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My Treaties on Social Justice

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My Treatise on Social Justice

Many ideas, philosophies, terms, and methods are used to define and explain social

justice. Some believe that justice involves a more equal distribution of wealth in order to

eradicate poverty. Some believe that justice is carried out through broadening human rights in

order to expand one's quality of life, such as making sure all peoples have access to clean

drinking water. Some focus on bringing justice to an oppressed people group or minority due to

unfair treatment by the government or society as a whole. An example of this would be the

oppressive social construct of racism. Overall, social justice seems to be a very fluid and flexible

term that means different things to different people. But despite the colorful assortment of

perspectives, all of these expansive ideas and methods share certain commonalities: 1) Its deep

concern and passion for people, 2) the acknowledgment of a particular area that devalues or

dehumanizes people, and 3) its determination to bring justice to that area and restore peace

among people. I believe this, at its core, is what social justice aspires to be. However, I

understand and appreciate the fluidity of its other individual definitions. Because social justice is

such a broad spectrum of issues -- some more world-wide or transnational and others more

localized to specific areas of injustice -- various definitions can and should differ. It can be

problematic when people attempt to shove the definition of social justice into a simple context

within certain boundaries. I am deeply convinced that because social justice deals with people, the idea is necessarily complex, as people themselves are rather complicated and, without a doubt, messy. Therefore, anything that attempts to address human nature and their interactions with each other, in any capacity, will be messy and complicated. Addressing social justice over this semester's course of study, I've realized many personal beliefs about how we, as a human race, can be more active in attaining justice and peace with each other. Whether dealing with broad topics such as racial reconciliation, or more specific issues such as the exploitation of Marshallese families in northwest Arkansas, there are three major points to consider. First, we must recognize the depraved and evil state of humanity. Second, we must agree that humans have inherent value and worth, and be willing to help others see that. And finally, we must embrace the role and responsibility we all play in enacting justice and becoming agents of change. I hope within these next few pages to expand upon these ideas, show how they build upon each other, and can be utilized to address and prevent injustice in our world.

The depravity of man It is important to realize that social justice would not be a necessity if humans were perfect and unbroken. However, throughout all of history, humans have proven their ability to treat one another in shockingly inhumane ways, clearly demonstrating that wherever people exist there will also exist the immoral and corrupt treatment of others. Systems of oppression -- racism, classism, and unjust systems of government to name a few -- are established in order to elevate one group of people above another. Equally true is the fact that those who possess power will inevitably abuse it. Therefore, it is imperative that we recognize

the very conflicts and people social justice hopes to help is caused by humanity itself, in all its depravity and corruption.

What's the point if humans can't be fixed? One might wonder if there is any real value or actual purpose in addressing injustice. Even if peace, reconciliation, and justice are successfully attained in a specific area, there will always be other points of conflict and instances of corruption that requires resolving. Admittedly, I have struggled with this very question myself -- wondering if the sacrifice of time and effort to strive for change is worthwhile when there will always be more to do. Will it actually make a difference? What will be waiting in its stead if the issue before me *is* resolved? This can certainly be discouraging -- seemingly hopeless and futile. But, on the other hand, what will happen if we remain passive and refuse to act? Those who are committed to the work of social justice, who desire to restore peace and hope, will undoubtedly encounter this very question. They must wrestle with their own convictions and determine for themselves the validity of their efforts versus the risk associated with them. Is humankind, in all our ugliness and hatred, a worthwhile cause?

Confronting our own depravity It goes without saying that the work of social justice and the need to consider man's evil nature will be painful. But even more painful might be what this consideration leads one to see within themselves. Since we are all part of the human race, it would be hypocritical and naive to reflect on the depravity of humanity without considering one's own depravity. The ability to point out flaws in others comes naturally to us, but being aware of our own shortcomings is unquestionably something most would rather ignore. Although it is much easier and more comfortable to remain ignorant, ignorance does not enact justice or bring about social change. Bringing about effective change in the world comes by being aware of

the harsh ways in which humans damage their own kind. Therefore, we should be able to confront our own humanity as well, as we have all been guilty to some extent of devaluing and dehumanizing others.

Confronting others of their depravity and being rejected Social justice requires the ability to increase awareness about these issues among others. If one takes on the responsibility to enact change, they must also be advocates for that change. Opposition and rejection are real possibilities, as calling awareness to these unpleasant truths can cause substantial discomfort. It takes courage to examine and reflect on the ways in which humans neglect and abuse their own kind. It is easier to remain unaware, blissfully ignorant, and passive. This is why bringing awareness to an issue can be precarious. Though someone may not be directly contributing to a form of oppression or injustice, their partiality or prejudice may be allowing it to continue.

This became clearer to me during our reading of Morris' book ***The Scholar Denied***, which examined the scholarly work and life of W.E.B Du Bois. Morris emphasized that though Du Bois was a leading pioneer in establishing racism as a social construct, his work was discredited by other scholars of his time because of the accepted belief that African Americans were an inferior race:

> "Definite political, economic, cultural, and personality factors led white social scientists to suppress Du Bois's scholarship of race and his unique contributions to the developing social sciences at the dawn of the twentieth century. That scholarship stood in direct opposition to the dominant racist views held by most social scientists, especially white sociologists" (Morris 2-3).

Though Du Bois's claims of racism were true, they were strongly rejected during his time because it confronted the flawed cultural belief that whites were intellectually superior to blacks. This led me to realize that calling awareness to areas that require justice will always be unpopular and controversial since it requires people to see beyond what is comfortable, to confront long-held personal and cultural beliefs, and to act upon new paradigms.

