WHAT IS JUSTICE?

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“Rights and Justice in International Relations.” (Free course.) *Open*.*edu*. N.d. 22 Sept. 2020. Web.

United States Catholic Bishops. *Economic Justice for All*: *Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U*.*S*. *Economy*. Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986.

Plato, in the *Republic*, defines “justice” as “giving to each his due.”

I once read a book on jurisprudence. It began by hypothesizing a man walking down a beach. He sees a shell, picks it up, decides to keep it. From then on, a relationship exists between the man and the shell that does not exist between the shell and anyone else. To deprive the man of the shell without cause would be “unjust.”

Usually, “justice” covers all instances of fairness between parties. But one can distinguish two subsets of justice: justice between individuals, and justice between groups (social justice).

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, distinguished between “distributive justice” and “commutative justice.” Aquinas followed him in this.

Commutative justice calls for fundamental fairness in all agreements and exchanges between individuals or private social groups. It demands respect for the equal human dignity of all persons in economic transactions, contracts, or promises. For example, workers owe their employers diligent work in exchange for their wages. Employers are obligated to treat their employees as persons, paying them fair wages in exchange for the work done and establishing conditions and patterns of work that are truly human. (United States Catholic Bishops § 69)

Distributive justice requires that the allocation of income, wealth, and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet. The Second Vatican Council stated: “The right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family belongs to everyone. The fathers and doctors of the Church held this view, teaching that we are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of our superfluous goods”. Minimum material resources are an absolute necessity for human life. If persons are to be recognized as members of the human community, then the community has an obligation to help fulfill these basic needs unless an absolute scarcity of resources makes this strictly impossible. (United States Catholic Bishops § 70)