

What is distributive justice essay



Distributive justice is generally referred to as fairness regarding the pattern of distribution among individuals. In order for distributive justice to be met, it is necessary for goods to be distributed fairly or justly. Goods are anything that holds value to any person(s); if something does not have any value then it is not a good. Value is the main requirement for something to be considered a good; therefore, not only physical goods hold value. Thus, such things as labor and medical insurance can be considered a good (Galvin and Lockhart 1182).

There are also different principles of distributive justice as interpreted by the different support groups. The first of these principles is the one of strict egalitarianism in which it is believed every person should have the same level of material goods and services. The second of the principles is that of the difference principle stating each person has equal basic rights and liberties, but social and economic inequalities are there for ranking of different positions. The third principle is the resource-based principle that prescribes equality of resources determined by the free use of people's resources.

The next principle is welfare-based principle is used to maximize welfare. Following that principle is the desert-base principle which states people deserve certain economic benefits. The sixth principle is the libertarian principle; there is no followed pattern because the exchanges they as themselves are just are what is set forth. The next set of principles is the feminist principles that offer very distinct versions of every theory. The last of the principles is the methodology and empirical beliefs about distributive justice most notably stated by John Rawls.

He brought the method of wide reflective equilibrium to philosophy (“Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy”). The international doctrine of human rights says, “Everyone has a right to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing, and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions” (Beitz 321). This perception poses a problem, because you have to distribute goods fairly in order to satisfy the international doctrine of human rights.

Some philosophers choose to go even farther than the international doctrine states, and believe that not only should everyone have the above rights, but everyone should in fact receive equal amounts of goods. On the contrary, some may reject the international doctrine and believe that people are not entitled to certain goods. Another idea to take into consideration is how these goods are produced. People can create goods, yet not all people create goods at an equal rate. If some people are able to create more goods, would that necessarily entitle them to more goods? When it comes to answering this question, disagreements arise from different philosophers.

Five different opinions of philosophers’ views and ideas of the definition of distributive justice will be given along with the flaws of any distributive justice system. There are arguments that support both claims in regard to this matter. A system of distributive justice without any flaws existent in it ceases to exist. In Plato’s Republic Socrates argued that people will work together to achieve the best outcome for both the general welfare and the individual self at the same time. One person must concentrate on one type of labor in order to achieve the most productive system.

If all members of a society become proficient at one type of labor, this system would ensure that the greatest possible amount of products will be produced in that particular society (Saxonhouse 273). If everyone was skilled in only one trade then there would not be differentiation of trades and only a limited variety of products in that particular region. In this society, the need for protection and maintenance of society is necessary, thus Plato develops a class to fulfill this purpose called the guardian class (Mara 597).

The guardian class consists of soldiers and guardian rulers, philosophers intellectually superior to the population would become the rulers. Good rulers were philosophers that were not motivated by competition, but by knowledge (598). Failure to apply this type of government in which philosophers rule would result in the government turning into a certain vice, such as timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, democracy, and tyranny. Plato describes inherent flaws in each of these, and notes that each vice is worse than the one it precedes (601).

Plato then mentions people reflect much of the same characteristics as a city, and each person has three souls. The rational soul represents the mind, the spirited soul acts in accordance with the rational soul, and the appetitive soul represents a person's emotions. Plato believed justice would materialize when all of the elements were working in harmony with one another. He also believed that justice is more appealing than injustice. A person who is just is happier, and the people that are unjust are unhappy.

He went as far as to say the more unjust a man is; to more wretched he will be (Sachs 142). Plato also claims that justice is to the human soul what

health is to the human body. This was the most criticized part of Plato's Republic. He stated that everyone wants to be just and live in harmony. Yet, he gives very little proof of this in the Republic, he claims the reason one must lead a just life is because a just life is a happier life (Sachs 142). he argues that one should be just because of the many positive benefits that it has on one's soul, and that a just person is a happy person.

