

**Prof. Dr. Manuel Knoll**

## **On Irreconcilable Conceptions of Social and Political Justice**

18:30, 13 June. 2014

Lecture Room 63

Sofia University (PhD and MA Program, Faculty of Philosophy)

Thesis: From the ancient world till today two fundamentally opposed basic conceptions of social and political justice can be traced in Western political thought. These two conceptions that can be characterized as egalitarian and non-egalitarian notions of social and political justice are irreconcilable. While egalitarians negate the natural and social inequalities of people and hold that it is just to establish arithmetic, numeric or simple equality, non-egalitarians like Plato, Aristotle or Nietzsche conceive of a just distribution of goods as proportional to existing inequalities. For non-egalitarians, it is just to allot equal shares only to equals, not to everyone.

Research Questions: How is it that all human beings have, as Aristotle and Rawls have noticed, a “sense of justice”, but nevertheless have opposing intuitions of what constitutes a just distribution and a just political order? How can we explain the disagreements about social and political justice?

1) “[...] because we use the same term for two concepts of ‘equality’, which in most respects are virtual opposites. The first sort of equality (of measures, weights and numbers) is within the competence of any state and any legislator: that is, one can simply distribute equal awards by lot. But the most genuine equality, and the best, is not so obvious. It needs the wisdom and judgment of Zeus, and only in a limited number of ways does it help the human race; but when states or even individuals do find it profitable, they find it very profitable indeed. The general method I mean is to grant much to the great and less to the less great, adjusting what you give to take account of the real nature of each—specifically, to confer high recognition on great virtue, but when you come to the poorly educated in this respect, to treat them as they deserve. We maintain, in fact, that statesmanship consists of essentially this—strict justice” (Plato, *Laws*, transl. by T. Saunders. In: Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by J. Cooper, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, p. 1433, 757 a–d).

2) “So the just necessarily involves at least four terms: two persons for whom it is in fact just, and two things in which it is manifested. And there is the same equality between the things as between the persons, for the things are in the same ratio to one another as the persons: if the persons are not equal, they will not get equal things. And from there quarrels and complaints originate: when either equals have and are assigned unequal shares, or unequals equal shares. This is also clear from the fact that assignments should be according to worth. For everyone agrees that what is just in distribution must be according to worth in some sense. But they do not all mean the same sort of worth: for democrats it is freedom, for supporters of oligarchy it is wealth, for others it is noble birth, and for aristocrats it is virtue. So justice is a sort of proportion” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bywater), transl. by M. Knoll, V 6, 1131 a 18–29)

3) “A constitution is the order of a polis in respect to its various offices and the questions of how they are distributed, what the supreme power of the polis is, and what the end of every community is” (Aristotle, *Politics* (Ross), transl. by M. Knoll, IV 1, 1289 a 15–18).

4) “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need” (Karl Marx, “Kritik des Gothaer Programms”, MEW, Vol. 19, Berlin: Dietz, 1973, p. 21).

5) “Distributive Justice in the sphere of welfare and security has a twofold meaning: it refers, first, to the recognition of need and, second, to the recognition of membership. Goods must be provided to needy members because of their neediness, but they must also be provided in such a way as to sustain their membership” (Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, New York: Basic Books, 1983, p. 78).

6) “We see then that the difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a common asset and to share in the benefits of this distribution whatever it turns out to be. Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out. [...] No one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favorable starting place in society. But it does not follow that one should eliminate these distinctions. There is another way to deal with them. The basic structure can be arranged so that these contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate. Thus we are led to the difference principle if we wish to set up the social system so that no one gains or loses from his arbitrary place in the distribution of natural assets or his initial position in society without giving compensating advantages in return” (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 1971, § 17, p. 101-02).

7) “People will differ in how they view regarding natural talents as a common asset. Some will complain, echoing Rawls against utilitarianism, that this ‘does not take seriously the distinction between persons’; and they will wonder whether any reconstruction of Kant that treats people’s abilities and talents as resources for others can be adequate” (Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Oxford: Basic Books 1974, p. 228).

8) “From the point of view of an entitlement theory, redistribution is a serious matter indeed, involving, as it does, the violation of people’s rights. [...] Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor. Some persons find this claim obviously true: taking the earnings of  $n$  hours labor is like taking  $n$  hours from the person; it is like forcing the person to work  $n$  hours for another’s purpose” (ibid., p. 168-69).

9) “The implications of the postulate of ‘justice’ cannot be decided unambiguously by any ethic. Whether one, for example—as would correspond most closely with the views expressed by Schmoller—owes much to those who achieve much or whether one should demand much from those who accomplish much; whether one should, e.g., in the name of justice [...] accord great opportunities to those with eminent talents or whether on the contrary (like Babeuf) one should attempt to equalize the injustice of the unequal distribution of mental capacities through the rigorous provision that talented persons, whose talents give them prestige, must not utilize their better opportunities for their own benefit—these questions cannot be definitely answered. The ethical problem in most social-political issues is, however, of this type” (Max Weber, *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, transl. and ed. by Edward Shils and Henry Finch, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1949, 15–16).