

## ON JUSTICE

Though much attention has been paid to different principles of justice, far less has been done reflecting on what the larger concern behind the notion is. In this work, Mathias Risse proposes that the perennial quest for justice is about ensuring that each individual has an appropriate place in what our uniquely human capacities permit us to build, produce, and maintain, and is appropriately respected for the capacity to hold such a place to begin with. Risse begins by investigating the role of political philosophers and exploring how to think about the global context where philosophical inquiry occurs. Next, he offers a quasi-historical narrative about how the notion of distributive justice identifies a genuinely human concern that arises independently of cultural context and has developed into the one we should adopt now. Finally, he investigates the core terms of this view, including stringency, moral value, ground and duties of justice.

Drawing on historical and analytical methods, Risse develops a unifying understanding of distributive justice across cultures while providing a broader account of the role of political philosophy. This investigation of global philosophical discourse will appeal to scholars and general readers interested in political theory, law, international relations, and intellectual history.

This unifying proposal for understanding distributive justice discourse across cultures sheds light on how best to understand political philosophy.

Mathias Risse is Lucius N. Littauer Professor of Philosophy and Public Administration and Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. His research primarily addresses questions of global justice ranging from human rights, inequality, taxation, trade, and immigration to climate change and the future of technology. He has also worked on issues in ethics, decision theory, and 19th century German philosophy. Risse is the author of *On Global Justice*, *Global Political Philosophy*, and *On Trade Justice: A Philosophical Plea for a New Global Deal* (with Gabriel Wollner).

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PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, FOUNDATIONS

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This book continues themes from *On Global Justice* and *On Trade Justice: A Philosophical Plea for a New Global Deal* (jointly written with Gabriel Wollner), though it stands on its own. It should come as no surprise that a book with as ambitious a title as *On Global Justice* would generate follow-up agendas. *On Trade Justice* became necessary because, among the several grounds of justice distinguished in *On Global Justice*, it was subjection to the trading system about which *On Global Justice* had least to say (even though my own work on trade goes back years before that book). My collaboration with Gabriel Wollner ultimately enabled me to close that gap. But then, any number of additional questions about the nature of inquiries into justice, political philosophy, and the foundations of the particular proposal in *On Global Justice* still remained open, responses to which ultimately coalesced into a book all their own: this one.

The absence of any serious engagement with race in *On Global Justice* is probably the most glaring issue here. Until a few years ago, matters of race and gender were raised in philosophy largely in ways that constituted their own specialized subdisciplines. *On Global Justice* was written as a contribution to a literature that did not intersect much with those subdisciplines, and did nothing to change that. Only in recent years have more and more philosophers seen the necessity for serious soul-searching to ascertain how prejudicial thought about race and gender has shaped our agendas. I am grateful especially to Charles Mills for having opened my eyes to the importance of making this kind of inquiry a shared disciplinary effort that cannot always be left to the same people. And, to some extent, the present book (or parts of it, in any event) is my own take on these matters.

I have worked on this book since roughly 2010, when *On Global Justice* was being completed. For the last several years the present book and the book on trade have been in the works together, with many synergies between them. Most of the work on both was done while I was “on regular duty” at Harvard, but in the fall of 2013 I was a visiting professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. The time I spent in Southeast Asia not only was eye-opening in its own right but also led to a fair number of collaborative activities with colleagues in Southeast and East Asia. I am grateful to the dean, Kishore Mahbubani, and the associate dean, Kenneth Paul Tan, for making my stay possible.

In the process of writing this book, it became increasingly clear that it is also an extended exercise in self-clarification. What is the point and purpose of writing books like those other two? What is the point and purpose of political philosophy anyway, and what should or could it look like at a global scale? Based on what criteria would one theory of justice be more plausible than another? And does political practice need one at all? In what ways is history important for what philosophers do today, and in what ways are the social sciences and the indignation that drives much



resistance to power? And how do answers to such queries help with a range of substantive questions about the grounds-of-justice approach in *On Global Justice*? Many of these matters, in turn, draw on how I see myself in the midst of the multifaceted conversation among political philosophers and between philosophers and researchers in adjacent fields as well as political activists and citizens. Accordingly, this book is an ongoing conversation with many who have helped me think differently, or whose thought I would rather resist.

My own professional self-understanding has developed over the years through many acts of crossing, or straddling, boundaries. I came to political thought from actual political practice. It was practice in a (relatively small) political party, and involved rather hands-on participation in small-town decision making. And it was political practice in Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since then I have moved to the United States, now holding both German (in fact, I am proud to say, European Union) and American citizenship. My work has moved from local to global, and from practice to theory. To my mind, credibility in the domain of global justice requires exposure to many local cultures, and in that spirit I have spent time in quite a number of different parts of the world. For the last seventeen years I have been a philosopher at a school of public policy, a social science–driven place that finds its own purpose in building bridges from academic inquiry to the world of public policy. For good reason, philosophy faces a higher burden of scrutiny at such a place than in a faculty of arts and sciences, and does not have the luxury of not having to justify itself.

