

It's time to rethink our concept of Justice

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In ancient times theories of justice were often discussed among philosophers and religious thinkers. Justice was frequently thought of as a synonym for fairness. Included also were ideas on what the just person owed to God and what was owed to the state in which the person was born and raised.

In Plato's *Republic*, 380 BCE, he described a dialogue between Crito and Socrates. Socrates knows that if he does not escape from Athens he will be condemned to death because his teachings were judged to have corrupted Athenian youth. Socrates' friends offered their assistance in making it possible for Socrates to escape from the Athenian justice system. Socrates argued that because his father raised him in Athens he, Socrates, was obligated by law and by principles of justice to suffer death either by his own hands or by Athenian laws.

Approximately 700 years later Saint Augustine in *The City of God* described justice as "love serving God and ruling well all else." In other words, God is the very centre of justice.

In 1861 John Stuart Mill in his *Utilitarianism* stated people possessed the ability to judge what was fair by acting upon whether or not their actions would lead to the overall happiness of societies. Only in situations where perpetrators could have acted differently were they to be judged as unjust or criminal.

More recently John Rawls in 1972 wrote *A theory of Justice* in which he recalled ideas from Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarding justice as a social contract wherein societies had obligations of justice towards citizens and citizens had duties of justice and obedience to the state. Rawls also incorporated ideas from Immanuel Kant. In Kant's concept of testing the justice of one's actions people should consider whether the action at hand could be universalized. That is, we should act as we would want all others to act towards us. This was a secular version of the golden rule which Kant called the categorical imperative.

Even from this short overview of the many directions the concept of justice has taken

from ancient times to the present, there are at least two evident points. One is that concepts of justice have taken many twists and turns over the centuries. Secondly, the concept of justice was important enough to engage thoughtful philosophers and theologians in the past and the present.

What follows are some questions about modern justice wherein technology, science, and instant communication systems have entered into our concepts of justice. Science compels us to look at different issues of justice in new ways.

In Canada there are those who are extremely wealthy and those extremely poor. Like it or not, social changes will require us to eat from the same table and be educated in the same schools and to depend upon common health care provisions. We are not there yet but concepts of justice among social scientists urge societies towards similar treatment for both rich and poor.

Scientists indicate that we should not view questions of racial and ethnic issues as legitimate reasons for treating citizens unequally or unfairly.

Capitalism has worked well in providing those with ambition and good ideas to prosper wherever useful products help to make societies more comfortable and where free enterprise policies are encouraged by governments. But trading of goods and services can be easily disrupted by tariffs and boycotts and by trade agreements whereby some partners are more advantaged than others.

Lack of meaningful gun control measures have led to numerous massacres among our American neighbours. Fortunately, Canada has better gun controls but in Canada we have the tendency to follow in the footsteps of the United States and we have more shootings and murders in Canada than we ought to have.

More and more, Canadian scientists indicate climate change is real. Ironically, countries in northern areas are adversely affected as are those in more central geographic areas. Climatologists tell us that both areas are facing increasing catastrophic climate events. Scientists tell us that the number of years we have left to prevent harmful climate changes is rapidly decreasing.

Information we receive from science, technology, and worldwide communications will result in our need to think judiciously about questions of fairness and justice. Science can help to move issues of justice into more modern solutions.