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HUM 104

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My Interpretation of Justice

I am firm in my belief that true justice—not retribution or reparation, but true justice—is unattainable, which makes defining it quite complicated. Name an injustice currently plaguing our society; nine times out of ten it can be traced back to a broader history that we have no ability to change, which makes injustice an inherent part of life. Injustice morphs and grows and becomes harder to identify in places, but it is just as present as it has always been, if not more so. But simply refuting justice is not defining it, so what is it?

Justice is a helpful concept for imagining the ideal—a thought experiment, if you will. If we aim for true justice, we will most definitely fall short, but our efforts could get us close enough to achieving some semblance of it. Because there are so few instances of true justice to observe, we must get to know its more frequent counterpart: injustice. By understanding what justice is not, we can begin to form an idea of what justice is.

I recognize that this may not be a very satisfying definition, but it is an honest one. I think back to my very first plenary session at Davidson College—eager, ready to define justice then and there. Our collective presence in Hance felt like justice in and of itself. Now, I am worn down. The more you know, the sadder you become, and the harder it is to imagine a world where justice could exist. But enough lamenting. "We might not have chosen time, but time has chosen us" (Wills 2.3.26, so we must do the best that we can.

The only notable philosophical premises we have on justice are either hypothetical—Rawls's Original Position—or would require us to completely deconstruct society and return to a time before the normative universe, as in Locke's State of Nature (Jankovic 9.18.25). These frameworks are admirable in their ambition: Rawls's veil of ignorance offers a compelling model for impartial decision-making, and Locke's State of Nature at least imagines a world unburdened by inherited hierarchy. But both ultimately falter on the same problem. Even if we could return to a societal landscape void of hierarchies, we would eventually regress back to a society that relies on differentiation to create order, because that is what we are predisposed to do as humans. And in this ordered society, someone will suffer—because those favored by the societal sequencing will abuse the freedoms and advantages they are afforded (O'Geen 9.30.25). So long as we uphold systems wherein positions are assigned by circumstances of birth, economic status, or talent, I do not see a way in which justice can prevail. We must think outside of the hegemonic box.

Justice is largely reactive, and even its most earnest institutional expressions reveal its limits. Consider the Truth and Reconciliation Commission following South African Apartheid: the effort to restore dignity through disclosure and acknowledgment was meaningful, and for some survivors, transformative. But for others, a full disclosure and apology from their offender was only cause for more pain. In most cases, an apology couldn't reverse what had been done. So then is the answer retribution? In the case of the Nuremberg Trials, the international community's attempt to hold perpetrators accountable was historic—a declaration that crimes against humanity would not go unanswered. And yet the Allies were guilty of some of the same crimes with which Nazi leaders were charged, and very shortly after sentences were decided, Nazi war criminals were released from prison, rendering the trials largely ineffective. Even the U.S.

Supreme Court must pick and choose the cases it believes are most pressing so as not to overwhelm its capacity (O'Geen 10.7.25), which makes me wonder whose stories are worth telling, and whose are slipping through the cracks (Bory 11.11.25).

Reparations cannot happen only at an institutional level—they must be paid by individuals to individuals, and I am not talking about monetary reparations. I mean a continuous effort to change the way we live (O'Geen 2.24.26), an acknowledgment of capitalism's direct perpetuation of injustice, and a subsequent effort to find a substitute (Lipsker 2.25.26). So long as we live in a capitalist society, justice will remain out of reach.

At its core, true justice is the emergence of agape—unconditional love, loving people as ends instead of means (Wills 2.3.26). I was initially hesitant to describe justice as love, but as the year progressed I felt a pressing responsibility to make that connection. "Love and imagination may be the most revolutionary impulses available to us, and yet we have failed to understand their political importance and respect them as powerful social forces" (Kelley 2002, Curso-Esquivel 4.13.26)—similar to how the pedants and sophisticates of society have deemed "happiness as something rather stupid" (LeGuin 1973, Jankovic 9.4.25). Love, as a political framework, is perhaps the most radical proposition in this essay precisely because it is the one most readily dismissed.

If the goal were to increase love rather than to win or dominate a constant opponent, liberation from constant oppression becomes imaginable. Coming from a place of love, "we would understand that the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships, which could only be measured by their depth. Scaling up would mean going deeper, being more vulnerable and more empathetic" (Brown 2017, Course-Esquivel 4.4.26). Think of it as a Greatest Love Principle—maximizing the love of a population as a means of securing justice. If

everyone practices selfless love for one another, everyone would be treated as they wish to be treated: Rawls's veil of ignorance, but one that is actually applicable. The shortcoming, of course, is that love cannot be legislated or enforced. It must be chosen—and chosen universally to function as a system. That is perhaps the most utopian ask of all.

The path toward justice requires mass introspection alongside radical love. *Nomoi* must merge and bend and envelop one another—if we can become docile through government surveillance, surely we can become more self-aware through tight surveillance of ourselves (Bory 3.26.26). Not a surveillance that makes us more docile and less resistant, but one that makes us more thoughtful and curious about the exterior world. This, too, is an imperfect solution. Self-reflection is only as useful as the frameworks through which we reflect, and those frameworks are themselves shaped by the very systems of oppression we are trying to dismantle.

Still, justice is in the minutia. At the most foundational level, justice is understanding—a deliberate choice to engage with the suffering of others, to take it on in conversation, and to feel it. There must be a way to strive for this ideal without feeding into mainstream political philosophy and its false, idealized model of society that ignores structural oppression, white supremacy, and patriarchy (Bory 9.25.25).

So what, then, is justice? It is not a destination but a direction—a horizon we move toward knowing we will never arrive. It is the TRC that falls short of healing but creates space for truth. It is the Supreme Court case that doesn't get heard and the one that does. It is Dante descending into Hell because love demanded it. Every framework examined in this essay gestures toward justice while revealing how far we still have to go—and that gap is not a reason for despair but a map for the work ahead. For me, the worlds that remain untarnished by injustice

are my childhood, Terraria (2D Minecraft, if you're unfamiliar), and nature. The task is to carry something of those worlds back into this one.