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ON JUSTICE

Lessons from Plato, Rawls and Ishiguro

Justice occupies a special place in the pantheon of virtues. For the ancients, it was often conceived as the master virtue, the one that orders all the others. For Plato, justice had exactly this overarching status. A just individual, he tells us in *The Republic*, is one in whom the three parts of the soul—reason, spirit, appetite—and the three virtues associated with them—wisdom, courage, moderation—stand in the right relation to one another. Justice in the city is precisely analogous. In the just city, each class exercises its own distinctive virtue by performing the task suitable for its nature, and none interferes with the others. The wise and rational part does the ruling, the brave and spirited part does the soldiering, and the rest, those lacking special spirit or intelligence but capable of moderation, do the farming and the manual labouring. Justice is the harmonious balance among these constituent elements.[1]

Most modern philosophers have rejected the specifics of Plato's view. Almost no one today believes that the just city is one that is rigidly stratified with a permanent ruling class, a permanent military class and a permanent working class, whose lives differ from one another in major respects. Yet many philosophers have retained Plato's idea that justice is not simply one virtue among others, but enjoys a special status as the master or meta virtue. A version of this conception informed John Rawls's celebrated book, *A Theory of Justice*, in which he claimed that 'Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought'.[2] By this he did not mean that justice is the highest virtue, but rather that it is the fundamental one, the one that secures the basis for developing all of the rest. In principle, social arrangements can display

any number of virtues—for example, they might be efficient, orderly, harmonious, caring or ennobling. But the realization of those possibilities depends on a prior, enabling condition, namely, that the social arrangements in question be just. Thus, justice is the first virtue in the following sense: it is only by overcoming institutionalized injustice that we can create the ground on which other virtues, both societal and individual, can flourish.

If Rawls is right on this point, as I think he is, then when evaluating social arrangements, the first question we should ask is: are they just? To answer, we might build on another of his insights: 'the primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society'. This statement orients our attention from the great variety of immediately accessible features of social life to the deep grammar underlying them, to the institutionalized ground rules which set the basic terms of social interaction. It is only when they are justly ordered that other, more directly experienced aspects of life can also be just. Certainly, Rawls's specific views of justice—like those of Plato—are problematic: the idea that justice can be judged exclusively in distributive terms is too restrictive, as is the construction device of the 'original position'. But for the purposes of this essay, I will endorse his idea that the focus of reflection on justice should be the basic structure of society. To explore this approach, and convey its power, I will examine Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *Never Let Me Go*.[3]

The story follows three friends, Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, who inhabit a peculiar social order. When we first meet them, they are children living at what appears to be a privileged English boarding school called Hailsham. As the novel unfolds, however, we discover that the children are actually clones. They have been created to provide vital organs for non-clones, whom I shall refer to as 'originals'. In the second part of the novel, the protagonists have left Hailsham and are living at the Cottages, a forlorn transitional residence, where they await 'training'. Now adolescents, they are preparing to begin their life's work of 'donation', which will culminate after a maximum of four surgeries in 'completion'. In the third part, the protagonists are young adults. Tommy and Ruth have become 'donors', while Kathy has become a 'carer', a clone who tends to

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[1] This essay was delivered as a lecture in a series on 'the virtues' at the Centre for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona, 13 February 2012.

[2] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA 1971, p. 3.

[3] Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, London 2005.

others recovering from organ-removal surgery. After Tommy and Ruth 'complete', Kathy feels she cannot continue in her role. The book ends as she prepares to submit to 'donation' herself.

Never Let Me Go is a powerful work, which left me overcome with sadness when I first read it. Actually, that is an understatement—by the time I reached the end of the book I was sobbing uncontrollably. Some reviewers have interpreted it as a work of dystopian science fiction about the perils of genetic engineering; others have read it as a *Bildungsroman* in which young people with outsized hopes and little understanding of what is truly important in life acquire the wisdom to value relationships and accept the world as it is. Neither interpretation is wholly wrong, in my view; each captures a strand of the work. But both miss what I take to be the book's vital core. As I read it, *Never Let Me Go* is a meditation on justice—a searing vision of an unjust world and of the profound suffering inflicted on its inhabitants.

