

BOOK REVIEW

On the Difficulty of Being Fair: A Review of Grzegorz Lissowski's *Principles of Distributive Justice*

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The question of justice is ever present in our lives. Lissowski quotes Chaim Perelman, who writes that 'Every revolution, every war, every overthrow has always been effected in the name of Justice.' Yet we don't need to go so far to find this great idea; we meet with it, or perhaps rather we stumble over it, nearly every day. From quarrels over whose turn it is to do the washing up through the division of bonuses among colleagues to debates on the subject of equal rights or the amount of aid to developing countries, the disputes involve the principles by which goods and burdens are distributed. The problem is therefore universal. Grzegorz Lissowski's book, entitled *Principles of Distributive Justice* deals with this ubiquitous and—to a certain degree—insoluble issue. And like most scholarly works that make a significant contribution to science, it provides more questions than final answers. We do not find in it specific 'prescriptions for justice', but rather the many different ways in which justice can be considered.

Principles of Distributive Justice, which was originally published in Polish in 2008, and then in 2013 in English, is the result of many years of work, research, and reflection on the problem of just distribution and this can be sensed in every page of the book. Grzegorz Lissowski, a professor at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw has been engaged on the subject of justice for over twenty years and during this period has published many articles on the topic, including in the prestigious *American Political Science Review*. The author's almost complete knowledge of the field is palpable in *Principles*. A 'compendium of knowledge' would probably be the best description of the book if it had to be described in three words. Such a description, however, would miss the nature of the book, which far exceeds the framework for those reliable and thorough works called compendiums.

The author himself writes about his work (p. 22) that 'The aims of this book are modest' and that they are the 'presentation of selected principles of the distribution

of goods and burdens and their most important properties.' If these two sentences were true, the word 'compendium' might indeed suffice. The author, no doubt in good faith, misses the truth here, though. In addition to an unusually solid description of the concept of justice, we find much more in the book. First, from the theoretical viewpoint, it has a very promising new typology of the principles for the just distribution of goods and burdens, organizing these principles according to the most basic intuitions concerning fairness. Furthermore, the introduction of this typology gives the author the pretext to present new evidence and assertions, which undoubtedly constitute value added for the theory of justice. A further aspect distinguishing *Principles* from an ordinary compendium is that it contains not only concepts that are known and widely discussed, but also turns its attention to propositions that have not been popularized yet.

Lissowski's book, as was mentioned earlier, describes selected principles of the distribution of goods and burdens, and their properties. Its extent is limited by the fact that a description of all the principles of distribution and all their possible properties would undoubtedly occupy thousands of pages. Furthermore, the author restricts himself to the pure distribution problem, in which all the participants in the distribution have equal rights and claims. Such a selection of persons taking part in the distribution brings *Principles* close to the great theories of global distributive justice, as what is being considered here are persons with equal rights, and this makes it possible to advance conclusions of a universal nature. And indeed, some of the concepts described in the book come from the global theories of justice, whose ambition is to describe or evaluate the distribution of goods at the world level, to resolve universal disputes, and to answer basic questions belonging perhaps more to philosophy than to sociology. Although Lissowski makes use of the achievements of such theoreticians as Rawls and Sen, his book is closer to the trend of reflecting on local distributive justice, or microjustice, which refers to specific situations and whose aim is to understand the divisions arising from everyday life. It could conversely be said that Lissowski draws on what is best in both traditions: philosophical reflection on the basic questions of justice or impartiality from global theories, and the precise instruments and cool mathematical objectivism of theories of local distributive justice (Nash, Suzumura). The whole book is characterized by a normative approach, which has been enriched by an element of empiricism thanks to references to interesting experiments attempting to identify the principles of justice.

Lissowski's work has five parts, of which the first contains a sort of introduction to the subject, a formal description of the perspective, an explanation of concepts, and notations that will serve the author further on in describing the main principles of fairness. The second part presents methods of determining social appraisal of the distribution of goods. In this part, the author also presents a typology of the principles of justice, based on three main criteria of fairness: equality, impartiality, and unanimity. It should be emphasized that this typology is in accord not only with an intuitive understanding of the three basic ideas: Lissowski presents here three basic relations corresponding to these intuitions. Among these, only Suppes's impartiality relation, corresponding to the postulates of impartiality, has a secure place in the

literature on the subject. The two succeeding relations, the equalization relation (connected with the postulate of equality) and the acceptance relation (connected with the postulate of unanimity) are innovative proposals by Lissowski. The following three parts of the book concentrate on the three base criteria to which people refer in speaking of justice. Thus these parts are concerned with the principles that combine, respectively, the base criteria of equality, impartiality, and unanimity.

