

Ethics linked to justice and fairness

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The concept of ethics without justice is difficult to imagine. Most citizens understand ethics is related to kindness, caring and sharing with one another.

Ethics may involve the concept of God although not necessarily so. It usually involves our ability to see things from the point of view of other people, although this too is not always the case.

In the third century BCE, Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle wrote and lectured about ethical justice.

Plato envisioned ethics from a broad societal point of view. In *The Republic* he wrote about ethics in terms of political leadership and the organization of the state to make the best use of the talents of its citizens at various stages of their abilities.

Later, Plato's student Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, thought the development of good habits in children was an excellent beginning to help children develop ethically. As they grew older, ethical behaviour would become ingrained in their daily habits and children would understand the importance of justice in ethical matters.

While these early Greek philosophers wanted to have just societies, they lived in a time when slavery was common, women's rights and equality were rare and, in Plato's case, there was an accepted elitism about the choice of society's leaders.

Much later, in the 18th century CE, philosophers were still pondering over ethical systems.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about justice in *The Social Contract*. He perceived justice and fairness as important components in the ethics of political leadership.

In 1970s and 1980s, Pierre Trudeau reintroduced some of Plato's ideas of a just society. He emphasized the importance of justice as a main component of ethical

governments. Trudeau believed that a just society would be one in which all the citizens would have the means and the policies that would give them greater responsibilities for their own future. In 1982 many of Trudeau's ideas of justice were enshrined in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

These leaders and many other thoughtful writers wrestled with the concept of justice within the framework of ethics. They accepted justice as a part of ethical systems and questioned whether we can be ethical without justice since ethics and justice work in harmony to improve societies and cultures.

It is hard to find appropriate synonyms for justice. Perhaps fairness comes closest. Usually in our laws, our judicial concepts and courts aim at obedience to our accepted customs and in promoting fairness in our treatment of one another.

When we want to know what is fair and just and ethical, it helps if we can imagine ourselves in the same situation as those we judge. Yet, in John Rawls' 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*, he recognized it is sometimes difficult to fully understand others enough to put ourselves in their position. In addition, when we consider other people, we should also consider the effects of our judgments on the broader society.

Honesty, generosity, compassion and the desire to help our fellow humans are very much a matter of ethics and justice and fairness. On the other hand, the societies that do not care about ethics are the same societies that do not care about fairness and justice.

Often equality is an important factor in helping others and in acting in ethically correct ways. Equality is similar to, though not synonymous with, justice and ethics.

If we are parents of two or more children, we will find each of our children have different interests and abilities. We should not treat each child with identical equality. While we may love each child equally, we ought to treat each one differently to take into account their individual abilities and needs and interests.

In conclusion, a good guide to whether or not our actions are ethical is to consider whether our approach is fair and just. The golden rule of treating others as we would wish ourselves to be treated is still an excellent maxim for developing ethics based on justice and fairness.