowy presence to the people, for, having appointed competent ministers to run things, he could just sit back and watch the state's affairs unfold in good order.

A more radical response to the failures of governments would be just to let everyone do what they want, a state of affairs more pejoratively called anarchy—a state of confusion and social disorder. Not having a government would create certain obvious problems of organization (for example, establishing rules for safe driving and ensuring that essential goods and services are provided). But it is not at all obvious that a reasonably sized group of intelligent planners could not design an organization (for instance, a set of traffic rules and regulations, a system of supermarkets and service stations) that would be generally agreeable within the society. We generally accept the convention of driving (in the United States) on the right-hand side of the road, not because the government forces us to but because we all agree that we must agree to drive on one side or the other, to drive safely, to drive sober. To be sure, there will always be those who refuse to comply with such agreements, but one might ask whether we really need a government (a highway patrol, traffic courts, judges) to enforce such mutually agreed-upon rules. And, to be sure, the absence of any higher power to delegate responsibilities might cause certain temporary shortages of goods—if it happens that no one

at the moment is producing such goods—but must we assume that governmental authority is the only means for preventing such shortages?

One of the most powerful arguments of our times insists that, indeed, we do not need government to organize society, at least with regard to our economic affairs. In a sense, we can just let each person do what he or she wants. It is the idea of the free market—that people will do what they need to do without being forced to do so by any law or government. If essential goods and services are needed, enterprising people will provide them—at a profit to themselves, motivated by self-interest. And if there are mutual agreements that must be made to make society better or safer, we will accomplish this ourselves, in our own interest, without the interference or the authority of anyone else. Of course, there may still need to be rules and restrictions (for example, regulations to ensure “fair play”)—but there need be and should be no government interference or organization where freedom of the market is concerned.



FROM THE SOURCE: The Invisible Hand
Adam Smith, from *Wealth of Nations*, 1776

As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.⁵

However, free markets have not shown themselves capable of solving some very pressing social problems. We need not question the value of individual freedom or the efficiency of the free market to satisfy at least some of our needs and desires in order to argue that certain basic needs are not well served by such a market. Health care is one example much in the news today. The demand for health care is simply not like the demand for most consumer goods. When a person becomes acutely ill, he or she is in no position to “shop around,” or to consider whether the services in question are affordable. And with the advances in medical science, the cost of effective care is now prohibitively expensive for even the reasonably well-to-do. Moreover, because illness is often a consequence of other deprivations—malnutrition or lack of adequate shelter—illness often strikes hardest at those who can least afford it.



FROM THE SOURCE: Alienated Labor
Karl Marx, from *manuscripts*, 1844

What constitutes the alienation of labour? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker, therefore, feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion it is avoided like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Finally the external character of work for the worker is shown by the fact that it is not his own work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person. . . . We arrive at the result that man (the worker) feels himself to be freely active only in his animal functions—eating, drinking and procreating, or at most also in his dwelling and in personal adornment—while in his human functions he is reduced to an animal. The animal becomes human and the human becomes animal.⁶

The free market has also shown too little ability to care for the poor. There is an old bit of market wisdom: the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. There seems to be no correction built into the market to handle such increasing inequality, and so there is a need for some countervailing force—notably government—to ensure that the very poor are adequately protected and provided for. Some people get extraordinarily rich, and some people sink into a cycle of poverty from which there seems to be no escape without considerable outside assistance. There is always charity, perhaps, but what if it isn't adequate? What we are discussing here, of course, is that enormous political concept called justice. Insofar as the purpose and the legitimacy of governments is to promote justice, we want to know—as Plato asked long ago in his great book *The Republic*—“What is justice?”

What Is Justice?

Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.⁷

—John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971

Life is never fair . . . And perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not.⁸

—Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 1895

In a good society, there will be something more than prosperity; there will also be justice. For example, one might insist that people who are good will be rewarded, while those who are bad will be punished. One might insist that people who work hard will be held in esteem and paid well for their work. One might insist that people will get to keep what they have, without fear that it will be taken away, and that those in need are taken care of. The problem of justice arises when *all* these various demands cannot be satisfied, when there is not enough to go around, or when the demands simply contradict one another. How can we make sure that the needy are taken care of if there are no taxes on the rich? How can we make sure that innocent people are protected without letting go some of the guilty? Justice, accordingly, is concerned with the priority of these various concerns and their implementation in a society that is, we admit, something less than perfect.



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Justice: Payback and Fairness

Retributive justice: Making sure that the wicked and wrongdoers get theirs

Distributive justice: The fair arrangement of the goods, benefits, and responsibilities of a society

Justice is often divided into two parts, one concerned with punishment and the other with the distribution of goods and responsibilities. The first is called *retributive justice*, coming from the word *retribution*; criminal courts and prisons are society's instruments of retributive justice, and in a just society criminals are caught and sentenced fairly. A harsh sentence for a minor crime is an injustice, but so is a light or a suspended sentence for a heinous crime. If the guilty party "gets off easy" because he or she is rich and powerful, justice is particularly ill served, for one of the presuppositions of justice is that it is "blind" to particular individuals, their status, and their power. (That is why the Western depiction of justice traditionally shows a *blindfolded* woman holding balanced measuring scales.)



