

## How to Think Clearly About Social Justice

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What an honor to be associated with this Forum, with Hillsdale College, for which I have a great deal of respect. We share the same great state, although it's easier to get to Grand Rapids than it is to Hillsdale, but I know many of you have made the pilgrimage there. And also to be part of the Center for the Study of Monetary Systems and Free Enterprise with the Durrell Foundation. These are important issues that you are examining and for me to be here is a great pleasure, as well as an honor.

If the story of Babel in the Book of Genesis has any meaning at all, it is to teach us that when words are robbed of their meaning and employed incautiously in discourse, chaos can result. Yet, one need not resort to encounters of biblical proportions to see such chaos at work in our society today. In the book that I recently wrote that you kindly mentioned (*Defending the Free Market: The Moral Case for a Free Economy*, I recount a story of when I was studying in England and I was studying English culture, English institutions, English literature, and I must confess, probed very deeply into that most particular form of English creativity—lager and ale. And so it came to pass that many years ago I was introduced to that most British of *all* British institutions—the pub. When I went to the pub with my friends, about 7 or 8 of us sitting in a semi-circle, we proceeded to order. Everyone ordered their own preference of drink and the waitress, without writing down a single note, took our orders, proceeded to the bar and came back with each order and placed it in front of the person who had ordered it. I was quite taken by the professionalism of this woman. And I remarked on it. I said, “Ma’am, you’re a real pro.” All of my English friends grew very quiet—it was that awkward kind of silence where I knew I had trod upon something un-nice, but was not quite sure what it was. So I turned to my friend next to me and said “What did I just do?” He said, “Oh, you’ve just called the young lady a prostitute.” This is precisely why George Bernard Shaw observed that America and England are two nations separated by the same language.

Now to our discussion of Babel. In contemporary usage there are a plethora of words which have developed new meanings, and yet pronounced the same way as they’ve always been pronounced. They’re employed in very different ways and for very different, specific political purposes. The topic proposed to me by our hosts this evening was “The Meaning of Social Justice: How to Think About Social Justice.” And this term social justice is, to be truthful, only one of a veritable litany of words and phrases that demand careful definition. Consider the way in which this list may fall upon your ears: progressive, social market, social gospel, equality, gay, marriage, marriage equality, fairness, sustainability, differently abled, cooperation, investment, social commitment, the common good, liberal or liberalism, pluralism, tolerance, diversity, and the list can go on. It is enough to drive a linguist to despair, is it not? And I must confess to you that I want my words back. And among the words I want back—perhaps chief of all—is the word Madonna.

Now let us proceed to sort through this mess and see if we can come to some sensible comprehension of what we mean when we talk about social justice. It is rooted fundamentally in

justice itself. I'm also aware that there are many commentators—not all of whom are enemies of sensibility and freedom and the human person—who want to just give up on the phrase “social justice.” I am not prepared to abandon it altogether and I hope to make my case to you now.

Simply put: what we mean by *justice* is to say that human beings are entitled to be treated in accord with what they are due—treatment in accord with dessert, You could put it on a bumper sticker. I suggest that some of the phrases of my previous litany are really not sensible concepts, but a thing called a *pleonasm*—that is, employing more words than needed to express oneself, a kind of redundancy. Now, this is not necessarily a bad thing, it can be a benign thing, just something we do for emphasis. We talk about tuna fish, do we not? Or free gift. Or a true fact. It may be the use of a term for the sake of emphasis to augment or to underscore something that is important. In the Italian language this also occurs. When you say “I love you,” literally to translate that into Italian is to say ‘*ti amo*’. Now, that’s the two words, *amo* being the first person singular of the infinitive *amare*. *Amore*, which means “to love,” is *io amo*. But most often when you say “I love you” in Italian, other than a kind of idiomatic phrase, which doesn’t pertain here, you would say *io ti amo*. Well you’ve already said “I” in the first person, *amo*. But you would say “I, I love you” in order to emphasize that it is *me* who loves you. So, to speak as some do of a social market is to employ this pleonasm. After all, how could a market be anything other than social the moment you begin to trade? So if people wanted to emphasize the social dimension of commercial activities, I doubt any of us would have any objection if that’s what they meant. We wouldn’t be confused; we would understand it—like tuna fish.

But some of us have a sneaky suspicion that somewhere out there is a factory trying to smuggle in a different political tilt on the use of our language. Something different. They want to add something to the equation that might not actually be in the equation. And I suggest to you that suspicion is justified. And that’s the problem with social justice.

