

Enriching Contemporary Approaches to Social Justice: Some Thoughts Offered By Barbara Baudot, Coordinator of the Triglav Circle

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly: what is essential is invisible to the eye.
Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Considering general notions of social justice and their moral foundations, John Locke wrote in his work entitled, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, 1754, “Our Savior’s great rule that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, is such a fundamental truth for the regulating of human society, that, I think, by that alone one might without difficulty determine all the cases and doubts in social morality.¹” This statement extracted from the writings of one of the great inspirations of liberalism offers stimulus and direction for analyzing the possibilities for building that heretofore ephemeral moral foundation for social justice that will be called simply “love.”

Locke treats this rule as one of the “fundamental truths” “providing the basis upon which a great many others rest and in which they have their consistency.” Locke placed this truth on a par with Isaac Newton’s discovery of gravity. Both truths “enlightened many other things that without them would remain unknown.” As a matter of prudence, these subjects were among those quintessential substantial questions that humankind should focus attention on, as opposed to the more trivial and diverting pursuits such as purely logical inquiries and other such intellectual dalliances that were trivial in meaning, such as if, as Locke suggested, a painter would spend his time counting the threads on the canvas he should be painting upon. Plumbing this “teeming” truth, “so rich in store” would furnish the mind with substance and beauty and bring to fore many other substantial ideas essential to life. Whether Locke believed in the Savior or not, as is widely debated, should have no effect on the weight he gives to this truth as a fundamental one from which other substantial truths regarding social morality could be derived. He has come to this idea concerning the foundation for social morality or justice through “prudence” in selection of worthwhile subjects of study and rational realization.

These notes explore some of the dimensions of Locke’s fundamental verity and what might be needed for its realization as the moral foundation for social justice today. It then looks at current approaches to social justice and concludes there is necessity for a change of mind-set.

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¹ John Locke, *On the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. F.W. Garforth, Classics in Education series-No. 31 www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/CESdigital/locke/conduct/sect/section-43.h...9/11/2005.

Love as the moral foundation for social justice

The concept of “love” used in Locke’s text has, contrary to the current foundations for the western ideological approaches to social justice, the quality of universality. Much has been written about it. Similar ideas are conveyed in writings of the ancient Greeks, Taoists, Confucians, Islamic scholars, and Buddhists, to mention only the most widely accepted belief systems and philosophies. The nature of love here is that of action. It has two dimensions the love of the self and the love of the other as an indivisible unit. It is clear that while the term “love” is ambiguous in modern society, in the Biblical context from which Locke has extracted his fundamental truth, the meaning is not easily to be confused with erotic, sensual, biological or selfish forms of love. For most people it would seem to mean virtuous behavior in society including acts of caring, giving, empathizing, compassionate responding, building bridges of solidarity and the like. It is a mutual loving evoking the idea that in seeking the good of the other, one finds one’s own well-being.

Such an interpretation is consistent with the description of love (charity or agape) in I Corinthians 13, wherein love is drawn as the highest virtuous form of behavior. This sentiment so conceived cannot be selfish or self seeking. It requires self abnegation of the person to behave accordingly. The act of loving means willingness to be long suffering, kindly, satisfied with one’s own lot in life, humble, well-mannered, selfless, non provocative, focused on the good, equilibrated emotionally, and at peace. This act of love is willing to bear all burdens, endure all tribulation while hoping for and having faith in what is good.

Illustrating the universality of this conception of love is the 15th century Japanese Noh play, Yama-Uba. The title means “old woman of the mountains.” She is a temporal incarnation of the Principle of Love that in reality secretly and endlessly moves in every person. Humans are not perceptive of the hard work and pain of Love and disregard Her. On the stage itself the players ignore the costumed embodiment of love acting as if expecting Love to be a young and beautiful person. Her incarnation in the play is an old-white haired and wizened woman. Her appearance reflects the actuality of her ceaseless struggle in the world. She suffers many pains gladly as she travels the world around knowing no rest in her work of bringing blessings and resolving problems. Yama Uba incarnates that unknown and invisible agent in Nature and in humanity that human beings will gladly imagine in a happy beautiful way but with whom they must come face to face in the full light of reality in their deepest conscience to grasp the actuality of nature.²

This form of virtuous feeling and behavior is to be found in the heart of humanity and serves as the arbiter between human reason on one hand and passionate drives on the other. Love, the human spirit, and magnanimity are nearly equivalent concepts.

