Original Research Article

Theory of Justice: A Cross-Cultural Philosophical Perspective

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| **Abstract** |

The study of the theory of justice has long been a central focus in legal and political philosophy. However, modern academic discourse is often dominated by Western thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and Robert Nozick, who emphasize utilitarian, egalitarian, and libertarian perspectives on justice, respectively. This paper seeks to broaden these perspectives by presenting perspectives on justice from Asian philosophical traditions, particularly China, through the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. This approach aims to demonstrate that justice can be understood not only structurally and institutionally, but also morally and relationally. In Confucius's view, justice is rooted in benevolence (ren), moral fairness (yi), and social order (li), where harmony between individuals is the ultimate goal of society. Mencius reinforced this view by asserting that justice arises from human innate goodness and empathy for the suffering of others, while Xunzi emphasized the importance of moral education and a strict social order to curb human evil tendencies. All three-position justice as the result of character formation and moral responsibility, not simply the application of formal law. When compared with Rawls, it is clear that Confucian theory of justice places greater emphasis on the formation of just individuals, rather than simply a just system. Rawls emphasizes procedural justice and equality of rights, while Confucius emphasizes social harmony and personal virtue. Thus, this paper asserts that there is no single and perfect theory of justice; justice must be understood as a cross-cultural dialogue between structure and morality, between the rational West and the ethical East. A synthesis of the two can serve as the basis for developing a more humane, contextual, and relevant concept of justice for contemporary global society.

Keywords: Justice, Philosophy, Social Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Justice is a fundamental concept in philosophy, ethics, and politics. It has been a topic of debate since ancient times. Imagine the classic analogy from Indian tradition: six blind men touching an elephant. One touches the trunk and says it resembles a snake, another the ears are like a fan, the legs are like trees, and so on. The same is true of justice—definitions are often partial, depending on individual or cultural perspectives. This demonstrates that understandings of justice are not absolute but are influenced by philosophical, social, and historical contexts.

In Western philosophy, Aristotle distinguished between universal justice (the overall virtue of human relations) and particular justice (fair distribution based on merit). The classic definition of Roman law by Emperor Justinian [1] states that justice is "the constant and eternal understanding of giving each person his due" (suum cuique tribuere). However, ambiguity remains: What does "right" mean? Does justice focus on the end-state justice, the process (procedural justice), or history (historical justice)? Does it emphasize equality, need, merit, or recognition?

The diversity of perspectives on justice can be categorized as follows [2]:
1. ***Conservative vs. Ideal***: Conservative approaches maintain existing norms (e.g., David Hume's theory of property rights as social

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[1] Michael J Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, 1. paperback ed (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

[2] Anthony Walsh, Craig Hemmens, and Marianne Hudson, *Law, Justice, and Society: A Sociolegal Introduction*, Sixth edition. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Citation: Sri Suneki & Toebagus Galang Windi Pratama (2026). Theory of Justice: A Cross-Cultural Philosophical Perspective. *J Adv Educ Philos, 10*(2): 18-24.

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conventions), while ideal approaches call for change toward principles such as equality or liberty.

2. ***Corrective vs. Distributive***: Corrective approaches repair wrongs between two parties (e.g., restitution for victims), while distributive approaches divide resources among many parties.

3. ***Procedural vs. Substantive***: Procedural approaches focus on fair processes (such as due process rights), while substantive approaches focus on outcomes.

4. ***Comparative vs. non-comparative*** approaches compare relative proportions (e.g., relative equality), while non-comparative approaches focus on individuals' absolute needs.

This diversity demonstrates that justice is not a single concept, but a collection of interrelated and often conflicting ideas, such as in issues of economic inequality or discrimination. In this paper, the author focuses on three main theories: John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism [3], John Rawls' justice as fairness [4], and Robert Nozick's entitlement theory [5]. This analysis is inspired by Karen Lebacqz's book, Six Theories of Justice [6], which discusses six theories of justice—including utilitarianism, Rawls's social contract, and Nozick's entitlement—plus theological perspectives such as liberationism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. The author also references original works such as Mill's Utilitarianism, Rawls's A Theory of Justice, and Nozick's Anarchy, State, and Utopia, as well as Confucius's The Analects (Lunyu) as a Portrayal of Asian Philosophy for comparison.