In preparing for the talk this evening, I first got my copy of the *Nicomachean Ethics* off the shelf—Aristotle—and then I pulled down the *Secunda Secundae* volume of the *Summa Theologica* and of course right at hand I had Antonio Rosmini’s essay, The Constitution Under Social Justice, one of the writers to introduce the term “social justice” into the moral lexicon, which was written in the 19th century. As I probed through these and made notes and found distinctions between justice and commutative justice and distributive justice and the common good and all kinds of rich distinctions, it dawned on me that this was supposed to be a talk after dinner and so I paused and I thought well this is a hearty, Hillsdale bunch. They’re intellectual, they can take it. And then I thought along the lines of the Protestant pastor’s wife who, as her husband mounted the pulpit to deliver his sermon, folded a note and handed it to the usher and asked him to drop it on the pulpit for her. He glanced at the as it placed it on the pulpit and saw the letters, “KISS”. Afterwards he confessed to the pastor’s wife that he could not resist reading the note. He said, “I saw what you had written and I want to tell you how much I admire you and your marriage. ”, “Oh no, no, no,” she said, “that means keep it short, stupid.”

Now, so shall I. What I hope to do is compress this thing and make it very comprehensible to all of us. Justice is rooted in the intellectual tradition as treatment in accord with dessert. In other words, we are bound to treat people as they deserve to be treated. But that raises another question. What do people deserve? And that raised yet another question. Who is

the human person who has the right to be treated in a particular way? Now this is where we come upon the most obvious thing about human beings. If we ask a few questions about ourselves, we see that the first thing that the human person is related to our physiological, corporeal, physical beings. But we know through our experience by thinking about ourselves that there is also something more to us than merely our physicality. When we can love, when we can appreciate art, when we listen to music that evokes within us a sense of our transcendence, we realize that we are transcendent beings as well as corporeal beings. And that is part of who the human person is. The definition of a human person cannot be observed from the perspective of a microscope or chemical analysis. We are more than that and what's more, each of us knows that we are more than that.

There's another thing that we are—simultaneously—in the same way that we are physical and transcendent. We are individual and social at the same time and in the same place. There is a sense in which we are biologically autonomous from the first moment of our existence in our mothers' wombs; we are within our mother but not physiologically or genetically part of our mother. But also at that moment, we are in relationship to our mothers. So this individuality has another aspect to it—we are social beings. And the whole of our lives after our birth is a play between those two polarities—our individuality and our social component, as is our physicality and our transcendence. These dimensions of who human beings are *need* to be understood if we are going to be able to construct a society appropriate to the dignity of the human person. If we're going to speak about what humans deserve, if we are going to speak about justice or social justice, then we have to find the balance by understanding these various dimensions and how they play themselves out.

The view that the government must be the complete arbiter or that the normative role for all social arbitration should be invested in the hands of those who own the monopoly on coercive power—that is the state—that it should be the primary actor in social relationships, is a relatively new idea. And it's the kind of idea that leads to a great bit of mischief. It leads to economic misunderstandings. Now, what does that mean? We've recently been told that “you didn't build it.” Well then who actually built it? Did I perhaps build it alone? When you take the anthropology that I've outlined, you understand that the creative person—through individual initiative and insight into the needs of people in an economy in a society—perceives those needs and then acts in such a way to meet those needs, and that is a creative engagement with the material world, with the natural resources, bringing their transcendence to bear, their intellect, because our greatest resource is ourselves. But we know that we never do it alone because we've never—none of us in this room—created anything *ex nihilo* - from nothing. We've always done what we've done in cooperation with others.

So it's not a matter of whether it's individualistic or socialistic. It's a matter of the right understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social and the other thing that human beings have by their nature, and that is the desire and the right to be free. Because of our intellectual capacity, because of the fact that human beings are bound to the material world by something more than our intuitions and our instincts and because the dominant thing that makes man man is our reason and our intellect - it is our mind that engages the natural resources of our world and creates—drawing out from those resources things that are valuable to ourselves and to others.

What I'm describing to you philosophically and morally right now is nothing more than the economic system we know as free enterprise and entrepreneurship. Some would say well yes, that's all nice and good coming from a priest, but a *real* believer in the free market would be a radical individualist, wouldn't believe in this social dimension. Well try Ludwig von Mises on for size. In his book *Socialism*, right in the outset of the book he discusses private property and he makes what should be to us an obvious and necessary distinction—he says that an owner, of course, is one who disposes of an economic good. Doesn't that compliment beautifully the citation from earlier from Dr. Arnn's? And then he goes further and he says that there are two kinds of goods: there is a good that is employed for one's immediate satisfaction, the satisfaction of a person's wants. And that good, because it's the immediate satisfaction of a want or desire, is consumed, is used up. But there's another kind of property that Mises talks about. So let's say you want an apple, you eat an apple, it's used up. But the ownership of an apple or toothbrush is not what is under assault today politically and philosophically. No rather it is the orchard and it is the toothbrush factory—what Marx would call the “means of production”. It is the ownership of these things, the organizations, the institutions that produce the products for people's satisfaction. The production of goods that *serve* the enjoyment—even if only indirectly.