Spare parts

What insights does the book offer us? First and foremost, it invites us to think about justice through negation. Unlike Plato, Ishiguro makes no attempt to represent a just social order, but instead offers a chilling picture of one that the reader comes to view as deeply unjust. This already makes a profound point: justice is never actually experienced directly. By contrast, we do experience injustice, and it is only through this that we form an idea of justice. Only by pondering the character of what we consider unjust do we begin to get a sense of what would count as an alternative. Only when we contemplate what it would take to overcome injustice does our otherwise abstract concept of justice acquire any content. Thus, the answer to Socrates's question, 'What is justice?' can only be this: justice is the overcoming of injustice.

How, then, do we recognize injustice? If we examine the social order portrayed in *Never Let Me Go* and ask why and in what respects it is unjust, we are struck by an obvious answer: this social order is unjust because it is exploitative. The clones are created and maintained for the sake of the originals. They are sources of organs, walking stores of spare parts, which will be cut out of their bodies and transplanted into the bodies of originals, when needed. They live, suffer and eventually die so that the originals can live longer, healthier lives. Treated as mere means to

the originals' ends, they are accorded no intrinsic value. Their needs and interests are nullified or at best subordinated to those of the originals. The clones, in other words, do not count as subjects of justice. Excluded from consideration and respect, they are not recognized as belonging to the same moral universe as the originals.

Here Ishiguro makes an acute observation, which concerns exclusion, identity and alterity. The clones can be exempted from moral consideration because they are seen as categorically different from the originals. It is this allegedly basic, ontological otherness that justifies their exploitation and their lifelong segregation from the originals. Their relegation to special places like Hailsham, where they live in a self-enclosed world with no outside contact, interacting only with one another and their teachers—whom Ishiguro calls, in a gesture to Plato, 'guardians'—serves a functional purpose. Barring direct acquaintance between clones and originals precludes experiences of similarity or affinity between them, which would contradict the assumption of ontological difference. That assumption is paradoxical, to be sure. The clones are in fact exact genetic replicas of the originals. Their utility to the latter consists precisely in the fact that they are biologically indistinguishable from them. Granted, their subjectivity differs, as the clones have experiences and memories of their own. But genetically, the two groups stand in a relation of absolute identity, a proximity so extreme as to be uncanny, even unbearable. We can speculate that this might provoke severe anxiety; if so, it would explain the originals' need to insist at all costs that their own ontological status is fundamentally different, and thus to legitimize the exclusion of clones from the universe of moral concern.

Nevertheless, as Ishiguro shows us, the clones in fact participate in the same scheme of social cooperation as the originals. They are subject to the same basic structure of society, in Rawls's sense. The two groups operate jointly under a common set of ground rules, which dictate that the life substance of the one be placed at the disposal of the other, that it be made available for the originals' benefit, irrespective of the harm inflicted on the clones. Thus the two groups participate in a single, shared bio-economy, a common biopolitical matrix of life and death. The originals rely on the clones for their own survival; yet they deny them the standing of partners in interaction.

To us, the readers, this situation is unjust. We recognize a mismatch between the restricted circle of those who count as subjects of justice—originals only—and the larger circle of those who are jointly subject to that society's basic structure—originals plus clones. And we deem this incongruity to be morally wrong. For us, accordingly, justice requires that all who are governed by a common set of ground rules be recognized as counting, in the sense of belonging to the same moral universe. Some participants should not be instrumentalized for the sake of others. All of them deserve equal concern. For this reason alone, the social order portrayed in *Never Let Me Go* is deeply disturbing.