² Noriko Hashimoto, “Philosophical Reflection on the Path of Art,” *Candles in the Dark: A New Spirit for a Plural World*, ed. Barbara Baudot, [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003] 233.

Erich Fromm defined the manifestation of Locke's foundational truth, "Love thy neighbor as thy self." as the essence of "brotherly love." Otherwise stated, it is human solidarity, oneness with all humanity and love of humanity. And, it is one of several manifestations of love which in the words of Fromm, "is not a relationship to a specific person; it is "an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole." Love is an activity; a power of the soul. The form of love expressed in "Love thy neighbor," is the most fundamental kind of love and underlies all types of love. It consists, as Fromm describes it, in "the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life." Extending to all human beings, it is characterized by lack of exclusiveness. Fromm holds that the beginning of this form of love is with love of the poor and of the stranger, as is emphasized in the Old Testament of the Bible.³

Supposing then that society should entertain the enrichment of its political foundations for social justice to absorb the maxim "Love thy neighbor as they self." What would this require. Certainly a change of heart. Fromm suggests specific guidelines to this end. Discipline, concentration, patience, and supreme concern with the mastery of the art of loving are prerequisites for this change of heart.⁴ For our societies it would demand of ourselves and of our educational institutions practice and promotion of these arts in the interest of all in the social realm of life.

How is such love as Fromm outlines it, able to exist in a capitalistic society? A society built on love must make the economic machine serve human kind. Fromm concludes, "To have faith in the possibility of love as a social phenomenon is a rational faith based on the insight into the very nature of man."⁵

Social Justice Today

What are the prospects of this happening?

What is the situation today? Perhaps it is as described below.

In fact capitalist society and a society based on solidarity are antagonistic even anathemas in ethos and ethic. Yet, we live in a global village whose social geography is marked by gapping and growing fissures between the economically rich and the poor, and between peoples of different races, belief systems, and aspirations. The environment is also in danger and intergenerational justice is now an added concern whereas hitherto issues of justice concerned those people currently living. The remedy for the ills of these times is sought in a particular "realistic" form of "social justice," which is designed to work within the dominant political economic system. As characterized in the western authority on verbal usage, the Oxford English Dictionary, social justice is one of a "large number

³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, [New York: Perennial Classics, 2000]43-44.

⁴ *Ibid.*,100-101.

⁵ *Ibid*, 123.

of collocations which has the quality of a set phrase but which has not gained in specialized meaning.” It pertains to society as a natural or ordinary condition of human life. In other words the meaning of the term is widely disputed and thus likewise the contours of the issues that arise in its name.

Contemporary Concepts of Social Justice

Certainly, social justice is a problem of political philosophy. What constitutes justice is also relative to specific ideological perceptions of the meaning of justice for society. Discourses on the subject are many variations on the theme of impartiality, rights, due process, and distribution in regard to the benefits or goods and services of society and the burdens thereof. In this scenario political and economic goods represent power and security, the quest is to find justification for determining those whose right it is to have access to them, in what proportion, and according to what process. A question also arises whether or when social justice is a matter of rights or one of charity and needs.

For example, classical conservatism regarded a hierarchical distribution of goods and privileges just, so long as the lowliest members of society had subsistence wages. Neoliberalists offer that distribution of social benefits and burdens be according to merit, based on an assumption that all persons are equal before the law and are born with equal opportunities to get ahead in a free and open market society. Socialists conceive distributive justice on the theme of egalitarianism striving for a society where benefits and burdens are ideally distributed according to the criteria “to each according to his/her need from each according to his/her ability.” It expects its members to contribute intentionally to the common good, their reward reflects that contribution. Modern welfarism, an amalgam of liberalism and socialism, holds that the satisfaction of basic needs is due to every person equally as a matter of right or justice; the duty to satisfy those needs falls on the organized community--vis a vis all of its members, irrespective of merit or contribution to the work of society.⁶

