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Theories of justice can be distinguished on the basis of whether they imply that distributive principles are universal or pluralistic in nature. The traditional approach to justice is to look for a single set of universal principles that are applicable across circumstances, i.e., to a wide range of goods. An alternative approach is to look for principles as they are practiced in a given culture or society and draw a connection between the social meanings and appropriate distributions of goods. This essay adopts the alternative perspective and argues that every society creates many kinds of social goods, each of which has its own sphere of distributive principles, procedures, and agents.

Contemporary industrial societies create a range of social goods that include political membership, security and welfare, money and commodities, hard work, free time, education, kinship and love, divine grace, recognition, and political power. Egalitarian concerns focus on maintaining autonomy among the spheres and preventing individuals who get ahead in one sphere from dominating others. Domination is the root problem for egalitarians. “It is not the fact that there are rich and poor that generates egalitarian politics but the fact that the rich ‘grind the faces of the poor.’”[xiii] Inequalities can be tolerated within spheres so long as the spheres are relatively autonomous, and a person who gets ahead in one sphere is unable to convert this advantage in another. Complex equality is achieved when no one is able to convert advantages from one sphere into another. In such a society, one is free from domination.

One consequence of this approach to justice is that theorists must remain closer to the beliefs and understandings of ordinary people than is usually the case with abstract theories of justice. Social criticism is possible, but critiques must highlight the divergence between the ethical code espoused by society and what actually transpires.

A THEORY OF GOODS

Traditional approaches to justice assume that goods simply appear in the hands of distributive agents, devoid of meaning and history, and are then distributed according to universal principles. However, every political community attaches its own social meanings to goods before distributing them. In a sense, the social meanings of goods determine their system of distribution. Once the social meaning of a particular good is known, the specific distributive principles associated with this good are also known. Thus, the role of a distributive theory is to interpret the social meanings of goods. This requires a theory of goods that recognizes six principles:

- Distributive justice is only concerned with social goods, the meanings of which are shaped by society.
- Personal identity is bound up in goods.
- Across cultures and times, there is no single set of primary or basic goods.
- Distribution is determined by the social meanings of goods.
- Social meanings are historical in character.
- Every set of social goods constitutes a distributive sphere within which only certain criteria and arrangements are appropriate.

DOMINANCE AND MONOPOLY

Most societies organize their distributive arrangements according to a social version of the gold standard: one set of goods is dominant and determines the value of other goods. In capitalist systems, capital is the dominant good; it can be readily converted into other goods such as prestige or power. A good is dominant if the individuals who have it, because they have it, can command other goods, with other social meanings, in other spheres. Monopolistic control of dominant goods permits exploitation of their dominance. Ruling classes monopolize dominant goods.

SIMPLE EQUALITY

Men and women who claim that a given monopoly is unjust challenge the monopoly, but not the dominance of that social good. If the good is wealth, the claimants seek a simple kind of equality: let wealth be shared. Societies that focus on the problems that follow from monopoly, rather than dominance, will forever substitute one monopoly for another. For instance, if everyone is given the same amount of wealth in a free market society, inequalities will follow almost immediately. Market winners and the talented will have to be constrained by state forces, but then state power will become the object of monopolistic concerns. State power might be shared widely, but then diffused state power will be unable to cope with the emergent monopolistic claims of social groups such as technocrats and meritocrats.

TYRANNY AND COMPLEX EQUALITY

An alternative is to focus on the claim that dominance is unjust, which implies that limits should be placed on the convertibility of social goods. A complex egalitarian society prevents the conversion of goods such as beauty into respect, strength into love, power into belief. Implicit are two assumptions. First, goods with different social meanings should have relatively autonomous spheres of distribution. Second, disregard of these principles is tyranny. A ruler should not be able to command opinion because of the power he wields. Complex equality is the opposite of tyranny.

In formal terms, complex equality means that no citizens standing in one sphere or with regard to one social good can be undercut by his standing in some other sphere, with regard to some other good. Thus, citizen X may be chosen over citizen Y for political office, and then the two of them will be unequal in the sphere of politics. But they will

not be unequal generally so long as X's office gives him no advantages over Y in any other sphere - superior medical care, access to better schools for his children, entrepreneurial opportunities, and so on.[19]

For goods, this amounts to the open-ended distributive principle: "No social good x should be distributed to men and women who possess some other good y merely because they possess y and without regard to the meaning of x." [20] Outcomes will not be determined by this principle, but it focuses attention on the pluralistic nature of social goods.

THREE DISTRIBUTIVE PRINCIPLES

Three criteria or principles that are commonly invoked to guide distributions - free exchange, desert, and need - exemplify the open-ended principle for some, but not all goods. Each has been defended, incorrectly, as a distributive principle that ranges over all goods. For instance, free-exchange is appropriate for market goods, less so for goods such as welfare or honor and respect. Desert is appropriate for education, less so for goods such as kinship and love. Need is appropriate for medical care, less so for political power.

SETTING OF THE ARGUMENT

Issues of justice arise chiefly in bounded political communities. This is true for two reasons: (1) unless there is a determinate membership, there are no shared meanings to shape distributions; and (2) unless the society is politically organized, a theory of justice cannot be applied since there is no state institution to maintain the boundaries between the spheres of distribution. It is possible to imagine societies, such as the old caste systems in India, in which the meanings of goods are so intertwined that their intertwined differentiation is impossible. In these societies complex equality cannot arise.