Terrible knowledge

What makes the world portrayed in the book truly horrifying, however, is something else: its protagonists do not perceive it as we do. The clones do not see their situation as unjust. They were created for, and socialized into, this highly exploitative order. Because it is the only society they know, its terms appear natural and normal to them. Granted, one of them, Tommy, is often angry. As a child living at Hailsham, he is prone to outbursts of temper for no apparent reason. But the others, including his closest friend Kathy, treat his rage as a personal problem. No one, including Tommy himself, ever considers the possibility that he has good reason to be angry. All encourage him in various ways to calm down; and so he does. When we meet Tommy later, as an adolescent living at the Cottages, he has mastered his rage. All that remains is a trace of sadness—a brooding quality which suggests some inaccessible and uncomprehended inner depths.

Here Ishiguro conveys another profound intuition. Clearly, injustice is a matter of objective victimization, a structural relation in which some exploit others and deny them moral standing as subjects of justice. But the harm is compounded when the exploited lack the means to interpret their situation as unjust. This can happen by deliberate manipulation—when, for example, the exploiters fully understand the injustice, but hide it from those they exploit. However it can also happen in a more subtle way—when, for example, the public sphere in a seemingly democratic society is dominated by individualizing, victim-blaming discourses, while structural perspectives are absent or marginalized. Or when anodyne, euphemistic and vaguely elevating terms are routinely used to

refer to murderous realities—as, for example, when forcible surgical removal of bodily organs is called 'donation' and the associated killing is called 'completion'. In such cases, the dominant interpretative schemas reflect the experience and serve the interests of the exploiters. Conversely, the exploited have few if any words that can adequately voice their experience and even fewer ways effectively to articulate their interests as a class. The result is yet another aspect or level of injustice: the society's means of interpretation and communication do not serve all its members equally well.

Under these conditions, the victims lack an essential condition for responding appropriately to their situation. The fitting response to injustice, we assume, is indignation. However, that response is possible only where the exploited have access to interpretative schemas that permit them to categorize their situation not simply as unfortunate, but as unjust. Failing that, they tend to blame themselves. Convinced that their inferior status is deserved, they bury their legitimate anger and tie themselves in emotional knots. Thus, an injustice in the social organization of discourse produces psychological fallout.

Never Let Me Go works through some of these repercussions. At first, during most of their years at Hailsham, the protagonists do not know they are clones. Ignorant of the terms of the social order into which they are being inducted, they do not know that they are being raised to supply body parts for an überclass. Much of the drama of the novel's first section inheres in a series of incidents in which the characters encounter anomalies in their situation, hints of another, darker reality underlying their relatively carefree schooldays. Meanwhile, the reader, who is herself initially naive, comes to understand the truth—and waits anxiously for the clones to grasp it too. However, our hopes for a cathartic revelation remain unfulfilled. We watch with growing consternation as the protagonists repeatedly verge on uncovering the truth, only to pull back from the brink again and again. Unable or unwilling to entertain such terrible knowledge, they ignore the hints, explain away the anomalies, and concoct increasingly convoluted rationales in order to shield themselves from a disastrous truth.

Certainly, the staff at Hailsham encourage the children's ignorance. One teacher, momentarily overcome with sympathy for her charges, who do not after all seem so different from her, blurts out the truth

and is summarily fired. She has violated the institution's policy, which is to let the truth emerge gradually, in small doses, telling the clones only as much as they are deemed able to handle at a given moment. This technique is like that in the famous anecdote of the frog which, when thrown into a pot of boiling water, immediately jumps out. If, however, it is placed into a pot of cold water that is warmed gradually, the frog remains calmly inside as it boils to death. The Hailsham policy of titrating knowledge keeps the child-clones in the pot.

Personhood and power

Eventually, they do learn the truth. But by that point, they are not disposed to feel indignation. Responding with sorrow instead of anger, the adolescent clones find their situation unfortunate, but they do not judge it—or the basic structure that underlies it—to be unjust. Nor do they contemplate collective protest or revolution. On the contrary, they latch onto the promise of escape for a lucky few. Specifically, they become obsessed with the possibility of 'deferrals'—another interesting choice of term, reminiscent of exemptions from the draft for university students in the US during the Vietnam War. In *Never Let Me Go*, word spreads amongst the clones that it is possible, under special circumstances, to postpone the start of one's organ removal surgeries for three years. To qualify for a deferral, so the rumour goes, a clone couple must demonstrate that they are truly and deeply in love.