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Four Kinds of Equality

- Every person has the same abilities, talents, and advantages (implausible).
- Every person has the same status before the law (fundamental to the American conception of justice).
- Every person deserves to be given the same goods, benefits, and responsibilities in our society (unworkable and contrary to our notions of merit and entitlement).
- Every person should have the same opportunities for achievement and advancement in our society (a necessary ideal but difficult to achieve).

The other kind of justice is *distributive justice*—the distribution of goods—which includes salaries and bonuses for well-done work and education and medical care for the public. Distributive justice continues to be a source of deep controversy in contemporary life. For example, there is vehement disagreement, to say the obvious, over Karl Marx's famous suggestion: "From each according to his abilities; to each according to his needs." This is a summary of one theory of justice, but notice that it says nothing about what people *earn* or about their right to what they already have. It does not suggest that people might ever deserve more than they need, and some would find this in itself grounds for rejecting the theory. On the other hand, a great many people are outraged that some shiftless playboy can lead a life of luxury just because his father worked himself to death, leaving his fortune to this wastrel.

Such entitlement plays no role in the Marxist conception of justice, in which serving people's needs is the main concern of justice. Yet most Americans would say that the young man is *entitled* to the money, if only because his father was entitled to do what he liked with his earnings. The American sense of justice is more concerned with making sure that people get and keep what is theirs. In a Marxist society, justice would demand that the playboy be disinherited and sent out to work for a living. His unearned fortune would be distributed among the needy. In our society, the young man gets to keep his money, even though we think he doesn't deserve it, because he is entitled to what has been left to him by his father.

Of course, matters of justice are not so simple. Marxist societies find it necessary to reward people for their work, if only to give them *incentives* to work harder. The Marxist view does not grapple with problems of ensuring motivation. In our society, the shiftless young man may get to keep a substantial part of his fortune, but we can be sure that the government will take a good chunk of it for its own redistributive purposes (whether these are to assist the needy, to build bombers, or to build roads). Indeed, every line on a tax return is in effect a miniature theory of justice—stating what people deserve and what activities are considered particularly worthy. Having children is rewarded with tax deductions; gambling losses are ignored. Return on investments may be rewarded with a low tax rate, lower than taxes on salaries. (What does this say about our concept of justice?) Distributive justice is an all-pervasive concern in our society: in every salary negotiation, in every commercial transaction, and in every grade assigned by a professor.



MASTER THE CONCEPTS: Four Concerns of Justice

- People should get what they need.
- People should give what they can.
- People should be allowed to keep what they have (**entitlement**).
- People should get what they deserve (**merit**).

Our concern for justice, however, is a never-ending balancing act among a number of very different and sometimes antagonistic factors. Most Americans probably agree with Marx that people should work up to their abilities and have their needs served, but we do not put these two considerations at the forefront of our sense of justice. Our system shows our concern that people get what they earn (just as, in criminal cases, we think they should get what they deserve). We also assume that taking risks and shouldering considerable responsibilities should be highly rewarded. And we apparently think—a matter worth pondering—that it is perfectly just that the highest paid, most honored and celebrated members of our society are those who entertain us—in sports, on film, or on the stage, for example.

The American sense of justice also insists, above all, on that sense of entitlement—that people deserve to keep what they have, no matter how little they have done to earn it, no matter what we may think of them. This makes our sense of justice largely conservative, as opposed to the radical redistribution of wealth urged in many revolutionary countries. Indeed, many prominent social theorists have argued that, whatever our emphasis on hard work and merit, our capitalist system of justice depends first of all on this conservative sense of entitlement (the inviolability of private property, for example) and only afterward on these other concerns.

The Meaning of Equality

... *The majestic quality of the law . . . prohibits the wealthy as well as the poor from sleeping under the bridges, from begging in the streets, and from stealing bread.*⁹

—Anatole France, 1894

What is most important for justice, however, in both Marxist societies and our own, is the concept of equality. On the one hand, it is obvious to everyone that all people are *not* equal in every sense. Some are born healthy, wealthy, and smart; others are born wretched, impoverished, and disabled. People have different talents, different looks, different capacities. Nevertheless, justice insists that they are all equal. What does this mean?