Principle architects of theories of justice in today’s prevailing varied ideological framework are John Rawls and Robert Nozick. Rawl’s theory builds on principles of equal rights to liberty for all. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are reasonable, that is expected to be to everyone’s advantages and attached to positions and offices open to all.⁷ He characterizes his concept as a procedural theory of justice which obtains in his words when “there is no independent criterion for the right result; instead there is a correct or fair procedure such that the outcome is likewise correct or fair, whatever it is.”⁸ His theory develops in the way of Hobbes and Locke’s social contract and in his neutral procedural theory in a way reminiscent of Adam Smith’s

⁶ For a brief survey of modern ideological conceptions of social justice see Barbara Goodwin, *Using Political Ideas*, [Chichester UK : John Wiley & Sons, 1997] 375-400. See also D.D. Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy*, [London: Macmillan, 1990.] 113-152. This summary reflects views largely drawn from these sources,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 86.

invisible hand working autonomously and impartially for the good of society through the market. He assumes that the people constructing a just and impartial society are mutually indifferent, do not suffer from envy, and that they are risk averse. Living under a “veil of ignorance,” people seek to maximize their own interests ignorant of what their place in the future society will be. Robert Nozick, reflects more closely conservative ideology and holds that people are entitled to the benefits derived from their own natural assets if these do no harm to others, that differential contributions create differential entitlements, and that natural rights and entitlement rights should not be violated.

Consistent with political ideologies that have emerged as legacies of the Western Enlightenment, these theories about social justice are fundamentally secular, rational, and generally justified on bases of self-interest. Today, the discourse on social justice includes reflections on the distribution of economic, social, and political goods and services in societies where human relations are increasingly altered by commodity fetishism and reification, terms used here as Marx has expounded these phenomenal changes in society. Virtue, love for humankind, magnanimity and other matters of the heart are almost never articulated as foundations for discourse on distributive policies in political decision making. In other words, love of humanity, the moral and humanist foundations for these contemporary ideological conceptions of social justice, are virtually ignored or at best muted. The political economic foundations are quite clearly important and even reinforcing for the prevailing ideologies.

Justification for Another Approach

Sadly, the situation in the world today with its growing problems of poverty, other social inequities and environmental devastation, indicate that another approach might be tried. Such is implied by Michael Ignatieff in his book entitled: *The Needs of Strangers*. He writes:

Modern welfare may not be generous by any standard other than a comparison with the 19th century workhouse, but it does attempt to satisfy a wide range of basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, warmth and medical care. The question is whether that is all a human being needs. ... (M)oney cannot buy the human gestures which confer respect, nor rights guarantee them as entitlements. It is because fraternity, love, belonging, dignity, and respect cannot be specified as rights that we ought to specify them as needs and seek, with the blunt institutional procedures at our disposal, to make their satisfaction a routine human practice.⁹

Ignatieff appears to be appealing for a more holistic approach to social justice that by its nature must be morally founded. It is not a novel aspiration, but a revolutionary one in the modern framework of the dominant approach to these questions. The society that conforms its approaches to social justice to the contours of the spirit of capitalism with its emphasis on rugged individualism, greed for personal power and wealth, and competition is not a likely specimen for such a shift in mindset. Nor is a socialist society focused

⁹ Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, [London: Vintage Press, 1994] 10, 13-14.

narrowly on production and the sharing of material wealth, to the exclusion of other requirements for human flourishing. Reason alone is insufficient to bridle humankind's insatiable material desires. To be recalled is Plato's observation that both reason and magnanimity must be nurtured to know their functions. Without the aid of magnanimity, the intellect is powerless against the animal nature.ⁱ

But because the current approaches are failing, why not explore the ramifications of this approach and its moral foundations, however, outrageous, idealistic, or utopian they may seem to the modern secular mind as was done centuries ago by some of the most respected thinkers of their times.

ⁱ Plato, *The Republic*, 402a.