Main Problem
Based on this background, the main problem of this paper is: How do the conceptual theories of justice in the Western philosophical tradition (Mill, Rawls, and Nozick) compare with the perspectives of justice in Asian philosophy (Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi), and how are they relevant in developing a more comprehensive and contextual concept of justice?

RESEARCH METHOD
This research uses a normative juridical research method, focusing on the study of legal norms, principles, and doctrines through a conceptual and comparative approach [7].

The data sources used are primary and secondary legal materials, specifically classical and contemporary works in the field of legal philosophy and justice theory, such as Mill's Utilitarianism, Rawls's A Theory of Justice, Nozick's Anarchy, State, and Utopia, and Confucius's Analects, as well as other supporting literature.

The analysis was conducted qualitatively by examining the argumentative construction of each theory, identifying points of difference and intersection, and formulating a normative synthesis as a theoretical reflection on the development of the concept of justice in the context of contemporary global society.

DISCUSSION
Part 1: John Stuart Mill's Utilitarian Theory
John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was an English philosopher, economist, and political thinker who had a significant influence on the development of modern moral and political philosophy, particularly within the liberal tradition. He was the son of James Mill, a devoted follower of Jeremy Bentham, who educated him strictly in rational and utilitarian principles from childhood. Mill had mastered Greek and Latin by the age of eight and studied Aristotelian logic and political economy in his teens.

This rigorous and intellectual upbringing made Mill a rational thinker, but also led to an emotional crisis at the age of twenty. He began to question the mechanistic aspects of Bentham's utilitarianism, which emphasized only the quantity of happiness, ignoring the quality of human experience. This personal experience led him to revise and humanize utilitarianism by adding ethical and psychological dimensions.

Throughout his career, Mill worked for the East India Company for 35 years and later became a member of the British Parliament. He actively advocated for various social reforms, including women's rights, freedom of thought, and universal education. Some of his landmark works include On Liberty (1859), Utilitarianism (1861), and The Subjection of Women (1869). In Utilitarianism, mill perfected Bentham's theory by asserting that happiness is not only measured by the amount of pleasure, but also by its quality, so that morality must consider the noble values that distinguish humans from other creatures.

Mill's utilitarianism rests on the "principle of utility" or "greatest happiness principle," which states that an action is right to the extent that it increases pleasure and reduces pain for the greatest number of

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3 John Stuart Mill and George Sher, *Utilitarianism: And the 1868 Speech on Capital Punishment*, 2. ed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publ. Co, 2001).

4 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Rev. ed., 5.-6. printing (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).

5 Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Philadelphia, Pa: Basic Books, 2013).

6 Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1986).

7 Syafliansah et al., *Metode Penelitian Hukum*, 2025.

people, and wrong if it produces the opposite effect. Happiness here is understood as the only thing with intrinsic value, while other things are valuable only insofar as they contribute to that happiness.

Unlike Bentham, who emphasized quantitative values, Mill introduced a distinction between lower pleasures—such as physical pleasures and biological needs—and higher pleasures—such as intellectual, moral, and aesthetic activities. He argued that a rational person would choose higher pleasures because they provide more meaningful and lasting satisfaction. He wrote: "It is better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied swine."

This statement demonstrates that a person's moral and intellectual qualities are the primary criteria for assessing true happiness.

In the context of justice, Mill viewed justice as an integral part of utilitarianism, not a separate goal. Justice encompasses perfect duties such as the rights to security, property, and basic liberties, because their violation causes widespread social suffering. According to Mill, the rules of justice are general principles that, when consistently applied, maximize long-term utility.

In terms of distribution, utilitarianism permits economic inequality as long as it contributes to the improvement of collective well-being. For example, financial rewards for innovators can be considered just because they encourage progress, ultimately increasing societal happiness. However, because marginal utility is diminishing—where a unit of money means more to the poor than to the rich—utilitarianism also supports progressive redistribution policies to alleviate the suffering caused by poverty.