The book's interesting structure is worth mentioning as well. Every chapter is accompanied by a more formal 'twin brother'—a starred chapter. In the un-starred chapters, the formal writing is kept to a minimum, which undoubtedly makes them easier to read, as well as easier to understand for a reader unaccustomed to a large number of assertions written with the aid of symbols and quantifiers. The starred chapters complement and deepen the content contained in the un-starred chapters. However, they are not just supplements filled entirely with models, assertions, and formal proofs; the author has taken care that most of the more formal chapters keep their flow and can be read as a cohesive whole. For persons interested in a deeper understanding of the concepts, these chapters will certainly be required reading. It is worth stressing that the idea of dividing the chapters into more and less formal ones, which was taken from Sen, appears to be an excellent manner of presenting formal theories. To speak in game theoretical language, thanks to this, readers have access to several strategies for reading the book and depending on their individual preference can choose the one that is optimal for themselves.

In spite of the treatment described above, it can not be said that Lissowski's work is easy reading, at least not in the sense that it can be read from cover to cover in a day. It is suitable rather for being the basis of a year-long course on the subject of the theory of fairness. The problems touched upon in *Principles* are too complicated for a superficial treatment to make any sense. On the other hand, in spite of the high degree of complexity of the concepts considered, Lissowski's work is easy to understand because it is characterized by an unusual precision of language, which is full of transparency, even clarity. Every succeeding sentence is linked in a logical manner with the preceding one, and the reader is never forced to guess what the author had in mind—and I don't believe this is the result solely of reliance on formal language. On the minus side, in my opinion, the small number of examples described in natural language could be enumerated here. However much the anonymous and neutral description of certain distributions (without giving names either to the goods distributed or to the persons obliged to divide them) may be an advantage for the book in terms of transparency and universal significance, it is a loss in terms of speaking to the imagination. A plus for the imagination, though, is the ease of evoking certain concepts by linking them to examples that have already been imagined. When these are lacking, it becomes necessary for the reader to return to the concepts or criteria encountered in earlier chapters. In other words, the abstract examples, although they are unusually precise and universal, are harder to remember and to link with a set criteria or a specific distributive principle.

Precision and clarity are a quality not only of the language in which the book is written, but above all of the typology proposed by the author. The principles of

justice can be rested on three basic criteria, which constitute the basis for dividing the principles of justice and also form the essence of the book's structure:

- First, justice can be understood as equality. The closer the distance between those who fare the worst and those who fare the best, the fairer the distribution. If someone can give something to a person in a worse situation without becoming thereby one of those who are 'worse off', it means that the division could be made even more equal. This rather awkward description (the reader will find a defter one in chapter 4) refers to the equalization relation. Chaudhuri's principle is also in accord with this criterion, as is the radical egalitarians' principle. Lissowski, in the part devoted to equality, discusses many propositions connected with various versions of the non-envy postulate. Within the framework of the idea of equality, the author also turns his attention to the principles of equal chances proposed by Szaniawski, which have not previously been popularized in the formal theory.
- Justice could also be understood as impartiality, and Lissowski refers here to the basic criterion of Suppes' justice relation. Concepts referring to the idea of impartiality often rest on the idea of a division being made behind a veil of ignorance. Thus the participant in the division must perform it without foreknowledge of the part that will fall to him in the final distribution. Rawls's maximin and leximin, the maximax and leximax of conservatives, and the utilitarians' principle are the chief principles of justice in this area. However, here too, the author does not limit himself to principles that have been elaborated and are generally known. In one of the more interesting chapters, presenting the results of empirical research into the principles of justice (chapter 8), the author describes a generalization of Rawls' concept and the concept of the conservatives that he drafted in cooperation with Swistak, and these principles appear to be unusually apt in portraying the choices of real people faced with the problem of distribution.
- According to the author, another basic idea of justice is unanimity. If all the participants in the division are inclined unanimously to accept it, it would seem sensible to make such a distribution. The problem of division is therefore dependent on acceptance by the participants, wherein the relation of acceptance proposed by the author rests on equalizing comparative gains from division with respect to the basic solution. Within the framework of this class of justice principles, we also find the Nash bargaining solution, as well as the Klemisch-Alert lexicographic maximin principle. In Lissowski's book we find not only the question of solutions based on the postulate of unanimity, but also various propositions concerning the schema of behaviour that leads to given solutions.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the book's advantages is the attention it pays to principles of fair distribution not previously popularized—in addition, it is a matter here of the concept of a Polish sociologist. In the chapter 'Klemens Szaniawski's Probabilistic Equality Rules' the author presents two principles—equal chances of satisfaction and equal chances of choice—which rest on the use of randomness in the distribution of goods. These principles fulfil many of the various postulates that could be expected from the principle of distribution: for example, they equalize chances of receiving goods ranking equally in individual arrangements of the set of goods.

