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An Introduction to Transforming Social Justice

The Editors

“When we talk and argue about social justice . . . we are discussing how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society,” contends David Miller in *Principles of Social Justice*.¹ Framed in this way, the concept of social justice seems linked to the idea of distributive justice. There are a number of principles of distributive justice that enjoy widespread philosophical support: resource-based, welfare-based, desert-based, libertarian, feminist, and the difference principle.² Each of these principles provides a basic theoretical justification for the kinds of goods that ought to be distributed among members of society, whom they must be distributed to, and the basis upon which the goods should be distributed.

Although these principles serve as a useful guide to understanding what one might mean by social justice, the grassroots debate is far less theoretical. Many proponents of social justice tend to emphasize the social effects of historical and structural inequalities, the need for a reallocation of wealth and increased access to resources, and the special duty for those who hold power to ensure fundamental fairness in society. Critics of social justice tend to argue that those who achieve success should not be punished for doing so and that preferential treatment of individuals or groups results in less equality between members of society rather than more. Both positions reflect commonly held beliefs about the value of social justice. However, this simple dichotomy does not and cannot present a complete picture of the debate: there will always be an expanding universe of arguments that support and contest the idea that constructing a meaningful theory of social justice is a useful exercise for citizens of a democratic society.

As its name suggests, the *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* recognizes that there is something important and worthwhile about cultivating a robust conception of social justice in a democratic society. However, it does not endorse any one principle or conception of social justice. The mission of the *Journal* clearly sets out our mandate as editors: to promote critical interdisciplinary discussions on urgent problems of social justice, including exploring the often-conflicting meanings of justice that arise in a diverse society.

In this issue of the *Journal*, we have developed a section that specifically explores the conflicting meanings of justice that often arise in our society. We have done so by asking scholars of different disciplines, legal practitioners, community activists, and poets to reflect on various conceptions of social justice and how it might be attained in a diverse society. Accordingly, the pieces themselves are diverse: the mediums include traditional academic articles, an interview, reflective essays, and poetry and their authors are Chicano, Jewish, White, and American Indian.

The title of this section, “Transforming Social Justice,” accepts that social justice is a necessary component of a democratic society that values equality, freedom, and human dignity but also accepts that ideas and social interaction are rarely, if ever, static. Thus, the concept of transforming social justice accepts both that social justice is a crucial aspect of human interaction and also that conceptions of social justice must evolve to meet the demands of an ever changing society. With this in mind, we invite you to read and reflect on the following selection of articles and to participate in an online community forum that has been created specifically for this section. More information about how you can share your ideas and contribute to this dialogue can be found at <http://law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/socialjusticeforum>.

¹ DAVID MILLER, *PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE* 1 (1999).

² For a general overview of each of these principles, see STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-distributive/> (last visited Apr. 24, 2005) (defining “distributive justice”).