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Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics

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What is troubling here is not Kent's prediction but his failure to undertake a full discussion of those Marxist, Feminist, and Post-structuralist theories of history which since the early 1970s have forced church historians and theologians fully to re-evaluate—indeed, set aside as unacceptable—*any* face begotten in a historical tradition, Christian or other. The first two are discussed in the volume, but only insofar as they add something to the “content” of historical study. Their serious radical theoretical critiques are hardly noted; those of the Post-structuralists strikingly never arise.

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Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics

Karen Lebacqz

Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986

158 pp. \$13.95

In this book Dr. Lebacqz sketches six alternative accounts of justice drawn from major philosophical and theological sources, and she devotes a single chapter to outlining and analyzing each account. None of the perspectives she presents can be regarded as a comprehensive or complete account of justice, since each author tends to be partial and limited by his/her own historical and cultural context. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing these different accounts of justice, Lebacqz intends to assist her reader to develop a more complete understanding of justice as a basis for analyzing and dealing with contemporary issues of social, political and economic justice.

Lebacqz chooses the 19th century philosopher, John Stuart Mill, to introduce the topic of justice. In his *Utilitarianism*, Mill presents the central idea that actions are “right” or “just” if they promote the widest possible common good. Utilitarianism has some implicit popularity today as reflected in the current emphasis on “cost-benefit” analyses used to arrive at public policy decisions.

John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* puts forward a “contract theory” which has dominated philosophical discussions of justice in the last decade. In Rawls' description of “justice as fairness” he attempts to avoid the weakness of utilitarianism by opposing the establishment of any social structures that would allow basic liberties and equalities to be compromised for the sake of social or economic benefits. Rawls also advocates government involvement in bringing about a common good within which the least advantaged in society are benefited.

Robert Nozick in his *Anarchy, State and Utopia* responds to utilitarianism's stress on political equality and to Rawls' emphasis on government

involvement in achieving distributive justice. Nozick argues for an "entitlement" view of justice which considers merit as a criteria in the just distribution of goods, and he favours minimal government involvement in the choices and free exchanges that take place within a private enterprise system.

The three philosophical works focus primarily on analyzing and conceptualizing a theory of justice. The next three "theological" accounts of justice emphasize the centrality of the Christian faith as a basis for dealing with concrete issues of social justice. The emphasis is more on practice than on theory, although Lebacqz is careful to point out the underlying assumptions and the view of justice implied in each of the theological positions.

The *Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* produced by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1985 offers a recent account of Catholic social and economic teaching. The letter emphasizes that the goods of nature and society are for all people and that the needs of the poor and the participation of the "marginalized" in society must be given first priority in establishing economic and social justice.

Reinhold Niebuhr, who exercised a strong influence on Christian social thought in America from the 1930s to the 1960s, presents the Protestant alternative on justice. In such works as *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, and *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr stresses the reality of sin and its presence in the social structures of all societies. He advocates a Christian "realism" which requires the exercise of both justice and love (*agape*) in working out the political and economic structures for a just society. But given the reality of sin and competing centers of power in a society, there will always be elements of structural injustice and fundamental limits to the social harmony which a society may achieve.

Jose Porfirio Miranda in *Marx and the Bible* utters an urgent call for justice from the perspective of liberation theology. Concentrating on the realities of injustice manifest in the political and economic oppression in the world, liberation theologians from Latin America seek to raise the consciousness of others regarding these issues and attempt to bring about fundamental changes in society to redress these conditions. This involves a fundamental challenge to the economic and social systems of capitalism and a degree of optimism regarding the ability of any new economic and social order to overcome current structural injustices.

Given the differences in perspective of the six theories of justice, it is not surprising that Lebacqz leaves the reader with a sense that the house of justice is divided against itself. Fundamental differences in substance as well as in approach and methodology separate these theories of justice. Lebacqz leaves these divisions unresolved and allows her readers to struggle with the tensions and begin to think through the issues of social, political and economic justice for themselves.

One important substantive difference between the philosophical and the theological accounts of justice relates to the evaluation of capitalist

economies. The philosophical accounts of justice are positively disposed to capitalist market-based economies. The theological positions, on the other hand, do not give unqualified approval to capitalist economic systems. For example, the bishops are moderately critical, while being intent on reform. Niebuhr offers Marxist criticisms of capitalism, but is equally critical of "socialist" alternatives, and liberation theologians are most vocal in their opposition to the structural injustices of capitalism. Lebacqz gives the impression that the theological accounts of justice have accurately identified fundamental social and political problems at the heart of capitalism, but have yet to work out the solutions to these problems with equal clarity.

Lebacqz's book is well-structured and clearly written. She takes a balanced and fair-minded approach in presenting the central concerns of each position, in examining various criticisms, and in producing insightful evaluations that probe the contributions and the limitations of each theory of justice. The book can be effectively read on its own, but will be especially useful to anyone interested in sophisticated critical analysis of the major works identified in the study.

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Faith That Transforms: Essays in Honor of Gregory Baum

Mary Jo Leddy and Mary Ann Hinsdale, eds.
New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987

It comes as no surprise that a *Festschrift* has appeared to honor the life and work of Dr. Gregory Baum, Canada's most noted liberationist theologian, but unlike so many works of this genre, this particular one has a goodly number of most compelling characteristics. Of course, the articles are mixed in their value and appeal. That is to be expected. Nonetheless, all of them have some value, and a number of them are superior. Rosemary Ruether's piece on theologizing from the "across-the-tracks" experience is especially poignant, and Dorothee Sölle's article linking peace with feminism is thought-provoking in its insights. Douglas Hall's "Theology Is an Earth Science" reflects his usual blend of classical thinking and radical insights. Especially appealing is Mary Jo Leddy's "Exercising Theology in the Canadian Context." Full well she realizes the pioneering importance of linking the gospel to issues in life within our own nation, just as she realizes how little importance we give to this task. She speaks of Canada's colonial existence, and the fact that "our point of reference is always elsewhere—*there* but not *here*." So, for her, the question "Who am I?" must be linked inexorably with "Where is here?" So, she concludes, we must turn away