Disciplinary Perspectives: Conversations about Distributive Justice

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CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE
(WITH THE "THERE ISN'T ENOUGH" GENERATION)

Catharyn A. Baird

Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. Isaiah 2:21

Introduction

The Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition is rich with admonitions to those of privilege to be attentive to the plight of the less fortunate. The series of conferences at Jesuit colleges and universities addressing methods of teaching justice has arisen because our students are hungry to explore their own faith tradition and often admonish us to be "more Catholic." In response to questions both asked and unasked, I am pleased to introduce my students to concepts of economic justice and Christian social teaching (both in the Catholic and Protestant traditions) which often confound members of my classes. As one economics major announced, "My economic training teaches me that transferring resources for the common good is not efficient but my Catholic conscience is not happy with the result."

The social justice tradition embodies the belief that, as Dag Hammarskjold wrote, "The road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action." Many members of our community solve the problem of economic injustice by privatizing altruism while remaining staunchly individualistic in the realm of business and public policy, that place where we decide how the resources of our community are going to be allocated. Classes in public policy and economic justice provide a rich opportunity to explore the implications of fervently held (though badly articulated) economic philosophies which often give short shrift to notions of the common good.2

When I assert that our responsibility as citizens as well as people of faith is to work not only at the individual level but at the organizational and institutional level to provide justice for all, students look mystified. Many students believe that America is a purely capitalistic economy. Few recognize that in fact we have a mixed economy, a combination of capitalist, socialist and neoclassical philosophies and policies. Even fewer recognize that their role as citizens is to determine which particular mix of economic policies make the most sense for individuals and the community. A primary task of a class on economic justice is to help students see that solutions are not black and white but rich shades of the rainbow as public policy objectives are advanced.

Students are quick to articulate that individual self-sufficiency is good and receiving government handouts is bad. The students' beliefs reflect the current public policy goal which strives to encourage self-reliance through romanticizing the Alger Horatio mythology and reducing--as well as stigmatizing--any reliance on certain shared community resources. Few understand the degree to which they have and currently are benefiting from shared resources. A benefit as direct as a guaranteed student loan is seen as a basic right rather than a privileged transfer of resources and is always contextualized as different from other kinds of "handouts" such as Aid For Dependent Children.

Framing The Question

The first task is to frame the question. Most students have never noticed that a community distributes many resources unequally: education, health care, employment, even marriage (as the current conversations about homosexual marriage indicate). Michael Walzer's Spheres of Justice explores the venues in which goods are distributed. Walzer explores the three most common criteria for distribution: free exchange (where goods are convertible to other goods through the medium of money); desert (where goods are exchanged based on what one deserves); and need.3 Then Walzer pro-

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vides conversations about what kinds of items are distributed. Students don’t think of time and work as distributed goods even as the industry norm is a fifty-hour work week which gives little time for family, leisure or community activities. Students are encouraged to expand their notions of distributed goods beyond the narrow world of food stamps.

The second phase involves exploring the different mediums by which goods are distributed. The first cut is to acknowledge that distribution happens at the individual, organizational and governmental level. The second cut is to see that distribution can be direct through transfers of wealth as well as systemic through access to resources and power. Distribution at the individual level, private charity, occurs when individuals determine what of their own resources they will give to others who are perceived as needy and/or worthy of the transfer. This method of resource transfer is extolled by many Enlightenment philosophers and classical economists as the most efficient and ethical way to serve those in need. Individual giving was primarily conceived as direct transfers of wealth. However, our community has developed institutionalized ways of distribution through non-profit organizations with attendant tax benefits. As individual giving becomes institutionalized, the systems of information, determining who will get the resources, and strategies to prevent “fraud” add layers of complexity to something as seemingly simple as helping someone who is down and out.