For example, in a society with limited resources, implementing a progressive tax to fund public education is considered utilitarian because the resulting social benefits (enhancing human capacity and alleviating poverty) far outweigh the financial inconvenience experienced by the rich. Therefore, the theory is consequentialist, judging the morality of an action based on its outcome, not the actor's intentions—in line with David Hume's view that justice arises from conditions of scarcity and the need for social cooperation.

Despite its significant influence, Mill's utilitarian theory has not escaped criticism. Some of the main criticisms include:

1. **Lack of sensitivity to the individual.** Aggregation of social happiness tends to ignore individual rights and suffering. In Rawls's terms, utilitarianism fails to consider the "separateness of persons," as total well-being can increase even if some individuals are severely disadvantaged.

2. **Vulnerable to the Tyranny of the Majority.** The principle of "greatest happiness for the greatest number" has the potential to justify violations of minority rights if it is perceived to benefit the majority. Rawls and Nozick consider this a violation of the principle of justice, which places each individual as an end, not a means.

3. **Difficulty in Subjective Measurement.** Happiness is subjective and difficult to measure objectively. Justice, on the other hand, often demands certainty and equality that can be legally and socially verified.

Furthermore, Lebacqz criticized Mill's utilitarianism for ignoring the theological dimension and human dignity, which should be the basis of universal morality. From a Kantian deontological perspective, utilitarianism is seen as reducing humans to means for collective happiness, rather than ends in themselves. However, Mill attempted to address this criticism by expanding the concept of "higher pleasure," encompassing moral values and human dignity as components of true happiness.

A modern application of this theory can be found in mandatory vaccination policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, where restrictions on individual freedom are justified for the greater good of public health. However, this policy also demonstrates a paradox in Mill's thinking, as in On Liberty, he emphasized the importance of individual autonomy and the limits of state power over the human body and mind.

Thus, John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism occupies a crucial position in legal philosophy discourse because it combines moral rationality, public interest, and empirical considerations in evaluating actions. While not without its flaws, this theory remains relevant in formulating public policies aimed at balancing individual freedom with collective well-being.

Part 2: John Rawls's Theory of Justice.
John Bordley Rawls (1921–2002) was an American political philosopher who taught at Harvard University and is considered one of the most influential figures in 20th-century political philosophy. His experiences as a soldier in World War II, including witnessing the suffering and injustice caused by war, shaped his views on social justice. Rawls was deeply influenced by the ethics of Immanuel Kant and the social contract tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. His seminal work, A Theory of Justice (1971), revitalized social contract theory in a modern context and became a cornerstone of contemporary political philosophy. He later refined his ideas through Political Liberalism (1993) and Justice as Fairness: A Restatement (2001), which focused on the issue of pluralism in democratic societies. According to Karen Lebacqz, Rawls's theory can be understood as an "egalitarian contract" aimed at protecting the most vulnerable in society.

Rawls developed a hypothetical model called the "original position," in which rational individuals devise principles of justice behind a "veil of ignorance." Under these conditions, a person is unaware of their social status, talents, wealth, or fate, so decisions are neutral and fair. This mechanism reflects a Kantian approach that places moral rationality above self-interest.

From this mental experiment, Rawls derived two main principles of justice:

1. The Principle of Equal Basic Liberties. Every individual has the right to the fullest possible basic liberties as long as those liberties do not infringe on the equal rights of others. Examples include freedom of speech, property rights, and political participation.
2. The Principle of Difference and Equality of Opportunity, namely: (a) All social and economic positions should be open to all with equal opportunity, and (b) Social inequality can only be justified if it provides the greatest benefit to the least advantaged (difference principle).

These two principles are hierarchical: liberty has first priority, followed by equality of opportunity, and then the difference principle. Rawls calls his approach "justice as fairness," emphasizing that justice is not merely the outcome, but also the fair process of decision-making. The "maximum" principle is used to maximize the position of the least advantaged. For example, CEO salary disparities are acceptable if they create jobs and increase workers' wages. In the modern context, this theory is often associated with support for Universal Basic Income (UBI) policies as social protection in the age of automation.