Having these goods, to enjoy them, must be shared. And it is shared through the division of labor. So that in a free society there is a *de facto* sharing of the kind of ownership that divides labor and enriches society so that between the producer and those for whom labor produces—the consumer—there is a bond, there is a relationship, there is this social dimension. And this I suggest to you, and history testifies, is a far better, more responsible, indeed more intelligent way to accord with human nature. To play upon this knowledge of who human beings are in all these dimensions I've already outlined, rather than indulging in what the economists have called the synoptic or one-eyed delusion—that this process of productivity and enrichment for society as a whole can be orchestrated and planned from the center of society. The synoptic delusion says that there is a centrally gathered eye that can orchestrate *all* of the productive factors in society and meet all of the needs because it knows all of the needs—such a synoptic eye does not exist. It is the delusion that Friedrich Hayek spoke of in his masterful, though short work, *The Fatal Conceit*.

So you see in this sense the alternative to free human beings understood in their rich complexity, acting freely based on their reason, on their apprehension of what the needs are for themselves, their families and the consumers they seek to serve, that the alternative to that free and natural system of trade and economic progress, is to diminish the intelligence of a society as a whole because it prevents more participants in that society, acting upon their knowledge, and subjective understanding of their condition and the condition of their neighbors. And by inhibiting their abilities to be brought into that system of economic trade, the entire society itself is dumbed down. And we have dislocations. We have shortages. We have queues. We have starvation. We have violence. Is that the end (the telos) of social justice? Social justice, my friends, is not socialist justice. Socialist justice is an oxymoron. It does not account for what human beings deserve because it does not account for who human beings are. And social justice is no more socialist justice than the common good is the communist good. The common good as simply put from the Catechism is that sum total of social conditions which allows people—either as groups or as individuals—to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. That is what

the common good is. It's not the ownership of all things in common—which as I've said can dumb down the society—but is the set of conditions necessary to allow this wonderful dance between human individuality and commonality, between the human person as a physical being and as a transcendent being. To guard, to safeguard, to institutionalize the protection of the rights that we bear in our very nature, endowed by our Creator.

In one sense justice is the foremost among the virtues. It can indeed be called the queen of the virtues because it aims at the rectitude of the will for its own sake in relation to others. And in another sense, it is the most meager of the virtues because we know that what is needed for a society that is free is that it must be something even more than just. That a society must have and know and exhibit charity, love. In the last analysis when you and I stand before the throne of God at that day of judgment, I don't know about you, but I know that I am not going to be demanding justice from Almighty God. I am going to be pleading for mercy. And if our societies do not dispose us in that manner, how will we be prepared for that last day?

In Michigan where I have lived now for almost 30 years, our community moved into house and outside of that house there was a big tree. Now you have to know I'm from Brooklyn, New York, so I'm not well acquainted with trees. I had seen one once when I was a child, but I think they got it. So as I was sitting on the porch one day looking up at the tree I saw something curious. Now this tree went up higher than the house itself. And I looked up and I saw that on part of the tree it was completely in blossom and on part of the tree it was dead. And I thought this was very curious, what does this mean? And then I discovered the existence of a profession I knew nothing about—the tree doctor. And so I called the tree doctor who came and who kicked around at the base of the tree and crushed some of the dried leaves and picked at some of the bark and looked at it and dug underneath and came up to the porch and he said the tree is dead. I said how can it be dead? It's blossoming. He said ah, it's an illusion. He said the sap has been going through it, this is a big trunk. He said it will go through and whatever sap is in there will give blossom to some of the tree but every year it will blossom less and less and the danger is that this tree is weakened and a good Michigan winter can blow that tree down on your house, so we have to take it down.

And I have often thought about that metaphor when I think about our nation. That in many respects we are living off of a past legacy, a rich legacy that produced a flourishing, bold, strong, healthy tree. And in these latter days people can think it possible to live off the richness of that former sap, but we must recognize—as I know Hillsdale as a college, as an institution, recognizes—that we must tend to the roots. Once again we need to go back and look at what made that tree or this experiment in human liberty possible. And I suggest to you that it is the anthropology that I've described here. That what made this incredible, unique, unprecedented experiment in human liberty and prosperity possible was the concept of our founding fathers and of two millennia of thinking on who the human person is. That that is what made this possible. And that if we do not tend to those roots, the entire tree will come down. I am hopeful that this need not be the case. That organizations like Hillsdale College and the Acton Institute and the plethora of other organizations and movements and encounters in your homes will ensure that those roots are nourished and rediscovered and rearticulated so that we can build an army of people who will go to the barricades to defend a society worthy of the human person—the free and the virtuous society.

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