Yet, how would one know that a just person is a happy person (Demos 396)? Also, Socrates mentions two different meanings of justice throughout the Republic. First, he mentions that justice is to be valued for its own sake as well as for its effects. Then his second idea comes out later on towards the end of the book; justice is right because of its effects, which are that it results in happiness for the person who is just (Sachs 143-144). Plato is commonly very pensive throughout the Republic, and does not offer enough explanation to his arguments.

One of Plato's pupils, Aristotle, emerged as a great philosopher shortly after Plato. He wrote a book which had his opinion of distributive justice. Aristotle based his theory in Nicomachean Ethics off of the assumption that people possess some form of virtue. Aristotle spent a great deal of time explaining the different types of virtues, yet justice is the virtue that he spent the greatest amount of time explaining. His belief was that everyone has virtues, because everyone's ultimate goal is to obtain happiness.

People have virtues not only because they are good for themselves and society in general, but also because they fulfill that need for happiness (Winthrop 1202). The only real happiness exists from the performance of

virtues; virtues are divided in two forms: moral and intellectual. If people are to follow their moral virtue or be just, then happiness will follow. It can then be concluded that people have a natural inclination to follow virtues, therefore a natural inclination to be just (Ward 72-73).

Aristotle recognized justice as a virtue, and assumed that people have an adequate perception of what is just and what is not. He narrowly defined things that are unjust as committing illegal acts and taking a more than fair share of a good. Therefore, people are just, as long as they follow the law and take only what is entitled to them (Winthrop 1202-1203). After Aristotle assumed everyone's behavior would be just, he narrowly defined how things would be distributed. Good are values by their rarity. Therefore, there is a limited supply of high values goods.

Consequently the larger share of goods for one person means a smaller share of goods for others (Mathie 65). Aristotle believed the merits of each person should base how the goods are distributed. Distributive justice is achieved by proportioning goods to his or her relative merit (65). Thus equal shares are required for the equals and unequal shares for the unequal (Winthrop 1204). However the amount of merit a person possesses is determined by who is in power; who is in power is linked to distributive justice.

Aristotle fails to mention a particular type of role that is best for distributive justice. Though he does state, " there is one regime which is everywhere by nature the best" (Mathie 67). A rule in accordance with being just is the one that recognizes merit fairly. Aristotle suggests that a rule or regime should

devise a uniform mathematical formula which would decide who receives what and how much they receive. He claims the mathematical formula has clarity preciseness and certitude, thus being capable of delivering a fair method of distributive justice (Winthrop 1204).

This brings up the major criticism of Aristotle's theory, which type of regime should be given the authority to devise the mathematical formula which would decide the fate of society in terms of distributive justice. Although many people agree that equal people deserve to receive equal shares of goods, how equality would be defined is the question that arises. Many people's opinions vary on the definition of equality. One opinion may be that two people are equal if they are capable of contributing to society through obtaining wealth or performing virtuous acts for the common good.

Through exercising this opinion a healthy person would be unequal to a disabled person, because the healthy person has a better advantage of obtaining wealth. Another opinion is that everyone who is born out of the human race is equal, and even some may be in favor of those of a certain race that are unequal to those of another race (Winthrop 1205). In Aristotle's philosophy he also mentions various types of governments, all of which differed in the type of mathematical formula they would set up in order to provide distributive justice.

Aristotle's theory is useless in identifying the most just way of distributing goods in society without a set mathematical formula. Utilitarianism goes on to explain that anything that produces sadness or pain is wrong and anything that produces pleasure is right. Mill describes his views on the

relation of pleasure and happiness and the relation of pain and unhappiness in Utilitarianism, “ happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; and unhappiness is defined as pain and the reduction of pleasure” (Hoag 190).

Another belief that centralizes around the belief of utilitarianism is that decisions should be based on people’s preferences; utilitarianism assumes this is what would provide the people with the most happiness. Furthermore, if there is a high preference for a certain good by a group then that good is valuable. High preference is believed to be equivalent to how much happiness one would encounter from the good (Kymlicka 21). Mill also believed happiness was a good among itself, and each person’s happiness is a good in itself, and general happiness is a good to everyone.

