

Borough of Manhattan Community College

**Argueta on Justice**

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Morality is a multifaceted concept that is highly intricate and difficult to shape. Since the inception of human consciousness, thinkers have spent centuries fine-tuning its complex facets, yet here we are today, far from its perfect form. The current events of this nation alone testify that humanity has seemingly abandoned its path of refining its virtues. Oppositely, the powers that be continue to exhibit their prejudices and implement changes in law that hinder the progression of a just society. A *New York Times* article entitled “Book Bans Are Rising Sharply in Public Libraries,” which was published in September of 2023, states there is a trend in book-banning, which began in public schools and has shifted to public libraries. The unfortunate reality, which strengthens my point, is that “most of the challenged books were by or about people of color or L.G.B.T.Q. people.” This is just one instance of our morally retrograding society, but the cumulative instances drive me to stand behind the virtue of justice wholeheartedly.

The virtue of justice, as John Rawls defines it, envelops “laws”, “social systems,” and “particular actions of many kinds, including decisions, and judgments.” (Rawls 7). The sum of justice equates to “fairness” (Rawls 3). Although clearly defined, our definitions cast a shadow over the complexities of justice; what exactly is just or fair as it applies to us and our lives? For this reason, my view is that the fundamental component with which we begin to shape justice is critical thinking. Critical thinking’s core function is to thoroughly evaluate our beliefs and determine which ones to keep and which ones to reject with good reason. This endeavor takes time, patience, and practice, like any other skill.

Most would be inclined to simply check the laws to answer our question of what is just, but I would make the radical claim that true justice requires critical thinking to take precedence over law, because law is subject to prejudices that can, in turn, create policies that are more harmful than good – like book banning. Law is guided by our thinking, and, at best, law is an attempt at justice, therefore we cannot rely on law to be our sole guidance for justice. That is not to say that one should intentionally break laws with the justification of critical thinking, but one should thoroughly examine whether a law is just and participate in changing the law if it is not. Consider the case of Nazi leader, Adolf Eichmann. Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem A Report on the Banality of Evil*, covers the trial of Eichmann held in Jerusalem. Eichmann is tried by the state of Israel for committing crimes against humanity, namely, developing the holocaust. During the trial, Eichmann's justification was that "He did his duty," and, "he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law" (Arendt 135). Arendt emphasizes "based on the Fuhrer's order; whatever he did he did, as far as he could see, as a law-abiding citizen" (Arendt 135). Arendt is not justifying his actions but rather pointing out that the law is subject to corruption and flaws. Additionally, Arendt points out that Eichmann's failure to think critically, in turn, made him subject to blindly adopting an entire party's hate and thirst for genocide. As Arendt puts it, his "inability to speak coherently in court was connected with his incapacity to think, or to think from another person's point of view" (Arendt xiii).

In our time and in our nation, we can see a slew of injustices occurring. Admittedly, I have been silent in the wake of this nation's injustices. I rarely cast my vote in any election. My entire life I've felt inferior to the oligarchy, to the duopoly, to the powers that be. As far as I can see, nothing ever changes regardless of whoever is the head of this nation. The rich remain rich, the poor remain poor, authorities perpetually funnel ethnic folks into prisons, women have lost

their reproductive rights, the L.G.B.T.Q community has lost their right to free speech, authors are being silenced, etc. These injustices are overwhelming and who am I to change anything? I'm just a Chicano from the Salinas Valley peering toward the sky at the tower of injustices shielded by the colossal machine known as the United States Government.

I've mentioned that I've been silent in the wake of our nation's injustices, but I haven't been complacent or completely inactive. In 2016, when I lived in Oakland, a friend of mine recommended that I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. A year later I moved to Brooklyn and got a job in Williamsburg. One day on my lunch break I took a stroll down Bedford Avenue looking for a quick bite and I came across a street vendor with an assortment of books sprawled out on the ground in front of him. Immediately my eyes were drawn to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, so I finally bought it – I had to. I consider Malcolm X to be my first teacher. He guided me to the virtue of justice. Malcolm X refined my vision which enabled me to see the harsh realities of injustices, even in northern cities that claim to be socially progressive. Since then, I've read books by Angela Davis, Dr. Cornel West, Martin Luther King Jr., and Assata Shakur. Through their experiences of injustice, my teachers – these civil rights activists – have taught me the importance of justice. Since then, I've been keen on furthering my formal education. Through education and critical thinking, I believe that I can contribute to shaping the facets of justice. Silence has been a fault of mine, but complacency never stood a chance. In my eyes, to be complacent and indifferent is the antithesis of justice. My teachers have set a fire in me that has propelled me to take action, and, thankfully, the seat on which I sat in my former years has gone cold.

Is there a personal reward for practicing fairness or justice? I think maybe, but I don't think our actions should be guided by incentives or disincentives. Growing up in a Catholic

family, I was always told to be good so I get into heaven after I die. I was also told if I do bad or cause harm to myself or others, I'll pay for it in hell. It took me until my adulthood to realize that doing good for the sake of reward, or for fear of punishment, is in fact selfish. I think that fairness should be a social contract for the sake of being fair (Rawls 3). For example, I consider myself to be an honest person – I always pay my MTA fare when riding the subway. Of course, I've had plenty of opportunities to evade the fare, but I choose not to. Why? Because I feel contractually obligated to contribute to the MTA for its services, even when the subway is extremely delayed and unpleasant. I made a conscious decision to move to a city that is heavily dependent on public transportation, and I do my part in complying with my contract. In another instance, when I was twenty-one years old, I drove a group of friends to celebrate New Year's Eve. We drank heavily, and when the bars closed, I attempted to drive us all home. About 20 minutes later I drove into a checkpoint. Before I approached the cop, one of my friends told me, "Don't tell them you were drinking! Tell them you're the sober driver!" I told the truth and went to jail that night. Why did I tell the truth? First off, because I broke the law, a just law. Secondly, I truly felt like I had broken the social contract to keep myself, my friends, and everyone else on the road safe. It was a harsh lesson to learn, but I never drove under the influence again.

It puzzles me to think that I should feel rewarded for being fair. We have seen the horrors of injustices in American history alone, and I think it is rewarding enough if these injustices do not repeat. Although I'm not driven by an external reward, I'm passionate enough and driven enough to have an ongoing relationship with justice for the sake of justice. My long-term goal is to help clear the shrouded path of justice by reintroducing the conversation of its importance through film. I firmly believe that people respond to film, and I intend to create films that

provoke people to think and discuss the elements of justice. This is my pledge to advocate for justice because an “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King 87)

## Works Cited

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