It means, first of all, that they are all equal *before the law*. Again, the blindfolded figure of justice signifies that justice does not recognize individual differences in rank and privilege; justice sees everyone as equal. In theory, at least, the same laws apply to everyone and in the same way. A judge is obliged to hand out the same sentence to a rich man as to a poor man, to a homeless person as to a movie star, if they have committed the same crime. Two people doing the same job deserve the same salary, and it does not matter if one is male and the other female, if one is black and the other white, if one is tall and the other is short. Indeed, this sense of “same job, same pay” is defended in American courts because it is so important to our sense of justice and the good society.



FROM THE SOURCE: A Principle of Justice John Rawls, from “Justice as Fairness,” 1999

*Inequalities are arbitrary unless it is reasonable to expect that they will work out to everyone's advantage and provided that the positions to which they attach are open to all.*¹⁰

But many writers have argued that equality cannot mean that everyone should be made equal in a more general sense. In a story by Kurt Vonnegut, the author talks about a society in which everyone is made equal by handicapping the advantaged. Strong people are made weak by being forced to carry heavy weights all the time; smart people are made dumb by wearing noisemakers that distract them from thinking; graceful people wear lopsided weights to keep them off balance. The outrageousness of the story is its suggestion that *inequality* is inevitable in any society. According to this view, some inequalities reflect real differences in accomplishment and make our whole society richer. People who work hard ought to live better, and people who can but refuse to work shouldn't have those same advantages given to them. And so the argument is that—above a certain subsistence level necessary for human existence—inequality should be tolerated as inevitable and, in certain ways, as desirable and advantageous to everyone.

But should there be *so much* inequality? (This is the very question that Marx raised when he complained that laborers were alienated even from a sense of their own accomplishment when the fruits of their labors were not theirs to sell but belonged to someone else, for example, a factory owner.) And even though we can understand why virtue and productiveness should be rewarded, why should we therefore accept the very different thesis that mediocrity and failure—or just plain bad luck and misfortune—should be punished? Could we not have incentives for hard work and productivity that nevertheless coexisted with material equality?

What equality means, many writers say, is *equal opportunity*. But here, too, there are problems. When we try to insist that everyone should be equal, we run up against the unavoidable fact that people are from birth unequal in abilities and advantages, and even the most radical and topsy-turvy restructuring of the society would leave this largely so. Besides that, our feeling that people ought to be rewarded (and punished) for what they do and our sense that people should get to keep what they have result in further inequalities among individuals. There is no equality of opportunity because the same circumstances that give some people ample advantage over others also give them much greater opportunities. “It takes money to make money” goes an old piece of wisdom, and no one can doubt that even a mediocre, lazy child who goes to a first-rate prep school has a better chance at opportunities for the future than bright, energetic but disadvantaged children in an inner-city school. Equal opportunity seems as elusive as equality.

One might think that such complications would be enough to render an ideal impractical, but that is to miss the point of moral ideals in society. There has probably never been a perfectly just society; perhaps there never will be. But what our ideals of justice and equality do is to remind us, all the time, of what we believe in

and what we stand for. An overall scheme for ensuring equality or equal opportunity might escape us, but we can, by virtue of our insistence on equality, be aware of inequalities that exist around us and do what we can to correct them. It is “natural,” one might argue, for people to associate with people of their own age, race, religion, and political persuasion; nevertheless, when this “natural” inclination interferes with fairness—for example, when an employer is hiring, firing, or promoting, or when some workers are forming a union, or when a club is being formed—our sense of justice intervenes and reminds us (perhaps with the help of the law) that such discrimination is not fair. It is unsurprising, one might similarly argue, that in a complex corporation different people doing the same job with the same title might find that they have different salaries; but our concept of equality comes once again to the rescue, for it is under the power of that concept that we feel compelled—and the corporation will too—to make sure that people doing substantially the same job are paid the same salary. However difficult and controversial our concepts of justice and equality may be, they serve an invaluable purpose in our society. We may argue for another two centuries on exactly what they mean and how they apply, but in the meantime they will be the instruments we use to improve our society.



FROM THE SOURCE: Two Principles of Justice John Rawls, 1967

We may think of a human society as a more or less self-sufficient association regulated by a common conception of justice and aimed at advancing the good of its members. As a cooperative venture for mutual advantage, it is characterized by a conflict as well as an identity of interests. There is an identity of interests since social cooperation makes possible a better life for all than any would have if everyone were to try to live by his own efforts; yet at the same time men are not indifferent as to how the greater benefits produced by their joint labours are distributed, for in order to further their own aims each prefers a larger to a lesser share. A conception of justice is a set of principles for choosing between the social arrangements which determine this division and for underwriting a consensus as to the proper distributive shares.

The two principles of justice . . . may be formulated as follows: first, each person engaged in an institution or affected by it has an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a like liberty for all, and second, inequalities as defined by the institutional structure or fostered by it are arbitrary unless it is reasonable to expect that they will work out to everyone's advantage and provided that the positions and offices to which they attach or from which they may be gained are open to all.