Rawls rejects classical utilitarianism, as proposed by John Stuart Mill, because it ignores the "separateness of persons." He argues that utilitarianism can justify the sacrifice of individuals for the happiness of the majority, even unjust practices like slavery, as long as it produces the highest total benefit. This view violates the moral principle that every human being has dignity and should not be used as a means for others' ends. Furthermore, utilitarianism ignores the distributive aspect of justice, as it only assesses aggregate happiness without considering who benefits from it.

Rawls's theory has also been criticized, as follows:

1. G.A. Cohen considers Rawls's theory inconsistent because it limits the principle of justice to institutions, while individuals remain free to negotiate personal interests such as high wages.
2. Susan Moller Okin accuses Rawls of ignoring gender inequities that occur in private spheres such as the patriarchal family.
3. Charles Mills calls Rawls's theory a form of "racial fantasy" because it fails to take into account the history of racism and real racial inequality.
4. In The Law of Peoples (1999), Rawls extends his theory to the global level, but has been criticized for being too permissive toward authoritarian regimes in the name of international stability.

Nevertheless, Rawls's intellectual legacy remains profound. His deeply Kantian, idealistic, and constructivist philosophy provides a moral framework for reconciling liberty and equality in modern society [8]. Although considered too abstract and ahistorical, Rawls's theory remains a key foundation in debates about political justice to this day.

Part III: Robert Nozick's Entitlement Theory

Robert Nozick (1938–2002) was an American political philosopher who taught at Harvard University and is considered one of the leading figures in modern libertarianism. Originally a left-anarchist, he shifted to right-liberal thinking after studying John Locke's theory of property rights. His landmark work, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974), was written as a direct response to John Rawls's A Theory of Justice, defending the idea of a minimal state and individual freedom from state intervention.

In addition to political philosophy, Nozick also wrote on epistemology, ethics, and scientific theory. He died in 2002 from cancer. Karen Lebacqz described Nozick's position as the antithesis of Rawls: while Rawls emphasized distributive justice and protection of the weak, Nozick emphasized individual rights and property freedom as the moral foundation of a just society.

Nozick proposed a theory of historical and procedural justice, known as Entitlement Theory. According to him, distribution is considered just not because it follows a particular pattern (e.g., equality or meritocracy), but because it goes through a fair process. Justice in property is determined by three principles:

1. **The Principle of Just Acquisition.** A person is entitled to property if they acquire it through legitimate means, for example, through labor or combining labor with resources not already owned by anyone else (referring to Locke's theory).
2. **The Principle of Just Transfer.** Ownership is legitimate if it is obtained through a voluntary transaction between the parties who have the right.

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[8] Harry Halpin, "Artificial Intelligence versus Collective Intelligence," *AI & SOCIETY*, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02240-x.

3. **The Principle of Rectification.** If a past injustice has occurred, such as theft or confiscation, compensation must be provided to restore ownership to fairness.

Nozick rejects theories of patterned distribution such as equality or utilitarianism, because he believes such patterns require the state to continually intervene to "maintain balance," which violates individual freedom.

His famous argument, the "Wilt Chamberlain Argument," illustrates that from an initial just distribution (D1), when people voluntarily pay to watch Chamberlain play basketball, a new distribution (D2) emerges that is unequal but still just. This pattern of equality can only be maintained by restricting freedom of choice—which, for Nozick, is a form of injustice.

His philosophy is rooted in Lockean natural rights, namely the natural rights to life, liberty, and property. The state, according to Nozick, emerges evolutionary through the "invisible hand" mechanism of interactions between individuals seeking to protect themselves and their rights.

Nozick introduced the concept of the minimal state, a state whose function is limited to protecting the basic rights of citizens from violence, theft, and fraud through the institutions of the police, courts, and the military.

