

Sandra Gilgen

Disentangling Justice

Needs, Equality or Merit?
On the Situation-Dependency
of Distributive Justice



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to Kaya and Juri

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Chapter 1: Distributive Justice Matters – Introduction

Distributive justice lies more at the core of our everyday dealings than we are probably aware of. In face of the worldwide raging Covid-19 pandemic, uncomfortable questions are being asked: Who is most at risk and are the measures in place effective in protecting those most vulnerable? Are governments taking action to attenuate the blow of the pandemic-related financial problems of their citizens? How do the protective measures affect our daily lives and economic realities differently depending on our personal situation and position in society? Which countries are provided with the vaccines first? And even more grimly: who gets prioritised when there are not enough hospital beds for every patient in need? The differences in the ways people are affected and in the resources and possibilities they have and can resort to when dealing with trying times and situations, as well as the way these distributional problems are solved say a lot about the way our societies are organised. Locally as well as globally, the pandemic has strengthened existing inequalities, shining light on power structures that privilege some, at the expense of others. However, even on a much smaller day-to-day scale, allocation problems are omnipresent. When we buy clothes, do we care how much of the money is going to the people who manufactured them and where the rest of the money is going to? When we receive our tax bill, do we feel like we are being robbed or like we are paying our due to society? The way we experience and evaluate these inequalities and questions of (re)distribution of resources in terms of fairness is far from accidental.

Perhaps more than we would ever like to admit, our views on issues of distributive justice have been shaped by our upbringing and socialisation, as manifestations of the contexts we find ourselves embedded within. Of course, what we perceive as fair also depends on our individual predispositions and experiences, however, from a sociological point of view, these are never independent of contextual influences, and are developed in interaction with our environment or *context*. Throughout this book, it will thus be assumed that our interpretations of the world around us are a result of an interaction of individual predispositions and the contexts we find ourselves in. Context itself is treated as inherently social in the sense that human behaviour is seen as a result of not only individual preferences, opportunities and restrictions,

but also of our inherent sociability and mutual interdependence (Zangger 2017; Granovetter 1985; Esser 2002). Depending on the context, situations and actions can carry different meaning and have different implications. Regional, temporal or (sub)-culture-specific social norms are an example of how context can shape collective belief formation, preferences as well as perceptions of the appropriateness of an action or situation. These social norms, or context-specific expectations, guide subsequent conforming or non-conforming behaviour, which in turn elicits social responses such as approval or disdain and punishment, for example, in the form of ostracism (Elster 2007).

Consequently, distributional preferences and the allocations we make also depend on our values and beliefs we have developed, while embedded in a specific context or contexts. These convictions manifest in the form of our beliefs, values and ideologies, whether they are religious, philosophical or political in nature, and guide us in our everyday decisions (Elster 1989; Binmore 2009). However, next to the implications for our daily lives, our beliefs about the state of the world and our preferred allocation systems of resources and rewards to members of society will have an effect on our political choices. For example, people who believe that poverty is primarily caused by laziness, are against policies for redistribution, while people who believe poverty is primarily a result of bad luck, that could hit anybody, are much more in favour of insuring themselves and others through such policies (Fong, Bowles, and Gintis 2006). At its core, much of the polarity between the political left and right has to do with issues of distributive justice.

Philosophers since Aristotle (2000) have contributed to normative frameworks of social justice more broadly or distributive justice more specifically, out of which different traditions of thought have arisen. Ranging from the classic liberal thought of Locke (1976) and Smith (1976; 2002), the liberalism and egalitarianism of Rousseau (2002) and Kant (1991) to Marxism (2009; 1976) and utilitarianism (Mill et al. 2003). More recently Nozicks' libertarian (2013) entitlement principle, Rawls' (2005) theory of justice, Dworkin's (2002) resource egalitarianism and Sen's (1999; 2009) capability approach to social justice have been influential, to name a few. These theories rely on different perceptions of human nature and thus also bring forth and legitimate different value systems. In turn, these values, among other factors, inform our choice of allocation norms we apply to problems of distributive justice (Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Eavey 1987a; Frohlich 2007; Fleischacker 2004).