These principles regulate the distributive aspects of institutions by controlling the assignment of rights and duties throughout the whole social structure, beginning with the adoption of a political constitution in accordance with which they are then to be applied to legislation. It is upon a correct choice of a basic structure of society, its fundamental system of rights and duties, that the justice of distributive shares depends.¹¹

One notion of equality, however, should stand in front of all these other notions. It precedes equality before the law and is more important than equality of incomes and even opportunities. And that is the notion of *equality of respect*—the presumption that we will view everyone we meet with the vague but immensely meaningful idea that he or she, like ourselves, is a human being with feelings and thoughts, hopes and worries, affections and concerns. It is not a political or even a social sense of equality as much as a deeply felt personal one, taught to most of us in the United States from childhood as an essential part of being a citizen of a classless society, whatever the inequalities in income, wealth, and power among us. But if we fully appreciate the importance of such mutual respect, perhaps some of the other inequalities in our social lives will gradually be corrected.

The Origins of Justice and the Social Contract

*During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of every man against every man.*¹²

—Thomas Hobbes, 1588–1679

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*¹³

—The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Where does justice come from? And why should considerations of justice have any binding authority over us? Why do we have states and governments, and why (apart from fear of punishment) should we obey them? The most popular modern answer to these questions—which has come down to us primarily from the great social thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (especially Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau)—is that justice and the whole of society as well have been produced by a general social agreement, a social contract. We are obliged to obey the rules of justice—and the governments that enforce them—because we (in some sense) *agreed to do so*. It is as if we made a contract with the state—or, more properly, with everyone else in (what is now) our society—to live together according to certain rules that, according to our best calculations, are in everyone's interest, including our own. In return for our obedience to the rules, everyone else will obey them too (or be threatened and forced to do so).

Just think of traffic rules alone to see how well this idea works as an account of both why there should be such general rules and how it is in our interest to obey them (at least most of the time) ourselves. And in return for our agreement to be fair and to support and participate in fair institutions—in particular the justice system but also the tax system (by willingly paying our “fair share”), the market

system, and the system of contracts and ownership—others will participate as well. Society will be orderly and more or less peaceful; property will be safe and secured and our personal lives protected. Justice thus results from a mutual agreement according to which we all agree to abide by certain rules and principles.

We ourselves have signed no such contract, of course, although one can argue (as even Socrates did in the *Crito* almost 3,000 years ago) that one has made an implicit agreement with the society in which one lives simply by “choosing” to (continuing to) live there. And in the United States, in particular, there is something like a “social contract,” an actual written document signed by representatives from the various then-existing states in order to set up a government and a set of general laws—our Constitution. But the appeal of the social-contract view, whether or not one believes that there ever actually was or is such a contract, is that it makes government conditional on our (collective) interests and dependent on our (collective) decisions. (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the leading defenders of this theory, referred to our collective demands as the General Will of the people.) Governments, on this view, don’t just appear “by nature” and impose themselves on us. We are in effect the ultimate source of their rules and laws, and it is our “will” that becomes the law of the land. As Rousseau profoundly put it, we collectively impose the laws on ourselves.

What was there before people got together to form society? Why did they get together? The most famous theory of the prior “state of nature” (that is, before the formation of society) is that of Thomas Hobbes, who argued that human life before society and justice was “a war of every man against every man” and, consequently, “nasty, brutish, and short.”¹⁴ He suggested that people are naturally selfish, and, in a world with too scarce resources, we would literally kill one another if there were no laws and governments to force us to behave ourselves. So why would we join a society and agree to such laws? Because each of us would be quite afraid of being hurt or killed by the others. And in return for our promise not to harm them, they agree not to harm us. Not a bad deal.

The implication, of course, is that human nature is still much the same and that, without laws and governments, we too might return to that same brutal, mutually murderous situation. In *Leviathan*, published in 1651 at the time of the English Civil War, Hobbes regarded civil discord as the worst evil that could befall a society. The only way to avoid it, he argued, was for power to be given to a strong central authority, which could be either an individual or a collective body. On this view, the members of society voluntarily give up their rights to the sovereign power; but Hobbes believed this was a price worth paying in order to ensure peace.



MASTER THE CONCEPT: The Social Contract

The **social contract** was a concept that became enormously popular and powerful in the eighteenth century as a theory of the nature of society, although it was typically presented instead as a view about the origins of society, which was most implausible. The social-contract theory views society

as based upon the shared agreement of all individuals who are its citizens; as citizens, they give up certain rights and privileges in return for the protection and the mutual advantages of the state. The best historical manifestation of such a contract is the U.S. Constitution, which was drawn up by representatives of the various states and commonwealths to establish the federal government and its limitations. Moreover, the idea of a social contract was one of the basic justifications of the French Revolution (1789) and, a few years earlier, the justification used by the American colonies to break away from Britain.