And after I, a white male from the lower social strata, spent my first twenty-odd years in a mostly white country, I have spent the last twenty-odd years in a country that during that time has to some extent been shaped by many emancipation movements around race and gender, and by the complicated social reality that arises from many people rethinking their own self-understanding in light of such movements. In time I (sometimes reluctantly, given my own decidedly unprivileged origins in my native country) came to see the extent to which racial and gender prejudices not only have generated substantial dividends for cisgender heterosexual white males (like myself) in everyday life but also have long shaped agendas in political thought. And, needless to say, holding EU and US citizenship puts me among the very privileged at the global level by any sensible absolute, rather than relative, standard. Reflections on my own vantage point have therefore tended to make me rather humble when talking about global justice, an area of thought that exists only because we live in an intensely interconnected world – but this is also an interconnectedness that in recent centuries was driven by imperialistic subjugation of the rest of the world by countries like those whose citizenship I hold.

Self-clarification is clearly much needed here. I hope that advancing my own in this book will also help others with theirs (if only by resisting some or much of what I say). Over the years it has often been a surprise to me how many people in academia (or otherwise connected to the university) with whom I interact think

they have found the one and only disciplinary angle from which all interesting questions can be explored, address their own doubts mostly and exclusively from within the safety and purity of a well-defined small niche, and thus do not really address any serious self-doubts at all. These tendencies seem especially pronounced among philosophers. One symptom of this is that among philosophers it is acceptable, to an astonishing and disconcerting degree, to limit one's intellectual engagement to relatively few people, who often tend to be scholars with whom one has overlapped somewhere or who have enabled one to do something.

At the same time, one of the great buzzwords of our time is “woke”: we are encouraged to develop an awareness of the structural injustices – racial, gender, colonial, etc. – that for too long not only have shaped the political and economic lay of the land but have also set intellectual agendas and determined, in excruciating detail, how people can develop a sense of themselves in relation to others and navigate public and private spaces. One unfortunate side effect of this overall immensely important movement is that – as happens in an impassioned movement – sometimes the passions overpower any efforts to pay attention to either nuances or the bigger picture.

In fact, academic life at this stage is largely shaped by the joint presence of those who do not have any serious self-doubts and those who feel they have already arrived at a new kind of intellectual consciousness and stand ready to dismiss all those who are not fully in line. Indeed, each of these two groups tends to think they are the only type allowed. But, to my mind, they each undermine the very point of academic inquiry, which so badly depends on comprehensive self-doubt and is destroyed by the sense that all relevant questions have been answered. Surely I protest too much, given that these are, after all, the acknowledgments. But I do need to mention these matters *here* (where I cannot hope to deal with them in any appropriate manner) in order to express one especially important, if somewhat generic, acknowledgment. The particular juncture in the academic world that I try to inhabit and that has generated my own exercise of self-clarification is not an easy place to get to (nobody can really give you directions to it) and not always an easy spot to occupy (lots of people will want to give you directions away from it). *Quite right too*, some might say (especially representatives of the two groups I just mentioned) – perhaps so, but my point *here* is simply that I am immensely grateful to the many friendly faces and open minds that make it possible to occupy that juncture anyway. I very much hope you know who you are. On occasion, I have tried to tell you, and if not, I will try to do better.

And, as always, without Kozue Sato's ongoing support and love very little would be possible. I am not even mostly talking about books.

Finally, a grammatical note that by itself is political and, in fact, a matter of justice. I used to express gender neutrality by writing “he or she” or by alternating between these pronouns. But I now realize that not only does this ignore the existence of all those people who, for whatever reason, do not wish to be identified

as either “he” or “she,” but also it positively continues a tradition insisting that, for public purposes, each person simply *must* be either “he” or “she.” I now think that, among the available options for dealing with this issue, switching to the generic third-person plural is best. In English at least, the second person already sets a good precedent: the generic “you” leaves open what kind of second person I mean (singular or plural), much as the generic “they” leaves open what kind of third person I mean. And the generic “they” is already often used that way when we do not quite know the identity of the third person involved. (“They left the package,” it might be said of the mail delivery expected for today.) Avoiding more specificity also actively creates the sense that there is more to know about a particular third person, but that in what role we encounter them depends on the context, and who needs to know what about those roles. In particular, we are then no longer signaling that their gender or sex is the most relevant or most obvious way of specifying what kind of a third person somebody else is. That is already quite close in spirit to the pluralistic public-reason view I defend in this book.

To be sure, for the time being I only use the third-person plural when referring to a generic third person. In the long run, I think, we should adopt the habit of using the third-person plural to refer to every person, even concretely specified ones. For instance, we would refer to John F. Kennedy as “they,” even though there is little doubt about this particular person’s self-identification as cisgender, heterosexual, and male. Only in that way would we really succeed in the mission I just sketched. But, stylistically, that is so out of touch with current practices that I am not doing it in this book. However, justice would be better served if we all did.

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