Any form of redistribution, such as progressive taxation for social welfare, is considered equivalent to forced labor, as it appropriates the fruits of individual labor for the benefit of others. He rejects full anarcho-capitalism because without minimal authority, society would descend into chaos, driven by competing dominant security agencies. In the modern context, Nozick supports deregulation and free market mechanisms as the most efficient way to reduce poverty through economic growth, rather than through redistributive policies.

Against John Stuart Mill, Nozick rejects utilitarianism because it is considered to sacrifice individual rights for the sake of aggregate happiness. He believes it is unjust if laws or policies sacrifice innocent individuals for the greater social good.

Meanwhile, against John Rawls, Nozick considers the principle of difference to be arbitrary. He rejects the idea that the state has the right to engineer natural inequalities, because an individual's talents and work are not public property. Rawls's concept of the "veil of ignorance" has also been criticized as too idealistic, ignoring the reality of real individual differences in society.

Several philosophers have highlighted the weaknesses of entitlement theory, including the following:
1. Murray Rothbard believes that Nozick's minimal state cannot be morally pure, because every state is a monopoly on violence.
2. G.A. Cohen criticizes Nozick for ignoring historical injustices such as colonialism and economic exploitation.
3. Thomas Pogge warned that this theory could legitimize a new form of modern feudalism, in which wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small elite.
4. John Rawls himself believed that uncontrolled economic freedom would lead to extreme inequality that would threaten social stability.

Philosophically, Nozick's theory represents extreme individualism that often ignores the social dimension and interdependence of human beings, making it difficult to apply in the broader context of social justice.

Comparison, Inter-Theoretic Critique, and Philosophical Implications

The three theories of justice—Mill, Rawls, and Nozick—represent different strands of the Western ideological spectrum. Mill stands for utilitarian consequentialism, which assesses justice in terms of the greatest happiness outcome; Rawls for egalitarian constructivism, which emphasizes a just social structure for the weak; while Nozick emphasizes historical libertarianism, which assesses justice in terms of the process of acquiring rights.

If we compare them to holding the same "parts of an elephant," Mill holds the "body" (total outcome), Rawls the "legs" (the foundation of equality), and Nozick the "trunk" (individual liberty).

The debate between them reveals fundamental contradictions:
1. **Mill vs. Rawls–Nozick:** Utilitarianism is seen as sacrificing rights (Rawls) and process (Nozick).
2. **Rawls vs. Nozick:** Rawls views entitlement justice as potentially perpetuating inequality; Nozick considers Rawls's redistribution to violate liberty.
3. **Nozick vs. Mill:** Nozick rejects utilitarianism because it views total outcomes without regard for legitimate property rights.

Lebacqz (1986) interprets the three theories through theological analogy: Mill is pragmatic, like general social ethics, Rawls approaches the Catholic tradition with concern for the poor, and Nozick reflects the Protestant spirit, emphasizing personal responsibility

and rights. Meanwhile, Amartya Sen [9], in The Idea of Justice, offers an alternative by focusing on the capability approach—justice as the real freedom to live a valuable life, not merely formal rights (Rawls) or property rights (Nozick).

In the context of contemporary global justice—such as economic inequality and climate change—the three theories point in different directions:

1. Mill supports global policies that maximize total benefits;
2. Rawls emphasizes aid and redistribution for poor countries;
3. Nozick relies on market innovation for efficient solutions.

It is undeniable that Western philosophical theories dominate the field of philosophical scholarship today. But what about the views of Eastern philosophers on justice? In contrast to the views of Western philosophers, Asian philosophy tends to prioritize racial, gender, and ecological justice, steeped in tradition, as equally important moral dimensions to study.

Theories of Justice in Asia: Confucius

Confucius (Kong Fuzi, 551–479 BC) was a philosopher, educator, and statesman from the State of Lu, a region now part of Shandong Province, China. He lived during the Zhou Dynasty, which was experiencing political and moral disintegration. In response to this turmoil, Confucius developed a system of social and political ethics focused on the formation of virtuous individuals (junzi) and a harmonious social order. His teachings were codified by his students in the Analects (Lunyu), which contains dialogues, moral advice, and reflections on daily life. Although he held little political office during his lifetime, his thought became a major foundation for the social and legal systems of East Asia for over two millennia. The concept of justice in Confucian thought is not formulated in a legalistic manner as in the Western tradition, but rather through morality and social relations. Two key concepts shape his view: Ren (仁) and Yi (义) [10].