MEET THE PHILOSOPHERS: Three Social Contract Theorists

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was an English philosopher who also defended the theory of materialism (“Everything is matter in motion”), which influenced Sir Isaac Newton.

John Locke (1632–1704) was an English physician and philosopher who became known as the father of British empiricism (see Chapter 5). He defended the idea of the social contract in his *Essays on Civil Government*, published in 1690 just after the English Glorious Revolution (1688).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) was a Swiss philosopher. In 1762 he wrote the influential book titled *The Social Contract*.

A somewhat more cheerful theory of the social contract was defended by Hobbes’s successor, John Locke. Locke suggested that in the state of nature we were basically hardworking creatures who tried to build things and cultivate the soil and by doing so claimed ownership of that property with which we had “mixed our labor.” But ownership in the state of nature would be a tenuous business. For although one had earned the right of ownership through one’s work, protecting what one owned was quite a different matter. We got together to form societies with laws and governments, therefore, to protect our hard-earned property. Locke’s theory, needless to say, places a high premium on the importance of private property, both in justice and in the workings of society.

An even more benign theory was defended by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who saw society and justice (as we mentioned earlier) as the expression of the General Will of the people. But Rousseau did not see the state of nature as a brutal war, as Hobbes did, nor did he see it primarily as a world of hardworking individuals. Rousseau instead imagined a world of plenty, in which our presocietal ancestors could easily survive by picking berries off the trees and sleeping in natural shelters. They left one another alone, and even felt pity for others in need. “Natural man,” Rousseau argues, was happier and healthier than most of us. Why, then, did people in the state of nature ever decide to form societies?

Well, much of the evolution of society, Rousseau tells us, is something of a tragedy, a product of our inventiveness but also our gullibility. Whereas nature finds us naturally good and happy, society, he says, "corrupts" us. Nevertheless, society properly conceived will not only restore something of our natural vitality and utilize our inventiveness but will actually make us into something more than merely "natural." Society will make us moral. Society will change a mere man or woman into a citizen.

These three thinkers' views of human nature differ considerably, but they all point to the same conclusion. For whatever reason, we got together and formed society, with laws and justice as its central feature. It is an exciting vision. And whether one gives any credence to its historical claims—either the theories of human nature presupposed or the story of the social contract itself—the vision exemplifies many of our most treasured demands regarding ourselves and the society we live in.

Justice Beyond Our Borders

The topic of justice raises questions not only about how one should treat one's fellow citizens, but also about how members of other societies should be treated. Some philosophers, in addressing this concern, have challenged some of our everyday assumptions about what it means to be a good member of society.

Being patriotic probably seems to most of us an obvious virtue. But how does this seeming virtue square with the virtue of being just? The question becomes clearer when we translate the idea of patriotism into the attitudes that compose it. Does patriotism imply preferring the well-being of members of our own society to that of foreigners? If so, is that really fair? Leo Tolstoy analyzed patriotism along these lines and concluded that it is immoral because the preferential attitude it takes toward one's own society or nation is at the expense of all others. But is this really the right way to look at what we mean by being patriotic? Might we not say instead that patriotism is being loyal to the society that has supported us in many ways over our lifetime, as well as being loyal to the particular members with whom we have interacted?

How should we define "patriotism"? Does it just mean that we identify with our country? This seems too weak a definition. One can identify with one's country and be ashamed of it, and many people would consider such shame to be incompatible with patriotism. Others might say that shame under certain circumstances—when one's nation is not living up to its ideals, for example—is a manifestation of patriotism. If patriotism is a virtue, it is surely something other than mindless agreement with everything done by one's leaders, one's government, or one's compatriots. Patriotism, to be meaningful, involves participation in a larger community or society, and most defenders of patriotism would agree that patriotic participation sometimes may involve criticizing the very nation to which one maintains allegiance.

In any case, mere identification with one's nation falls short of patriotism. As most of us use the term, patriotism seems to require enthusiasm for one's nation and putting its interests first. Members of the military, who risk their lives on

behalf of the nation, are often seen as the epitome of patriotism. But this idea of putting the interests of one's nation first brings us back to the question of whether such partiality can be morally justified.

One argument in defense of patriotism is that citizenship imposes special moral obligations on the citizen. This is the argument that Plato's Socrates gives to his disciple Crito when he claims that he has obligations to the state because it nurtured and educated him, and that by living in it he has made an implicit contract with it that requires him to obey its laws. Seemingly, Socrates would see the partiality of patriotism as justified in that it is an outcome of this implicit contract with the state.

Some thinkers have denied that any kind of partiality is legitimate. The ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi (also Mo-Tzu) contended that any kind of preferential treatment, even that based on family ties, is immoral and also harmful to society as well as one's family members. Surely, he claimed, we would be more confident that our parents were well cared for if we lived in a society in which everyone cared for everyone's parents, not just their own.