The notion that being in love could constitute a basis for postponing forcible surgical dismemberment is ingenious on Ishiguro's part. This particular urban legend posits a link between affective individuality and intrinsic value. The premise is that a being heretofore deemed to possess only extrinsic value, and thus to be a mere means to others' ends, can nevertheless be elevated in status, at least temporarily, into a being that is valuable and deserving of consideration in its own right. The further premise is that what enables this transmutation is the interiority and individuality of that being, as embodied in the affective experience of romantic love. What confers value, then, is personal subjectivity.

The young-adult clones invest all their hopes in this idea. It offers them considerably more than the promise of three more years of relative bodily integrity: it allows them to see themselves as something more than walking collections of spare body parts. It tells them instead that they are

unique individuals, irreplaceable persons, each with a singular inner life. And where did the clones get this idea? At Hailsham, which we learn had been founded as a progressive alternative to the squalid hostels where clones had been previously stored. Squeamish about the conditions under which their biological duplicates were warehoused, sentimental liberal reformers had conceived of a special institution where clones would be educated and shown to have a soul. The school emphasized creative self-expression, encouraging the clones to produce artworks; the best, they were told, would be exhibited in an off-campus gallery. Later, when Tommy, as a young man, seeks to secure a 'deferral', he decides to make his case through the production of art. He will prove the depth of his love by displaying his paintings.

Again, Ishiguro's insight into (in)justice is penetrating: namely, individuality is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is the mark of personhood and intrinsic value, the admission ticket for moral consideration. On the other hand, it is easily made into a ruse of power, an instrument of domination. When divorced from a structural understanding of an exploitative social order, individuality can become a cult object, a substitute for critical thinking and an impediment to overcoming injustice. In 'democratic' mass-consumption societies individuality is the dominant form of ideology, the chief way in which subjects are interpellated. It is as 'individuals' that we are exhorted to assume responsibility over our own lives, encouraged to fulfill our deepest longings by purchasing and owning commodities, and steered away from collective action toward 'personal solutions'—invited to seek deferrals for our own precious, irreplaceable selves.

Ishiguro provides a masterful account of this paradox of individuality. What is most cruel and perverse about the world he portrays is that the protagonists are sold a bill of goods. Socialized to think of themselves as individuals, they cannot get past the idea, even when the truth becomes clear: they are actually bags of spare parts, created to be cannibalized. What set me sobbing were the book's closing lines, narrated by Kathy, now in her early 30s. As a 'carer', she has spent the last ten years nursing her fellow clones, including Tommy and Ruth. She has tended their frail, depleted bodies, successively dispossessed of one vital organ after another. She has kept them alive and available for additional 'donations', providing what solace she could, as if to rebut Ruth's despairing claim that their kind were modelled from

human 'trash'. Now with both friends gone, Kathy can no longer bear to continue her work. Having decided to start 'donations' of her own, she anticipates 'completion' and looks back on the course of her life: 'The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them.' Though she tries not to go searching for remnants of the past, Kathy recalls:

> The only indulgent thing I did, just once, was a couple of weeks after I heard Tommy had completed. I drove up to Norfolk, even though I had no real need to. I wasn't after anything in particular . . . Maybe I just felt like looking at all those flat fields of nothing and the huge grey skies. At one stage I found myself on a road I'd never been on, and for about half an hour I didn't know where I was and didn't care . . . I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire, and I could see how this fence and the cluster of three or four trees above me were the only things breaking the wind for miles. All along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a sea-shore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before finally coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire. Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags. That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing . . . I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn't let it—and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.[4]

