

## Distributive Justice

The concept of **justice** is at the heart of any moral/ethical code. The preamble of the Constitution lists "...to *establish Justice*..." as one of the purposes of creating the "more perfect union". Moreover, we pledge allegiance to "*justice for all*". Quite naturally, people differ in their interpretation of what these words mean and more specifically, the role of the government in meeting that goal. The concept of *distributive justice* asks, "according to what principle should we as members of a society seek to distribute the material goods (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, medical care) of that society?" Listed below are several concepts of distributive justice that might be applied to what we want in our society. Read them carefully and choose the concept that most closely reflects your personal concept of *distributive justice*.

1. **Distributive Justice as Equality.** Every person in our society should have an equal share of society's benefits.
  - a. The distribution of these benefits should be left to the private sector and the moral conscience of individuals.
  - b. The government should have a role in ensuring these benefits are equally distributed.
2. **Distributive Justice Based on Contributions.** Benefits should be based strictly on one's contribution to the goals of her/his group (the firm, society, humanity, etc.). Pay and benefits measure contributions. These are used in turn to obtain society's benefits. If one does not have the means to pay for such benefits, he/she goes without them. The "free market" of economic activities determines who gets what and the government has no obligation, or right, to interfere as long as everyone has a legal opportunity to gain employment.
3. **Distributive Justice Based on Needs and Abilities.** Contributions should be required according to people's abilities and benefits should be distributed according to people's needs.
  - a. Contributions and benefits should be left to the private sector and individual conscience.
  - b. Government should have a role in establishing justice according to this concept.
4. **Distributive Justice as Fairness/Equity.** Each person has a moral right to a *fair* distribution of benefits of a society. This includes, as a minimum, the essentials of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. The higher expectations of those better situated are just/fair if, and only if, they work as part of a scheme that improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society. There must be *fair*, not just *legal*, opportunity to attain advantaged status.
  - a. Benefits and contributions should be left to the private sector and individual conscience.
  - b. The government should have a role in ensuring a fair distribution of benefits according to this concept.

### Student Exercise

Referring to the concepts of **distributive justice** on the previous page, identify the concept which you believe best reflects the values of the following:

Your	Today's Constitution	Society at Large	Current Government Policy
_____	_____	_____	_____

Apply the concepts to the following specific benefits:

	Yours	Today's Constitution	Society	Current Government Policy
1.Housing	_____	_____	_____	_____
2.Health Care	_____	_____	_____	_____
3.Child Subsidies*	_____	_____	_____	_____
4.Education	_____	_____	_____	_____
5.Income Distribution**	_____	_____	_____	_____
6.Equal Opportunity	_____	_____	_____	_____

What are the policy implications of your selections?

If the government is to be involved, which level of government is most appropriate?

Where does a progressive income tax policy/estate tax fit in the quest for distributive justice?

Do disadvantaged groups get a fair shake?

Is some sort of affirmative action justified to compensate for circumstances beyond the control of the individual? If so, what circumstances call for such action?

Would you apply your personal values to the whole of humanity rather than just to U.S. citizens? What does your religion teach about this?

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\* This includes Aid for Dependent Children and other subsidies for under-privileged children.

\*\* This includes such things as welfare payments, tax-deductible home mortgage interest, minimum wage, etc.