The Confucian philosopher Mencius (Mengzi) countered that this approach would lead to a leveling of the concern we showed to a lowest common denominator, and (like Socrates) he argued that we have special obligations to those who have tended to us since our birth. It is natural that we have special concern for those who are closest to us, and the family is the context in which we first learn to care for others besides ourselves. While we have particular obligations to care for those who are closest to us, the cultivation of our natural sympathy for others naturally expands in a widening circle of concern for others. Contemporary communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre, while focusing on the community instead of the family, similarly argue that partiality toward those among whom one has developed one's sense of morality is not only acceptable, but morally required.

Questions about the moral standing of patriotism become particularly important when one's country goes to war. When our nation declares war on another, it is targeting other human beings on the basis of their national affiliation, so partiality is evident in the extreme. The question of whether war is ever justified is a philosophical issue of long standing. In the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna, the person who has the responsibility to give the order to commence the battle, has difficulty bringing himself to do so. He reflects on the fact that his order will lead to the deaths of kinsmen and others on both sides. (He ultimately does give the order, for reasons we will consider in Chapter 11.)

At the very least, war involves killing other human beings, perhaps the paradigm case of an action that is wrong (at least the vast majority of the time). Most people would claim that sometimes killing people is not wrong, and many would include killing combatants in war among these exceptions. But if they are right, is this true of any war, no matter whether it is provoked or how aggressively or cruelly it is waged? And how does one ensure that one kills only combatants and avoids killing civilians (often chillingly and euphemistically referred to as "collateral damage")? Most philosophers think there must be at least some restrictions on when killing in war is morally acceptable (if it ever is).

Just-war theory tries to establish the circumstances under which it is morally permissible to go to war and what actions are acceptable when war is undertaken.

Most just-war theorists take a nation's self-defense when attacked to be a just reason for going to war; there is more disagreement about whether a nation can legitimately go to war to protect innocent people who are not citizens. The questions become more complicated when a multinational alliance is involved, particularly when it goes to war to protect innocents in nations that are not part of the alliance. Some have argued that a first strike can be a form of defense against a looming threat, but this raises the question of when an attack is so obviously impending that this could be fairly called defensive. The notion that war should be undertaken only as a last resort, after efforts at negotiation have been attempted, is also an important principle in just-war theory. (Interestingly, although famous for his ingenious analysis of military strategy within war, the ancient Chinese military theorist Sunzi [or Sun-Tzu] is in agreement with just-war theorists on this point, although his grounds are prudential, not moral.) At every phase of war, just-war theorists insist that a party to the conflict is morally obligated to limit the amount of force employed to what is necessary to achieve its legitimate goal.

Qualms about the legitimacy of partiality motivate many who adopt the position called cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitans (in the sense of those who hold this view, not the colloquial sense of being well traveled or at home everywhere) take seriously the idea of global community. Typically they hold that we have moral obligations to all other human beings. They promote the idea of international political arrangements that would facilitate the welfare of all human beings, regardless of their national citizenship. Philosopher-economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, for example, defend a cosmopolitan view according to which policies should be developed that help people develop their natural capabilities to thrive and provide them the freedom to make use of these capabilities.

Cosmopolitans differ with respect to the nature of the international institutions they defend and how much power such institutions should have, as well as on the extent (if any) to which citizens of specific nations have special obligations to their fellow citizens. Nevertheless, they concur that national sovereignty should be weakened at least to some extent so that neither the policies of particular states nor national borders interfere with the satisfaction of human needs.

Rights and the Individual

One of the most important ingredients in most contemporary theories of justice—some authors would insist it is the definitive ingredient—is the notion of rights. A right, essentially, is a kind of claim. Employees have a right to their salaries, for example, by virtue of a prior agreement with the company. Students have a right to an A if they have done excellent work in a course. To say that a person has a right is to say that someone else (perhaps the whole society) has a duty or an obligation to that person. For example, if a child has a right to a decent education, society has an obligation to make such an education available. Needless to say, there may be considerable disagreement about who should be responsible for this and how it will be paid for. Nevertheless, the right exists, with the corresponding obligation. To be a self in a society is to have such rights, as well as the corresponding obligation

(for example, to help see to it that others get an education, by paying taxes, by sending your children to school, perhaps by teaching school).

There are different kinds of rights and duties. For example, some are contractual rights—the right to be paid for one's work, the obligation to pay for what you buy, or the duty to keep one's promises. Some are legal rights—such as the right to drive (with certain reasonable restrictions) and the duty to drive (more or less) under the speed limit. Other rights and duties are civil rights, whether or not they are written into law—such as the right and the duty to vote or the right and the duty to speak one's mind about topics of political concern. Finally, there is the general category of human (or “natural”) rights, which apply to every human being on earth, no matter what the society or the circumstances—for instance, the right not to be tortured and not to be imprisoned without reason, the duty not to torture and not to imprison without reason.

