

Is Social Justice Primarily a Matter of Outcomes, Or of How Those Outcomes Are Achieved?

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Social justice is one of the most controversial issues in political and social life because different individuals and groups seldom have the same views on the essence and scope of this concept. Religious, political, cultural, and other differences complicate the situation severely. However, even when people manage to develop a single vision of social justice that they would like to achieve, disputes might not disappear. Despite sharing the same goals, people still can disagree over the methods for ensuring preferred outcomes. This situation is likely when a noble cause relies on controversial initiatives, forcing one to decide what matters most. However, contrary to these complications, both the outcome and the methods matter.

It is not difficult to explain the perceived conflict between people who believe that the outcome is the primary concern and those individuals who prioritize the methods or principles used. This conflict represents a relatively old philosophical and ethical problem. Ancient philosophers, including Socrates, discussed this moral problem and tried to determine whether the ends can justify the means. This question defines the core of many ethical dilemmas. For example, it might be problematic to tell whether the desire to achieve social harmony and eliminate violence justifies the prohibition of hate speech or censorship. Similarly, someone can ponder whether it is acceptable to use force for establishing a society where violence would be impossible or illegal. Other people can wonder if they may lie, steal, or perform any other immoral act for a noble cause (such as saving a human life or helping someone to escape poverty).

The answer to the question of morality borders depends on the ethical framework chosen. Consequentialist and deontological theories are perfect examples. These frameworks have radically different theoretical premises. Consequentialism explicitly states that only outcomes of specific actions matter. One of the most popular theories within this framework is utilitarianism. One of the most famous supporters of this philosophy, John Stuart Mill (1863, p. 14), insisted that all human actions must ultimately maximize pleasure and utility for an entire society. In other words, rational choices should increase the amount of happiness and minimize any misery that can exist. However, any act is moral, even if it inflicts suffering, provided it generates more pleasure than pain. In this case, supporters of social justice should not worry about the morality of methods they choose for accomplishing this ideal. Any radical policy or measure, ranging from confiscation to censorship, is acceptable if it contributes to the rise of social justice, at least in the long run.

Deontological ethics features an opposite approach, insisting that the methods and principles one follows to accomplish a goal are more important than the goal itself. In other words, the ends do not necessarily justify the means. Kantian philosophy is probably the most well-known example. The creator of this philosophy, Immanuel Kant, insisted that human actions should always comply with moral rules or maxims. Such maxims should fulfill specific requirements. First of all, any moral principle should treat human beings as ends, not means. Similarly, one must be able to use this maxim as a universal law (White, 2011, p. 23). The costs and benefits associated with such decisions, however, have no significance. Consequently, no action can be immoral in one situation but permissible in another. Namely, it is unacceptable to

lie even if doing so is necessary to save someone's life. Since lying is by definition immoral, one cannot pursue such an option (White, 2011, p. 25). This limitation forces promoters of social justice to follow specific moral principles and methods even if doing so makes it more challenging to achieve the desired outcome.

This ethical conflict frames the discussion of social justice outcomes in accordance with the methods used. Indeed, people who think that only the outcome matters might argue that social progress always involves costs and sacrifices. They can emphasize that many historical changes, which promoted social justice, relied on the use of violence. For example, the elimination of slavery in the U.S. would not have happened if the Northern States had not fought and won a violent war against the South. In that case, high casualties and enormous suffering became necessary to ensure that African-Americans could receive protection of their fundamental human rights. Other defenders of this position may note that progressive reforms often require an infringement on peoples' rights. For example, equal access to healthcare and social services will almost inevitably require higher taxes and the redistribution of wealth. Such an initiative, however, restricts many human rights, including the right to own and manage one's property freely.

Meanwhile, people who prioritize methods of achieving outcomes disagree with these arguments. In their opinion, the respect for human rights is an essential aspect of social justice, which is meaningless unless it presupposes unquestionable protection of natural human rights. Indeed, one can reasonably argue that violence or another violation of human rights compromises the purpose and essence of social justice because justice means equal access to

rights and privileges as well as equal protection from abuses. Such critics might further emphasize that by focusing on outcomes, their opponents overlook enormous incentives and opportunities for abuse. Indeed, Liang et al. (2017, p. 307) report numerous cases of psychologists and social activists who had noble goals but ended up overlooking the potential weaknesses of their initiatives and approaches to a problem. In other instances, the pursuit of social justice succumbed to the desire to obtain personal gain, fame, or other benefits, encouraging such persons to abuse their power and make decisions that would harm others. All people are prone to such weaknesses. However, the lack of critical reflection on one's actions increases this risk. Unfortunately, the notion that the ends justify the means can reinforce such unhealthy biases.

Since both points of view have strengths and weaknesses, the wisest choice is to combine these approaches. Indeed, while people need to pursue social justice, they must remember that their ultimate goal is to improve human well-being, not endanger it. Even Mill (1863, p. 57), who endorsed utilitarianism, recognized its limitations and argued that rules that concern "the essentials of human well-being" might have to be absolute. He emphasized the significance of norms that forbid humans from harming each other because they secure the existence of modern society. This fact proves that people should care about the methods of accomplishing social justice to ensure that such practices do not endanger human life or health as well as other basic moral principles. In other words, social justice is a matter of methods and principles, not outcomes, as long as such a pursuit can affect the foundations of human society. For that reason, no attempt to promote justice can involve violence, the deprivation of freedom, or the violation

of other essential human rights. The only legitimate exception to this requirement is possible when society needs to protect human life and health, or to punish criminals.

In other cases, it is reasonable to judge matters of social justice solely by intended outcomes. While this approach involves some ethical challenges, they are manageable for multiple reasons. First of all, social and political life, by definition, presupposes the reallocation of scarce resources, including access to resources and privileges. People regularly sacrifice some share of their interests for the sake of society and have a comfortable life in such a community. Consequently, the outcome-oriented approach should not harm people provided such pursuit of social justice honors the limitations stated previously. Moreover, by focusing on intended goals, one gains additional incentives and opportunities to reflect on the advantages or disadvantages of specific initiatives and select the most promising ones. Hence, this ethical framework will help one to choose the most effective policies for promoting social justice. This way, one can maximize the well-being of society (especially the most vulnerable groups) by imposing minimum limitations on individual rights and privileges.

All in all, social justice is a matter of both the desired outcomes and methods (or principles) used to accomplish those outcomes. This approach is necessary because both ethical frameworks have limitations. Notably, people who only care about the outcomes of social justice are likely to overlook serious moral hazards. Their peers who prioritize the methods of delivering desired results might be unable to adjust to challenging situations. By recognizing both aspects of social justice, one can address these problems. Specifically, one needs to scrutinize methods of accomplishing social justice if they can affect fundamental human rights, including the right

to life since the removal of such protections endangers social stability. In other situations, it is reasonable to focus on the outcomes and, thus retain the freedom of choosing the most effective and fair social policies.

References

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