If general happiness is a good to everyone, then everyone must care about fit along with the happiness of their self. If everyone would have cared about the general happiness then they would not have cared so much about when they did not receive a fair share of goods, regardless of whether or not their own happiness was a factor being promoted (Seth 473). A large argument that favors utilitarianism is that it conforms to a human’s well being. It should be followed through only if it promotes a human’s well being. If a human’s well being is not promoted then the act should not take place.

Thus, the term consequentialism comes about, which states that we should be concerned with people’s utility or well being. If there was a decision to come up, according to consequentialism, whatever makes the person happy should be the answer. Therefore, something is morally good if no harm is

produced and only happiness comes from it. (Thus, if someone says that sexual activity is morally wrong, but cannot show proof of any harm caused then the consequentialist would be forced to believe that sexual activity is proper because there is no harm caused only happiness (Kymlicka 11)).

Mill claimed general happiness as the desired outcome in his Utilitarianism theory. However, there was never any reason given as to why general happiness was so desirable. It was assumed that each person's desire was their own happiness. Each person's happiness is what's best for that individual, then general happiness may not be the best option for that particular individual. Just because one desires to be happy does not mean they desire for everyone to be happy. People generally have a selfish attitude and only care about their own level of happiness and not anyone else's level of happiness (Brink 67-69).

In certain cases this could cause unjust treatment towards some people. Mills' philosophy is challenged by another criticism that states anything that produces pleasure promotes happiness. Therefore, happiness would be promoted in turn for this pleasure producing good. This theory is challenged by Robert Nozick with a hypothetical situation. He asks for people to imagine that they are hooked up to a machine that will drug someone up and allow them to feel infinite pleasure.

Most people would volunteer to be hooked up to this machine for life if pleasure was the most important thing, yet few would actually volunteer to be hooked up to this machine. The reason this concept is true is because people do not just want to have the feelings of certain emotions, such as the

feeling of accomplishment or excitement. They want to actually experience these things. Such as a feeling of accomplishment is wanted if someone won a competition. However they also want to experience competing and actually do it (Kymlicka 13).

Another reason utilitarianism might not promote the best way of living is because seldomly do people know what will make them happy. Everyone believes that certain things are able to produce a greater amount of happiness for them. However, people are not always correct suppose they want some food that maybe desirable, yet it is very unhealthy for them. By constantly eating this certain food people believe they are receiving something very pleasurable. Yet, as a result, they may become very unhealthy and obese, and consequently they have more pain than they ever had happiness as a result of eating this food.

The basic argument of this example is that if human beings do not know what makes them happy, then how can they rely on a utilitarianism theory? In A Theory of Justice Rawl constructs a society where he believes that everyone with a rational mind would choose, if they were given the opportunity, before they were born, as to how all goods and hardships of life would be distributed. In Rawl's model of society everyone would start out with a "veil of ignorance", nobody would know their talents or future preferences.

Everyone would be blind to their role in society, the only thing they would be able to fall back on is that everyone is equal. If everyone was blind as to where they were born in the social hierarchy, or what attributes or talents

they will possess upon birth; that would be the only true way to conceptualize everyone as equal. Rawls names the position of people who are under the “veil of ignorance” as being in the original position. If anyone were in the original position they would be the best suited to make the most worthy decision concerning distributive justice.

Nobody has had the opportunity of being in the original position; however Rawls argues that if there ever was anyone that would comply to the standards of being in the original position they would make the most ideal system of distributive policy (Mandelbaum 244). However, critics claim that some people enjoy taking risks, and if some rational people were given a choice they would choose to gamble in order to be able to receive the highest amount of social and natural primary goods. By this Rawls's difference theory would be disproven, because in that case they would choose an opposing theory such as utilitarianism.