A growing source of distribution of goods is through institutionalized charity, often framed as “service.” Schools encourage their students to serve the community, and many companies give employees reimbursed time to serve the community. Many students believe that such service is good for the company and the community. As we explore the principles of a market economy, that goods should reflect the cost of manufacture, the students are invited to question whether it is ethical or appropriate to spread the cost of altruism to the customers by building the expense of community service into the price of the goods and services. Is buying the exclusive right to market Coke in schools in exchange for a handsome “donation” to the school a way to help finance schools and reduce taxes or an inappropriate marketing device. Such questions generally result in scowls as the answers are not self-evident.

Finally, we explore distribution through community sharing, governmental transfers of wealth and resources. Gathering common resources to pay for that which is used by all is easily justified. Roads and parks seem “no-brainers” for students. More interesting conversations come when community resources are used to pay for private enterprise, for example, authorizing taxes for building stadiums for professional teams while voting against funding schools. And then we talk about transfers of wealth to individuals, from grazing rights and water rights through AFDC and unemployment. Students are quick to criticize welfare moms without questioning whether ski resorts are paying their fair share for building ski runs through national forests.

Historical Perspective

Many students perceive correctly that their parents have what they have through hard work. Most of their grandparents who survived and thrived during WWII, and their parents who worked through the ups and downs of the 1970s and 1980s, have improved their standard of living as family wealth and opportunity are traced back to the roots of immigrants who survived the travails of the Depression. What most students do not realize is that government policies determined who
had access to shared resources and thus determined who had an opportunity to build wealth.

For example, who got to possess the land. The American Indians believed that land was to be held in common, the wealth and resources of the land shared by the community. Settlers to America brought with them the notion of private property and then began appropriating community property for individual use. Without the notion of private property, America could never have developed its particular brand of capitalistic economy. Thus, from the first colonization through the Homestead Act, thousands of families who in Europe would never have had access to land were able to begin their fortunes through acquisition of real estate. Then, in the Depression, the Federal Housing Authority was established to assure low interest loans for families. However, with institutional red-lining in a segregated America, very few African-Americans were able to benefit from that government distribution of wealth.

Most students have never considered the wide security blanket which has been woven through direct allocation of monies and regulatory policies which limited the harshness of capitalism. Education, health care benefits, social security, unemployment benefits, tax incentives, and a myriad of other subtle transfers of resources in fact define an economy which many students prefer to consider pure capitalism. Most students have no idea how unequally these resources were and are appropriated, the primary beneficiaries being white males and their families.

Even today the preferences are masked. After thirty years of affirmative action and minority set-asides, policies devised to grant access for women and minorities who were historically denied access to the fundamental building blocks for personal wealth and individual responsibility are being curtailed under fears of "reverse discrimination." However, many prestige universities still find room for legacies, those who do not meet the stated admissions criteria and who Garrison Keillor characterizes as "academically challenged students" with "financially gifted parents." Proposition 209, California's anti-affirmative action proposal, got rid of every preference except preferences for veterans, the majority of whom are white males.

Manuel Velasquez articulates the cultural shift from a reliance on individual rights to claims against others for resources in his discussion about negative rights and positive rights. Negative rights are those which one can enjoy without interference from others. If I choose to spend my money on landscaping while you choose to spend your money on a snowmobile, if we each have the resources, no one can stop us. Positive rights are those which some other agent (and as Velasquez notes it is not always clear who) is to provide for us.

When students are asked to list what everyone should have, the inventory is long: health care, education (often a college education), housing, food, clothing, work, and on and on. When asked who is to pay for these positive rights, the corner into which the students have backed themselves becomes clear. If they say that people should pay for these goods on their own, then the students must be willing to take the action of my grandparents who would have chosen to let a child die rather than take that child to the hospital when they couldn't pay the bill. If the students say that someone else should foot the bill, we are back to charity, business or the government through taxation as the source for those goods. Scowls abound.

**Exploring The Tension Between Individual Rights And The Common Good**

Once the class explores how individuals build wealth and begins to come to terms with the systemic support for the unequal distribution of goods, they are ready to engage in a conversation about the tension between relying on individual talents and resources in making one's way through life and supporting the common good. At this point two assumptions about economics can be challenged: first, that economics is value-free and second, that the market is always the best way to distribute goods.