Kathy speaks here for all those whom our social order simultaneously interpellates as individuals and treats as spare parts—as sweatshop labour, as breeders, as disposable workers; as providers of organs, babies and sex; as performers of menial service, as cleaners and disposers of waste; as raw material to be used up, ground down and spat out, when the system has got from them all that it wants. In another era, they were christened 'the wretched of the earth'. Today, however, they are too

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[4] Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, pp. 281–2.

omnipresent, and too close to home, for that designation. We might view them instead as a substantial fraction of 'the 99 per cent'. Kathy speaks for all these people, but she does not issue a call to arms. Rather, she expresses all the hurt, confusion, self-deception, betrayed hopes and longing that have coursed through her short, tragic life. Above all, she makes a stubborn claim to a measure of dignity in the face of a social order that disrespects her at every turn. She persists, too, in the effort to make meaning, even when the basic structure of her society has granted her nothing from which to fashion it except debris. It is this heart-rending mix of all-too-human emotions that makes the words of this doomed clone so moving.

From fiction to practice

But let us now leave the world of *Never Let Me Go*, put aside its pathos and think in a hard-headed way about what it has taught us. How might Ishiguro's many insights be applied to our social world? First, the strategy of approaching justice negatively, through injustice, is powerful and productive. *Pace* Plato, we do not need to know what justice is in order to know when something is wrong. What we need, rather, is to sharpen our sense of injustice, to cut through obfuscation and ideology. Focusing on the wrong, we need to determine why it is so and how it could be made right. Only through such a process of negative thinking can we activate the concept of justice, redeem it from the realm of abstraction, concretize it, enrich it and make it fruitful for this world.

Second, and again *contra* Plato, we should beware constructions of essential difference; distrust attempts to draw lines between guardians and workers, insiders and outsiders, citizens and aliens, Europeans and others. We should also suspect ontologized differences invoked to legitimize a dual social order, with one set of rights for 'us' and another for 'them'. Often masking anxieties of identification, such attempts misframe justice. They license the wrongful expulsion of some from the universe of those who 'count'. Third, instead of concentrating on otherness, we should follow Rawls (and Marx!) and look to 'the basic structure'. To see who deserves moral consideration, we should determine who is jointly subjected to a common set of ground rules which define the terms of social cooperation. If the ground rules institute one group's exploitative dependence on another group—for such vital necessities as body parts, labour power, babies, sex, domestic work, child-care,

elder-care, cleaning, waste disposal—then together they are subject to the same basic structure. Members of both inhabit the same moral universe and deserve equal consideration in matters of justice.

Fourth, we should be wary of approaches that misframe justice, wrongly excluding some from moral standing; and be on the alert for cases in which the circle of those accorded that status does not match the circle of those subject to the same basic structure. *Contra* Rawls, therefore, we should challenge those who treat formal citizenship as the principal determinant of who counts, as they necessarily misframe justice in a transnational, even global, social order. Fifth, we should question the tendency to redefine structural inequities as personal problems; scrutinize interpretations that attribute people's unfavourable circumstances to their own failings; and resist efforts to dismiss bellwether emotions, like anger, which possess diagnostic value. Thus, we should look beyond trait-based explanations to the broader patterns of stratification, the causal mechanisms which produce hierarchy and the ideological strategies, such as personalization, that obscure them.

Sixth, we should not assume that the absence of explicit critique or overt protest means that injustice does not exist. We should understand, rather, that organized opposition to injustice depends on the availability of discursive resources and interpretative schemas that permit its articulation and open expression. We should examine the public sphere for biases that impede equal access to political voice, and figure out how to overcome them, by broadening the terms available for naming social problems and disputing their causes. Seventh, we should distrust one-sided paeans to individuality; and beware societies that fetishize love, interiority and private life, while systematically denying the vast majority the material conditions for their realization. We should reconnect subjectivity and objectivity. Finally, we should appreciate the creativity of the oppressed; validate the longing for a better life and the drive to make meaning, even in the most unfavourable circumstances; and cultivate social indignation and political imagination. Let us make justice the master virtue—not only in theory, but also in practice.