Yet this requires Rawls to define what is rational; wanting to gamble is a natural human condition, the aspiration for risk varies on each individual. Rawls then clarifies the choices made in the original position if ever given the opportunity; a rational person would maximize what he/she would get if they were put in the worst off position (Kymlicka 66). While having the original position in mind he suggests a principle of justice in which all social primary goods are to be dispersed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the less well off.

It was Rawls's belief that we should not take away the inequalities benefiting everyone, if everyone is benefited then everyone will accept them (Frohlich

and Oppenheimer 5). However, if only the better off are benefited then it shall not be accepted. This will enhance the opportunity of everyone being equal. He used the difference theory when arguing his theory. The difference theory states human beings have a bunch of different inequalities, such as some people being born handicap and some not. When people are born they go through the process of a natural lottery.

Rawl's theory suggests that the people that receive the short end in the lottery should indeed receive inequalities to their favor. Rawl's belief was that inequalities people were born with were undeserved, which would prohibit equality (Kymlicka 57-58). Therefore, only when everyone has an equal opportunity to obtain these goods will equal distribution be met. This insured class, race, ethnicity, sex, or other natural talents were not a factor in the goal of obtainment of goods. Consequently, everyone would have to earn their success, instead getting lucky and being fortunate in the natural lottery of life.

He described two types of goods—social primary goods and natural primary goods. Social primary goods are distributed by social institutions, such as power, rights, and wealth; these goods are directly affected by the natural primary goods, which are a person's race, gender, health, and natural talents (64). Rawls believed natural primary goods should not affect the distribution of social primary goods. The difference theory ensures that natural primary goods shall not have an effect on the distribution of social primary goods (65).

This has pointed out one of the main criticisms of the difference principle. The principle suggests everyone will have equal social primary goods, yet it still does not allow a just distribution of natural primary goods (Kymlicka 72). The theory suggests if someone was to be born severely handicapped that they should be entitled to equal social primary goods such as wealth and rights. Yet the theory fails to address the fact that someone who is handicapped will not have the same equality of life as someone that would live a healthy lifestyle.

In addition, the handicapped person is subject to pay for medication, treatments, and the many unappealing qualities that come with being handicapped. He clearly states that both goods are unequally deserved, yet the only compensation people receive is for social primary goods. He fails to address that people shall be compensated for natural primary goods as well. If a person was been born handicapped and in a high social class they would not get special therapy or training to remediate the disabilities. Yet, they would be forced to pay for healthy people who are born in a lower social class than them.

Rawl's theory also called for equal distribution of goods, unless an unequal distribution of goods would be in favor of the less well off. The result of this would be an increase in goods for the people that were worse off in society. Implementation of this rule resulted in a decrease of the overall motivation of work by not providing any incentives greater than the amount of work one accomplished (Zuckert 468-470). Another criticism was that the implementation of a stiff rule trying to equalize income according to Rawl's

theory allowed severe negative effects when it came down to the amount of production.

This was due to the less talented people of society making the same amount as the talented members of society; this caused the amount of production to be lowered. This resulted in all members of society being worse off than if this policy would not have been implemented. If all members of society were negatively affected by the rule that everyone must receive equal income then the people who were in the original position did not accept Rawl's theory of the worse off being compensated with just as much money as the wealthy (Wright 75-77).

Also if two people had the exact same amount of talent and social status yet one talent allowed for more income, should Rawl's theory state that they should be compensated for the less productive talent? One example would be a person with slightly average skills in business would most likely have made more money and was more productive. Yet someone that is talented in a sport has the enjoyment of playing that sport as their occupation. Under the difference principle, the business person would have been forced to give some money so both the athlete and business person would have made the same amount of money.

Nonetheless, the occupation was a choice made by two people that possessed equal talents; the business person was deducted money for their choice. The athlete, however, made their choice because they desired enjoyment from the sport over income and was not deducted money for their choice (Kymlicka 74). This also shows how overall production decreased.

Perhaps, if the athlete did not receive extra money they might have sacrificed their enjoyment of the playing the sport for a more productive career.