Economists have made great strides in their field by developing descriptive economics, models which tend to predict what will happen if certain policies are adopted. What descriptive economics does not do is provide insight into the norms or values which should inform the decision making. Thus, policy makers must examine their own value systems to determine which policies should be adopted. If we uncritically hold the belief that economic policy is value free, we fail to explore and tell the truth about the ways that different policies can either support the common good or sup-
support the individual at the expense of the common good.\textsuperscript{8}

To the degree that students doggedly hold onto the belief that the market economy must be preserved at all costs and is the best way to accomplish all economic goals, developing economic policy that supports the common good becomes difficult. Often policies which support a market result are at cross purposes with solutions which support the common good.

Health care in the United States is a prime example of cross-economic policies. The market demands that products be made efficiently, the lowest cost for the highest quality. What is required then is that the cost of the production of the goods be borne completely by the purchaser. When costs of providing social benefits are added to the price, expenses which have nothing to do with the quality of the product, the cost of the product no longer bears a direct relationship to the cost of manufacturing the goods or providing the services. Pricing then depends on externalities, which "occur when production or consumption by one firm or consumer directly affects the welfare of another firm or consumer, where 'directly' means that the effect is not mediated through any market and is consequently unpriced."\textsuperscript{9}

If in fact health care is a basic right for all members of the community, then the economic policies need to reflect that value. We have two ways of providing care: (1) requiring all firms, regardless of size, to provide health care for all who work, full and part time, or (2) providing care through a government vehicle. If as citizens, consumers of health care, and members of the economic system, we are unwilling to engage in either of these policies, then we cannot with integrity say that we believe that health care is a right. Rather, our actions articulate the belief that health care is a privilege for those who have the resources to pay for services.

Students are generally very uncomfortable with the above direction of the conversation. First, notions of self-sufficiency are challenged. We all are where we are because of the efforts of others as well as because of societal norms and policies which enable us (or our parents and grandparents) to pursue our dreams. Thus, if notions of the common good require that all have access to education, then policies and resources should be put into place to assist all members of the community in reaching that goal. Second, if we truly believe that all are created in the image of God and that all members of the community have equal value, then we need to implement policies which reflect and support that core belief. Third, notions of goods going to those who deserve them are shaken as students begin to understand the inequality of distribution of goods in our community. Again, when people are working full time to the very best of their capacity and still cannot earn enough to provide basic goods for themselves, then we cannot say that folks are poor because they are lazy.\textsuperscript{10} Rather, we must look at organizational and governmental policies that institutionalize and support poverty.

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\end{center}

\textbf{Call To Action}

Jesuit schools are proud to graduate "Men and Women in Service to Others." We embrace as part of our mission the goal of teaching students to give a "preferential option to the poor." I believe that this call to action must address individual, organizational and governmental policies and attend to both individual transfers of wealth and systemic barriers which impede, and bridges which enhance access to resources.
Acting at the individual level is a common solution to distribution of goods. We donate our time and our resources to help those who are less fortunate than we are. Inviting our students to experience the "other" through their service learning activities enhances their ability to act in the face of need. We easily work with organizations which provide services to the poor.

What we don't do so well is talk about participating in the common good at the organizational level. Timothy Fort, in "The First Man and the Company Man" suggests that the organization provides a framework in which one has no choice but to negotiate with others in the organization so as to understand one's identity within the context of the demands and aspirations of the members of the organization. One learns interdependence and moral values."11 Such an approach requires that students exercise the virtue of courage as articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre in After Virtue. MacIntyre suggests that courage is a core virtue "because the care and concerns for individuals, communities and causes which is so crucial to so much in practice requires the existence of such a virtue. If someone says that he cares for some individual, community or cause, but is unwilling to risk harm or danger on his, her or its own behalf, he puts in question the genuineness of his care and concern."12 Courage in an organizational context requires a willingness to jeopardize one's own reputation and financial well being to speak for the common good and others.