Therefore, one could speak here rather about justice *ex ante* and not *ex post*. At first glance, the idea of probabilistic principles of justice could seem pure abstraction. It is sufficient, however, to remind oneself of all the situations—such as drawing the short straw or some other event of fate—where it was necessary for someone to bear the burden, to see how close to reality this concept is. After reading this chapter I am certain that it would be worthwhile to test such principles. Moreover, the author does not limit himself to describing only a probabilistic concept of distribution, but cites the results of experimental research on the subject.

A further Polish accent in *Principles* is the description of a procedure for distributing goods that was devised by scholars from the famous Lwów school of mathematics: Steinhaus, Knaster, and Banach (p. 338). Lissowski emphasizes that the schema for division that they analyzed—'one divides, the other chooses', the 'last diminisher method', and the procedure of sealed bids—could successfully constitute the basis for a typology of all possible schemas of distribution. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that the author devotes a good deal of space to the Polish contribution to developing a theory of justice not so much out of sentiment as for the simple reason that that contribution is not small.

More importantly, the author of *Principles* describes the achievements of scholars engaged on theories of justice not as an 'existing' whole but as a rapidly changing field giving rise to discussion. It is apparent that the move from general to specific principles has occurred through criticism, the showing of inconsistencies, and the indicating of paradoxes. Thanks to this, the course of the book can also be followed as an example of the cumulative development of the field. The author additionally points out interesting and unresolved disputes among theoreticians: for instance, between the followers of Rawls' principles and those of the utilitarians.

An additional incentive to reach for Lissowski's book is that the field has not yet solidified and is rapidly developing. Many topics related to justice have only begun to be considered and there is much research waiting to be done. It is far yet to the meeting of theory and empiricism and to determining the adequacy of individual concepts and theories in various social contexts.

In summary, *Principles of Distributive Justice* is not an easy book, but a very important one and it is great that it will now be available to a wider public. In Poland, where it was published in 2008, the question of a formal analysis of the subject of justice has not been studied as intensively as in international circles. In 2013—finally, one might say—the work, translated by Tomasz Bigaj, was made accessible to an international audience by Scholar Publishing House and Barbara Budrich Publishers. It can now make its way into the hands of scholars engaged on the subject of justice—both those who are more interested in considerations of a global or philosophical nature, as well as those who are interested in the subject of local justice. It has undoubtedly reached some of them already, as the book is marked 'temporarily out of stock' in the world's largest online bookstore. It is worth adding that before publication of the book the author's contribution to the theory of justice had found appreciation in international society: the article from the *American Political Science Review* of 1995, entitled 'Choosing the Best Social Order: New Principles of Justice and Normative

Dimensions of Choice', in which Lissowski and Swistak first described their innovative concepts, appeared again in the prestigious publication *Amartya Sen: Critical Assessments of Contemporary Economists*, edited by John Cunningham Wood and Robert D. Wood (Routledge: 2007, vol. 4, pp. 113–154).

Lissowski's work presents the achievements of the theory of justice in an interesting and exhaustive manner, while simultaneously constituting an inspiration for posing further questions, conducting research, and bringing theory closer to practice—abstraction closer to the specifics of human choices. Thanks to the book's clear and precise—if fairly abstract—expression of the criteria, an attempt can be made to describe and analyze what seems to us just or unjust and why. *Principles of Distributive Justice* is decidedly worth reading.

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