Chapter 4: Social Justice

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 What does it mean to give each person his/her due? How has the meaning of "giving each his due" changed over time?

Giving each person his due means treating every individual in the way they deserve, so that justice looks after the well-being of all people. Socrates held that a just ruler, like a doctor caring for patients, must ensure the well-being of the people, which includes giving each person what is due to him. The idea survives today, but what counts as 'due' has changed. In Plato's time, justice was tied to duty, order and the ruler's role. Today it is linked to what is due to each person as a human being. Following Kant, every person has dignity, so what is due to all is the opportunity to develop their talents and pursue their chosen goals. Justice therefore requires giving due and equal consideration to every individual.

Q2 Briefly discuss the three principles of justice outlined in the chapter? Explain each with examples.

The chapter outlines three principles of justice.

1. Equal treatment for equals: all people share certain human characteristics, so they deserve equal rights (civil, political and social) and must not be discriminated against on grounds of class, caste, race or gender. Two persons doing the same work, such as breaking stones, should receive the same reward; paying a person less because of caste, or a female teacher less than a male teacher, is unjust.

2. Proportionate justice: rewards should match the scale and quality of effort, starting from equal rights. Awarding exam marks by the quality of answers is fairer than giving everyone equal marks. Differences in effort, skill and danger, as with miners or policemen, justify different rewards.

3. Recognition of special needs: people unequal in important respects, such as the disabled, or those lacking good education or health care, may be treated differently. In India, the Constitution allowed reservations in jobs and educational institutions for Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

Governments must harmonise these principles, since stressing one can work against another.

Q3 Does the principle of considering the special needs of people conflict with the principle of equal treatment for all?

No, it does not necessarily conflict. The chapter says that taking account of special needs extends the principle of equal treatment rather than contradicting it. Equal treatment of equals implies that people who are not equal in certain important respects can be treated differently. People with disabilities, or those deprived of good education and health care, are unequal in some respect and deserve special help. If those living in very different conditions were treated identically in every respect, the result would be an unequal society, not an egalitarian and just one. For example, a visually impaired student given extra examination time, or reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in India, aim to give real equality of opportunity. The difficulty lies in agreeing which inequalities deserve recognition, and governments must balance this with equal treatment and reward for merit.

Q4 How does Rawls use the idea of a veil of ignorance to argue that fair and just distribution can be defended on rational grounds?

Rawls asks us to imagine deciding how society should be organised without knowing which position we ourselves would occupy: our family, caste, wealth or privilege. This is thinking under a 'veil of ignorance'. People are not asked to be selfless; each still decides in terms of his own interest. But since nobody knows who he will be, each will view the future society from the position of the worst-off, and so will prefer rules that ensure reasonable opportunities and resources such as education, health and shelter for the weaker sections. Rational persons will also ensure that policies benefit society as a whole and do not weaken the better-off, since they might be born privileged. Fairness thus results from rational self-interest, not benevolence or generosity or pre-given moral goals. This is why Rawls holds that a fair and just distribution can be defended on rational grounds.

Q5 What are generally considered to be the basic minimum requirements of people for living a healthy and productive life? What is the responsibility of governments in trying to ensure this minimum to all?

Governments and international organisations such as the World Health Organisation have devised various ways of calculating basic needs. In general, it is agreed that the basic minimum includes enough nourishment to remain healthy, housing, a supply of clean drinking water, education and a minimum wage. A just society should provide these conditions so that people can live healthy and secure lives, develop their talents and have equal opportunities to pursue their chosen goals.

Providing people with their basic needs is considered one of the responsibilities of a democratic government. This may be a heavy burden, particularly in countries like India with a large number of poor people. Disagreement also exists on the method: some favour free markets and open competition, while others want the state to provide the minimum, if necessary through redistribution of resources. Where private agencies find basic services unprofitable, the government may have to step in.

Q6 Which of the following arguments could be used to justify state action to provide basic minimum conditions of life to all citizens? (a) Providing free services to the poor and needy can be justified as an act of charity. (b) Providing all citizens with a basic minimum standard of living is one way of ensuring equality of opportunity. (c) Some people are naturally lazy and we should be kind to them. (d) Ensuring basic facilities and a minimum standard of living to all is a recognition of our shared humanity and a human right.

Arguments (b) and (d) can justify state action.

(b) is valid because, as the chapter explains, social justice needs some basic equality of life conditions so that everyone can pursue their goals; a basic minimum standard of living is one way of ensuring equality of opportunity.

(d) is valid because basic facilities for all recognise our shared humanity and each person's dignity as a human being, which makes them a matter of right.

(a) and (c) are not suitable justifications. Both treat help as charity or kindness, a favour from the better-off, whereas justice concerns what is due to a person as a right. Calling people naturally lazy is also an unfounded assumption, not a principle of justice. Calling the minimum a matter of charity or kindness would make it dependent on generosity, while justice treats it as a claim every citizen can make.