Finally, we must talk carefully about distribution at the government level. We must balance between individuals retaining enough of their earnings so that they remain productive and motivated to be responsible for themselves with enough resources being shared that people who are contributing to the community are appropriately sharing in its wealth and resources. If we do not want to burden companies with trying to remain competitive and provide health care, then we need to find some way of sharing resources so all can have a basic level of health care. If we don't want to raise the minimum wage so that American companies can remain globally competitive, we must find some way to assure that those who work full time are not positioned below the poverty line and thus unable to provide for themselves or their families. The conversation is messy and complex. However, we must be willing to engage thoughtfully and persistently in the conversation.

Challenges

What result is gained, other than depressing students, from opening this conversation?

While the conversation can be overwhelming, broadening the perspective of students to see that distribution of goods and the common good is useful. First, students begin to note how privileged they are. Even those who compare themselves to the relative wealth of others at the university begin to see that in comparison to the community as a whole they have an ample share of the goodies. Second, students can see that they have benefited from transfers of community wealth grounded in pervasive notions of the common good. Thus, they can become generous with their resources now that they are in a position to individually give as well as influence organizational and governmental policies.

Can economic justice courses be accessible to those who are not business or economics majors?

As students harmonize their learning across the various disciplines, liberal arts and science majors can appreciate that all of us are members of the community. They have the opportunity, even the obligation, to participate in decisions that affect individual and community well-being. Students can begin to articulate the policies behind individual distributions of goods. They can also see the systemic pressures which mask the transfer of wealth, and they can thus become more effective citizens.

How will these policies translate into the students' own leadership positions?

Finally, students can begin to grapple with complex issues and develop ways of thinking about the problem so that, as they move into positions of leadership, they can institute policies and systems which in fact strengthen the common good and more fairly distribute benefits. The opportunities present themselves in subtle, but powerful, moments of decision. I sit on a non-profit board that was authorizing the transfer of a pension plan from a defined benefit plan to a defined contribution plan. The reserve monies in the plan could be distributed one way which would benefit the top earners of the company or another way which was slightly
more complex, which would benefit the secretaries and other members on the lower end of the wage scale. A member of the board asked about the alternate method of distribution and positioned the conversation so that the more equitable distribution was seen as the only viable solution. Asking those kinds of questions requires paying attention and exercising courage and leadership to forward the claims of those who don't have access to power.

As members of the Jesuit learning community engage in conversations about distributive justice, we must exercise ruthless self-discipline in not imposing our personal agenda. Rather, each of us must seize opportunities to respectfully explore the strongly held but generally unarticulated beliefs of the students about the allocation of wealth. As the strengths and weaknesses of all possibilities and policies are explored, students can begin to get a sense of the tradeoffs inherent in any policy option. Encouraging students to wrestle with the implications of getting only what one earns personally, or enjoying both the benefits and burdens of working for the common good, opens the possibility that students leave our institutions with some sense of the power and potential of economics in service of others.

WORKS CITED


2 Faculty in the Division of Business teach two kinds of classes which deal with economic justice. The first type are classes which are part of the College Core Seminars. The freshman seminar on Economics and the Common Good and the senior seminar on Economic Justice in America draw students from all disciplines. The second type is offered to business and economics majors and focus on issues of public policy (the regulatory environment) or other economic topics as they apply to the business community.


7 Velasquez, 90.


9 Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1989), 53.

10 Often the reality of poverty gets lost in statistics. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that income is up and poverty is down. However, the article also noted that "The census study...also offers stark proof that life is still a struggle for millions of Americans...The poverty rate was still 1.6 percentage points higher than it was in 1973, the twilight of America's last prolonged golden age." "Charting the Pain Behind the Gain," *The Wall Street Journal* 1 October 1999:B1.
