

Beyond Equivocal Equality and Masking Myths: Grounding Justice in What We All Need to Live as Human Beings

Part VIII

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Global Research, March 11, 2012

11 March 2012

Theme: [History](#), [Law and Justice](#)

BEYOND EQUIVOCAL EQUALITY AND MASKING MYTHS

GROUNDING JUSTICE IN WHAT WE ALL NEED TO LIVE AS HUMAN

by

Professor John McMurtry

G.A. Cohen's *Rescuing Equality and Justice* is the most egalitarian opposition to the Rawlsian 'difference principle' within the dominant academic discourse. Yet all the life-blind exclusions identified by (1) to (8) above govern this understanding of social justice as well. Criterial life substance, basic needs, and existing ruling social structure continue to be blocked out. The worst-off are, therefore, not better recognized in *what makes them badly off*.

The reigning order of inequality by unearned private money-capital income is also never mentioned. The masking myth of personal talent reaping higher pay (benefit) for superior productivity of performance (burden) remains in place unexposed. Again we may see the ruling value syntax at work. Radically egalitarian argument itself avoids the organic life goods making anyone's life well or worse, blinkers out the money-capital governance of the world producing the deepest real inequalities, and accepts the idealizing equation of deserving more money for superior performance as the ultimate issue to argue. *Conceptions of justice and injustice again disappear into debate within the terms of a primary myth of the system.*

Because the ruling money-sequence syntax of injustice remains in place, the common life-ground itself and life-grounded government to achieve social justice cannot be conceived. What is not recognised is that even the normative category of "equality" allows for limitless exploitation of its ambiguity of meaning. This is why "equality" has been at the forefront of system-justifying doctrine since John Locke and the U.S. Constitution he inspired, while *also* being a rallying cry of radicals from the British Levellers to the French *sans-culottes* to socialists today. It is an equivocal concept which brings out whatever discussants project

onto it.

That is to say, any ordering principle can be seen as both equality *and* inequality at once, depending on the viewer – equality before the same capitalist rule system, for example, but extreme inequality of condition entailed by its operations, on the other.

This is why market capitalism has long been described as both a system of “equality” and a system of “inequality” at the same time. The original revolutionary struggles and documents in the formation of capitalism in the later eighteenth century and contemporary philosophy of justice have both long traded on and elaborated this *built-in equivocality* without recognizing the intrinsic problem of double meaning. Even when one seems to have a straight-on disagreement in principle – for example, G.A. Cohen opposed to Robert Nozick opposed to John Rawls, the list is long – the most apparently inegalitarian position, like Nozick’s, turns out to be grounded at another level in the same idea – equality before market-system laws.

What really matters to people cannot be understood by elastic categories without life-value criteria – “equality” in particular. What the lives of all people *in fact need* for their life capacities not to be deprived is the robust and impartial standard which is missing in social justice theory, but what life-value onto-ethics builds on. Liberal theory never mentions sufficient food, or water, or housing, or waste systems, or natural environment as parameters of social justice, even though their deprivation in developed society is the most pressing form of injustice. How can rights or justice be understood when what really matters to people’s lives is thus hollowed out? Citizens cannot eat claimed liberties, or be assured of a more just society by a marginal income gain when they have lost their homes, or enjoy an attractive versus despoiled environment if the issue is blinkered out, or be concerned with massive fellow species extinctions if the matter cannot be seen, or have a human vocation if only opportunities exist to compete for scarce higher money-value positions.

If all of these basic issues of human life right are blinkered out as they essentially have been, social justice cannot be understood even in theory, and in practice the most basic common life goods can be despoiled beneath recognition. This is why even the human food system can be stripped of nutriments by chemical-genetic concoctions in accord with the money-value syntax with no issue of injustice to millions diseased by it arising to theoretical view.