This conception of rights, however, gives rise to some notorious political problems about their scope and nature. For example, we can all agree that the right not to be tortured is a global human right, but what about the right to free medical care? Or the right to keep what one has earned, however one has earned it? How much power should society (through government, or the state) have over individual citizens? Indeed, how much of one's self is defined by citizenship? How much is one a self quite apart from one's membership in society?

A broad spectrum of answers to these difficult questions has emerged over the past several hundred years, as concern for the individual has increased and as the size and power of societies have increased. We may mention, for instance, three possibilities: libertarianism, liberalism, and communitarianism.

Libertarianism

Libertarianism is the view that people are defined as selves by a strong set of natural rights as individuals, including the right to be left alone and not to be interfered with, the right to keep what one has, or has earned, and the right to be free from government interference in all things except when absolutely necessary to the general good. Libertarians tend to be strongly against taxes and big government and strongly for individual freedoms of all kinds. For the libertarian, the self is largely independent, and people establish themselves as selves by what they do with this freedom. Robert Nozick defends a libertarian position in his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

Liberalism

The view of liberalism also holds that people are defined as selves by a strong set of natural rights, but the set of rights is quite different from the rights defended by the libertarian. Whereas libertarians emphasize the right not to be interfered with and the “negative rights” that this implies (for example, the right not to be prevented from speaking one's mind), the liberal emphasizes people's “positive” rights to the benefits of society (decent housing, education, food, health care, security). Whereas libertarians stress minimal and local government (“That gov't is best which governs least”), contemporary liberals tend to support a strong centralized

government to administer social programs. (This is in contrast to the “classical liberals” of the eighteenth century and beyond, whose focus was negative liberty and defense of private property.) For the contemporary liberal, the self is the bearer of rights to a decent life, which become the obligation of society. John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* presents a vision of the just society that is premised on liberal ideas. A cosmopolitan variant of liberalism is the view that the rights of all human beings, regardless of citizenship, should be promoted and defended on an international basis. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted along these lines a Universal Declaration of Human Rights that called for international justice and the defense of the dignity of every human being through the protection of both civil liberties (negative rights) and freedom from want (positive rights).

Communitarianism

The communitarian view rejects the one-sided liberal and libertarian emphasis on rights and stresses the concept of duty instead. What defines a citizen is not his or her rights but rather his or her duties (“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country”). In the communitarian view, the self sometimes becomes a function of society rather than an independent entity. G. W. F. Hegel, for example, attacked the social-contract theory because such a theory presupposes that individual selves who are capable of entering into a contractual agreement exist before society, but it is only within society that such agreements are possible. This, he insists, is nonsense. The self must be defined by society; there is no self outside of society. At its extreme, this view sometimes leads to totalitarianism (or fascism), which holds that the individual self is literally nothing, that the whole self is defined by—and is the property of—the state. (Hegel himself rejected this conclusion.)

Justice Denied: The Problem of Race

[I]t doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean that we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us.¹⁵

—Malcolm X, 1964

Each of us is a citizen of our nation, but this has not always guaranteed that our rights have been protected, particularly if we are members of a minority group. In the United States, African-Americans constitute one of the most important marginalized groups. The problem of institutionalized racism has been of crisis proportions in this country ever since the drafting of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and even before, when the first slaves were brought over from Africa to toil in the fields of Virginia and the Caribbean Islands. Racism has become, over the last fifty years, an inescapable problem that threatens the very moral integrity

as well as the social harmony of life in America. The question of how we are to resolve the injustices perpetrated against racial minorities is pressing, and political philosophy should help us to address it.

Philosophy itself, however, has been accused of collaborating with racist society in downgrading people of color. The fact that African-American writers, for instance, have traditionally been left unread and out of the curriculum in American universities has been challenged as a continuation of “cultural slavery,” the marginalization of one people's ideas by another's. In this respect, we can ask whether our tradition's approach to intellectual history has itself been unjust in its neglect of African-American thinkers and its failure to attend to their (often political) concerns. The rise of African-American philosophy over the past half century represents a step toward redressing this unfairness and toward acknowledging the role that racial prejudice has played not only in our social practices but even in our philosophical theories. The fact that African-American philosophy has emerged into greater prominence in the last half century is thus a step toward greater justice within the field and ideally a sanguine development for redressing past injustice.



FROM THE SOURCE: Philosophy Must Consider Race

K. Anthony Appiah on African-American philosophy, 1992–1993

Thinking about how the facts of “race” and the demand for justice may be accommodated to each other and to the realities of our various identifications and identities; nothing could be a more recognizably philosophical project. And what [W. E. B.] Du Bois called the “social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult” as well as the contemporary meaning of “racial difference” need always to be borne in mind if these discussions are to hew to reality.