Preventing injustice and dehumanization of people In addition to addressing the ways in which people dehumanize, damage, and degrade others, we must ask ourselves the obvious question. Why do humans commit such atrocities against one another, and can those involved with social justice prevent this from happening? I believe the reason why systems of oppression, corruptness, and injustice exist is due to the fact that we deny each other our own humanity. There is a certain value, worth, and dignity humans possess that is unknown to any other creature. This is demonstrated by and revealed through our higher level of intellect and our unique ability to relate to each other. Therefore, the moment someone treats another in a way that forgets or denies them their human worth and value is the moment injustice is borne.

This idea was deeply influenced by Coates' book, ***Between the World and Me***. Coates, who writes to address his fifteen-year-old son, shares his perspective and experience on what it is like to be seen as less than human in America because of his blackness:

"To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear" (Coates 17).

This is a powerful explanation of the injustice caused when people are stripped of their value, dignity, and worth. I believe if people were more convinced of their own astounding dignity, value, and worth as a human being, they would be much less likely to deny those things to others. What we believe to be true about ourselves will directly affect what we believe to be true about others. Our own identity, and who we believe we are, will influence our interaction with others and the way we view their identity as well. Therefore, devaluing ourselves will likely lead us to devalue others. Moreover, thinking too highly of oneself and being self-righteous could just as easily lead to the same thing. Oftentimes, when confronted with others who are different than us (physically, mentally, culturally, etc.), a feeling of superiority is the result. When we lack the ability to understand someone, or the capacity to see their unique perspective, this leads to further isolation, marginalization, and even fear of that person, making it easier to devalue, degrade, suppress, and ultimately, dehumanize others.

 Building empathy as a means to prevent injustice I believe it is imperative for those of us who hope to thrive in the work of social justice to be agents of empathy and understanding between peoples. One of the most frustrating things about most social justice work is its tendency to be mainly reactionary; it addresses the oppression, marginalization, or unequal treatment of a specific people group *after* being deeply established in society. Often, there seems to be a great concern for the effects of oppression, but not its causes. This ultimately drove me to believe that injustice could be prevented through two things: first (and as stated above), people must be more aware of their own human-worth so they will not deny the same to others, and second, people need be willing to empathize with others and see things from alternate perspectives. We must become experts in other people's points of view, and what has shaped

those views, in order to be advocates of their unique stories. Hopefully, this will challenge others to see outside their own singular perspective, and therefore attain the unnatural and invaluable ability to empathize, directly challenging their prejudices and enmity for a certain people group. If a vast amount of people were better versed in the skills of empathy and understanding, fear and hatred of others would be less rampant.

Probably the most personally persuasive piece we examined over this semester was Andrew Solomon's book, ***Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity***. Solomon examines children's differing identities and how those affect the relationship between a child and their parent. His work for the book was accomplished over a ten year period in which he interviewed over 250 families, observing what he called "horizontal identities" (or identities children did not share with their parents), such as disabilities, dwarfism, prodigies, criminals, and transgender, to name a few. It was especially influential for me because it directly confronted my own prejudices over certain identities. But more than that, Andrew shared people's stories in a way that helped build empathy and understanding. Andrew observes:

> "Ability is a tyranny of the majority. If most people could flap their arms and fly, the inability to do so would be a disability. If most people were geniuses, those of moderate intelligence would be disastrously disadvantaged" (Solomon 29).

It is so frequent and effortless for us to stereotype and marginalize people in a society to which we do not relate or share a commonality. If we want to be agents of justice we must be agents of empathy. We must be active in seeing our shared humanity with another, yet also accept others' uniqueness and individuality.

Accepting responsibility Finally, I would like to make the argument that everyone has a responsibility to enact justice and to be agents of change in the world. Our individual and personal responsibility cannot be ignored if we realize that impartiality will directly contribute to the continuation of oppression and injustice against humanity. When we sit idly by we are allowing atrocities to continue. Therefore, if a greater number of people accepted responsibility and became agents of justice, and builders of empathy, peace would be a higher possibility within the whole of humanity. This responsibility may seem impossible to handle. It may seem weighty and overwhelming. It certainly is all of these things, especially when we attempt to carry this responsibility on our own. Justice will never be addressed or prevented without a community of people who are committed to helping each other attain this goal. Each individual has specific bents, talents, abilities, skills, and passions. If we each utilize our specific talents and passions to enact justice, the goal will be more attainable. Just like in any company or organization, each employee has a different role. When all the roles are functioning at high rates, the company benefits. But when roles go unfilled it causes holes and the company suffers. The same is true for the work of social justice. No one can hope to arrive at this objective alone. Some may have the ability to share others' stories and build empathy. Some may be better at gathering resources, or delegating responsibilities to others. Some may have a passion to see justice enacted for victims of sex-trafficking, where some may be passionate about advocating for equal rights of a minority group. Whatever our talents and bents may be, I hope that more of us will utilize them to restore justice and peace in our own lifetimes.

      To conclude, social justice can involve an endless amount of definitions and terms. And because it deals with a great number of problems in our world, the definition should never be boxed in or bound by limits. Social justice addresses people and their interactions with each other, therefore its definition will be adjustable and fluid. However, I am profoundly convinced that the restoration of justice and peace will come through considering these things: human depravity, human worth and dignity, and our individual responsibility and role to act. Justice will always be something we must fight for, and injustice will always be something we must fight against. I genuinely hope that through calling attention to these things, more will be convinced to fight for these things in their lifetime and that justice will be a more attainable reality for humanity.

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