Most social injustices in the contemporary global rule system are of this kind – unjust deprivations of means of life by the reigning system’s demands, usually represented as “equal rights to compete” for self privilege within it. Thus increasing hundreds of millions of people can be without ecological security or even water and nutrition as global wealth multiplies in the control of an apical few, yet the freedoms and well-being of the poor is declared to be rising. Ever greater volumes of junk commodities may undermine the health of children and non-affluent across the globe even after critical science recognizes the epidemic damages, but the lives of all are declared as “better off”. Social infrastructures of education, health and pensions may be defunded to pay compound-interest public debts to private foreign banks leveraging the debt money, but the transfer of wealth from the impoverished to the rich is called an “economic necessity for developing nations”. Evolved cultures of participant art and play can be lost to debased and violence-pervaded products of mass-culture factories, but a “global information culture” is proclaimed. Wars and domestic oppressions by force of arms may grow in public funds devoted to them as common life support systems are stripped towards collapse, but “security of the world’s

peoples” is ubiquitously incanted. Species extinctions and genocides may accelerate by the ruling system’s growth demands, but more parks emptied of indigenous people and pollution- credit handouts to polluters is called “saving the natural world for our children”.

Eventually the question needs to be posed, what could be a more life-blind disorder of burden and benefit allocation, of rights and obligations borne by global society’s citizens? How much more could the ultimate principle of justice, the due proportion between rights and duties, benefits and burdens, be turned upside down in life-value terms?

From Rational Plan of Life to Human Vocation: The Ultimate Moral Regrounding

The most basic onto-axiological principle in the dominant theoretical discourse dodges this question a-priori. The dominant assumption of contemporary English-speaking philosophy is that a “*rational plan of life*” is the given frame of a good life for anyone. It is an ancient idea with a pedigree back to Socrates, but in contractual justice theory and corresponding moral philosophy, rationality means consistently self-maximizing choice with morality and justice the arrangements required to make these choices compatible among individuals by agreed-upon principles of restraint for the a just or right ordering.

“Communitarian” justice theory does not ground in this atomic logic of individual choice and consent. Its base is established social relations and personal bonds with no way beyond these constituted attachments to more life-coherent forms of social order. This is why liberals reject “communitarianism” for rational life plans of individuals.

No-one on either side conceives of the logic of life-value community, all the social constructs enabling universal access to life goods – what life-value onto-axiology calls ‘the civil commons’. In any case, the Rawlsian discourse reiterates its first premise of a ‘rational career plan’ for each as what must be open to pursue as a necessary condition of social justice. Yet a question immediately arises none in this tradition answer: What of those who have no such ‘rational plan of life’, but reject it as a careerist closure to the creative openness of human being? Young people, for example, may find elders insisting on such a life plan as oppressive bores. They may further experience any force-fitting of them into such a ‘rational plan’ as an overbearing injustice to their open lives. But the young are excluded wholesale from this scheme of justice as young. Rawls is clear that their elders must choose for them, and this is not seen as a problem although it may be the upbringing source of all the others.[\[10\]](#)

The young are by no means alone. Consider the possible exceptions to this presupposition of how to live justly. Giving one’s all to the challenging tasks at hand can make the ‘career plan’ a cramping, egoic distraction. An all-round life may rule out a ‘life plan’ as a one-sided reduction. Yet this idea itself of a ‘rational life plan’ is an assumption of justice theory without any argument for it. Deeper interrogation might ask whether it is a primitive assumption of elite racism and sexism too – the subjugated are irrational. Revealingly, various wisdom literatures implicitly and explicitly counsel against this form of rationality. Very briefly, they agree that any such confinement to a self-plan and the accumulating assets of its fulfilment means blindness to the wider life body to be comprehended and served.

Life-Ground Ethics Rejects a Career Plan as a Universal Good of Justice or Morality

The “rational life plan” which is assumed as both (i) the condition of understanding justice and (ii) what justice must allow to be realised, really means, decoded, a *self-maximising career plan* across decades of unpredictable self, age and world changes – hardly what social justice needs, especially in a world of work changes as normal.

Since life-span plans can only make sense as career plans, social justice itself must then mean what serves the careers of atomic selves. A summary comprehension of the underlying shape of justice in this scheme of thinking follows. The rational life-career plan determines each’s good, and justice is what allows it to each: with equality of benefits to each self the basic issue of contention. One will find no relevant dimension of this dominant discourse on justice excluded by this formula. What is not noticed is that *the good of life itself has silently disappeared*. Life as ground, ultimate value and connectively guiding goal is abstracted out and in its place are rights of atomic selves to compete for positional advantages.