These issues, which are crucial for questions of race in public life quite generally, intersect with a more narrowly academic range of questions in what I suppose we could call not so much the philosophy of education as the philosophy of the academy, questions about how racial identities and racist histories have shaped our disciplinary heritages. Philosophers (like others) have not always been good at seeing clearly the historical formation of their own discipline.

Feminist philosophers have argued that the structure of philosophical discourse reflects the longstanding exclusion of most women and women's concerns, first from the life of intellectuals, then, as it developed, from the university; and their lesson is not simply that here, as elsewhere, sexism has damaged women and men, but that it has clouded our understanding. There has not been an equally extensive exploration of the question how racism has misguided our more abstract reflections; of how the absence of black voices has shaped our philosophical discourse . . . [I]t seems simply astonishing how little of the political philosophy of the philosophers explicitly acknowledges the distinctive and different significances of race and other kinds of collective identity as well as of gender to the questions that arise at the intersection of the state with morality.¹⁶

We do not have the space here to go into all the various contributions of African-American thinkers over our country's history. But two African-American thinkers from the 1960s have become extremely influential—Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X—and so it may be helpful to devote our attention to them. The two men—who knew each other and both worked throughout their lives to enhance the position of blacks both in America and elsewhere in the world—held widely different political philosophies.

Martin Luther King, Jr., advocated civil disobedience in the tradition of Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. In other words, he sought to advance the position of African-Americans in this country through peaceful political protest. Such protest included breaking unjust laws and suffering the consequences of doing so, but never violence. King was also an integrationist, meaning that he believed that equality of the races required mixed neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools. His goal was full integration and the equal recognition of civil rights for black and white Americans, to be achieved through peaceful and ultimately “color-blind” means.



FROM THE SOURCE: The Challenge of Change
James Baldwin, 1961

King's responsibility, and ours, is to that future which is already sending before it so many striking signs and portents. The possibility of liberation which is always real is also always painful, since it involves such an overhauling of all that gave us our identity . . . We will need every ounce of moral stamina we can find. For everything is changing, from our notion of politics to our notion of ourselves, and we are certain . . . to undergo the torment of being forced to surrender far more than we ever realized we had accepted.¹⁷

Malcolm X, on the other hand, was generally taken to be a revolutionary, and he advocated Black Nationalism. Black Nationalism was a separatist movement that sought a unification of African-descended people all over the world into a separate society. Malcolm X is somewhat notorious for his claim that the interests of blacks throughout the world should be advanced “by any means necessary,” meaning that violence was appropriate where peaceful means failed. And in general, Malcolm X believed that peaceful means had failed during the hundreds of years of white oppression of blacks. During much of his active life, Malcolm X was a Black Muslim, that is, a member of an American Islamic black separatist movement. The Islamic religion, the Black Muslims believed, lent itself particularly well to the project of worldwide unification for blacks. Although Malcolm X later qualified his strong views about violence and separatism, he defended them in much of his writing, and because he died young, he is largely remembered for them.



FROM THE SOURCE: A Revolution of Self-Defense
Malcolm X, from *Malcolm X Speaks*, 1965

No, since the federal government has shown that it isn't going to do anything about [the Klan] but talk, then it is your and my duty as men; as human beings, . . . to organize ourselves and let the government know that if they don't stop that Klan, we'll stop it ourselves. Then you'll see the government start doing something about it. But don't ever think that they're going to do it just on some kind of morality basis. No. So I don't believe in violence—that's why I want to stop it. And you can't stop it with love, . . . No! So, we only mean vigorous action in self-defense, and that vigorous action we feel we're justified in initiating by any means necessary.

Now, for saying something like that, the press calls us racist and people who are “violent in reverse.” This is how they psycho you. They make you think that if you try to stop the Klan from lynching you, you're practicing violence in reverse. . . . Well, if a criminal comes around your house with his gun, brother, just because he's got a gun and he's robbing your house, and he's a robber, it doesn't make you a robber because you grab your gun and run him out. No, the man is using some tricky logic on you. . . . With skillful manipulating of the press they're able to make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look like the victim.¹⁸

Although Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., disagreed in their political orientations and analyses, they were both committed to pressing the cause of African-Americans. Both, however, made enemies, some of whom were not content to continue the conversation through words and symbolic actions. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.

African-Americans have sought to take the premise that all men are created equal as meaning what it says; but most whites in America in the latter 1960s, including many persons of good will, took equality to mean, roughly, some measure of improved circumstances for nonwhites. Even now, white America does not seem organized (even psychologically) to close the gaps, but instead seems concerned only to make the situation less painful and obvious. It is worth asking which orientations and policies would really make a difference and which are geared, perhaps with window dressing, to retain the status quo.

Sexual Politics: The Rise of Feminist Philosophy

Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice or Representation.¹⁹

—Abigail Adams, 1776