World movements for social justice are accordingly blocked out along with the ultimate concerns moving them. For example, concepts of global justice like ‘basic needs fulfilment’, ‘climate justice’, ‘end the war’, ‘food sovereignty’, ‘no privatization of water’, ‘public health not private profit’, ‘education is not a corporate agenda’, and ‘no blood for oil’ cannot compute to this paradigm. There are in truth no life grounds to recognize the reduction and violation of people’s lives in which social *injustice* consists. Yet a life-coherent concept of justice cannot be satisfied with these glimpses. Principled grounds, life-good coordinates, and thought-through conception of social agency for achieving them are required. Justice always turns on what is ultimately *due* to the lives involved, but nowhere are the life-coherent benefits and burdens, rights and obligations that true justice entails defined in official, academic or oppositional discourse. The profoundly unresolved issue of exactly *what* is due on both sides of the right-obligation ledger can only be answered by life-ground onto-ethics: understanding that defines humanity’s universal life needs and goods, and comprehends the civil commons agency and rationality required to enable human lives in a life-coherent way. The concept of “equality” does not much help if it is a life-decoupled formula in a long line of opposite meanings of it.

Life-value onto-axiology re-grounds in life itself and what it needs at all levels for its capacities to reproduce and flourish. It observes that any real social justice is a process of society’s achievement of universal human life goods for all by its social rule-system – in the largest sense, from natural capital preservation and the coordinated capabilities of scientific technology to life-protective imperatives and educational, health and social programs recognising human life right to all. The need/good of *human vocation* in particular is recognised to be the life-coherent contribution of each to provision of these life goods to receive the benefits and enjoyment of them.

Linking Life Right and Obligation at System-Wide and Historical Levels

Linkage of right and obligation at a system-wide level is the ultimate onto-ethical issue of human civilization, and requires any system to be accountable to the enabling provision of these universal human life goods as its ground of *legitimacy*.

When we stand back to consider the historical pattern of the last 80 years, however, we are able to recognise the meta logic of humanity’s universal life necessities/goods and their

evolving civil commons provision since the Great Depression and War, on the one hand, and the private-profit corporate war upon them to appropriate and dismantle their resources for private profit since 1980, on the other. This meta conflict explains why ever more growth of wealth by the rule of this system goes along ever more impoverishment of most people's lives and life conditions – the unseen *war of social injustice*, that is, *ever more unnecessary suffering from life capacity reduction by deprivation of life goods*.

Life-value understanding therefore recognises and stands for the age-old process of overcoming social injustice by civil commons advance. Thus, for example, it understands that national public healthcare which became socially provided without price barrier for all those in need of it was a major civil commons victory for social justice in many societies, just as public water and sanitation systems were a century before and still are today in much of the world. In the private corporate rule of the U.S., in contrast, it recognises that citizens are ruined or bankrupted by medical costs more than any other cause, and almost twice the population of Canada are still without protection. It understands too that even long-successful public health systems are endangered by the same private for-profit corporate forces as invade civil commons in all spheres in the name of “freedom of choice” or “new efficiencies” or other demonstrably false claim. Nonetheless social-structural analysis in even its progressive forms misses the mark when it reduces the struggle to one of waged workers against capitalism or women against patriarchy. The underlying common life-value ground of all is again blinkered out in principle.

The Life-Coherence Principle, Civil Commons, and the Human Vocation

Consider here the jobs and benefits of universalizing literacy as well as public healthcare, society-wide water and sewer systems as well as life-protective laws and norms, life security in old age and disability as well as in unemployment, scientific understanding normalized as well as public parks and squares, as well as open internet communication and information.

There is no level of our human lives and conditions not enabled and dependent on shared civil commons formations whose inner logic of recognition and advance is the life-coherence principle, or consistency with universal life requirements. Yet even our life-ground as human reason and how to live is lost to us. It remains invisible amidst lavish praises of private-profit commodities filling the electro-magnetic spectrum with demands for ever more life-blind growth of both. The cost of what really matters on every level is unseen.

While life-value understanding, the civil commons, and the life coherence principle continue to underlie all real human advance, their ultimate ground of meaning and value is generally not conceived in principle. The ultimate need to serve, express and enjoy human life capacities as a coherent end-in-self of life is the lost human vocation.

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