1. Ren (仁) means humanity or moral virtue. A person with ren behaves with compassion, empathy, and concern for others. Justice, in this context, is born of kindness and humanity.
2. Yi (义) means moral fairness or ethical righteousness. It requires one to act not for personal gain (li 利), but because it is morally right.

For Confucius, true justice is not simply the application of the law, but actions that reflect morality in social relationships. He emphasized the importance of Li (礼)—rules of propriety and social rituals—as a mechanism for maintaining societal harmony. Each individual should fulfill their role according to their social standing: rulers' rule with benevolence, subjects obey with respect, children are filial to their parents, and so on. Thus, justice is realized when the social order is in harmony with inner morality.

This Confucian concept of justice later influenced the ancient Chinese legal and governmental system, which prioritized official morality over the power of positive law. In modern philosophy, Confucian values have been revived in the discourse of communitarianism, which rejects extreme individualism and emphasizes the importance of moral community as the basis for social justice.

Justice According to Mencius and Xunzi

Two great successors of Confucianism, Mencius (Mengzi, 372–289 BC) and Xunzi (310–235 BC), interpreted the concept of justice in different ways.

1. Mencius argued that humans are inherently good (xing shan, 性善). He introduced the concept of the four seeds of virtue—ren (compassion), yi (righteousness), li (property), and zhi (wisdom). He believed that justice arises from a human conscience that empathizes with the suffering of others. Therefore, a just government must prioritize the welfare of the people and not rule by force. He wrote: "The people are the foundation of the state; the state stands because of the people, and falls because of their suffering." Thus, justice for Mencius is moral and empathetic, growing from within humans.
2. Xunzi, on the other hand, argued that humans are inherently evil (xing e, 性恶). He believes that justice does not arise naturally, but rather through education and moral conditioning guided by Li (social rules) and law. He believes that justice is structural and normative, not spontaneously born of conscience. A just government must create an educational and legal system that guides people's behavior toward virtue.

This distinction illustrates two major currents in Eastern philosophy: justice as inner virtue (Mencius) and justice as social order (Xunzi).

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9 Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2011).

10 Pattamawadee Sankheangaew *et al.,* "Lifelong Learning in Confucius Philosophical Perspective,"

Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change, November 25, 2025, 1350–60, https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i2.1803.

Comparison with John Rawls's Theory of Justice

Compared to modern Western theories of justice such as John Rawls's, the fundamental difference lies in their moral foundations and social orientation [11]. Rawls defines justice as fairness—a system that is just for all, achieved through a rational social contract behind the "veil of ignorance." Justice, for him, is institutional, procedural, and egalitarian, emphasizing formal structures that guarantee equal rights.

Meanwhile, in Confucianism, justice does not arise from a social contract or formal equality, but rather from moral responsibility within hierarchical yet harmonious social relationships. Confucius believes that a just order can only be achieved if everyone behaves according to their moral virtues, not simply by following the law. While Rawls focuses on just rules for individuals, Confucius focuses on the formation of just individuals within a moral community. Thus, Rawls locates justice in social structures, while Confucianism locates it in human character.

CONCLUSION

No theory of justice is perfect; each capture only a portion of this highly complex concept. Mill offers pragmatic flexibility through utilitarianism, Rawls presents an egalitarian framework for modern democracy, and Nozick emphasizes the importance of individual liberty as a limit to state power. Combining these elements—such as Rawls's proceduralism with Nozick's emphasis on individual rights—can produce hybrid models, such as a relational theory of justice that views justice as the result of dynamic social interactions.

However, Asian philosophy, particularly Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, broadens the horizon by emphasizing the moral and relational dimensions of justice. For them, justice depends not only on institutional structures or the distribution of rights but also on the formation of human character and social harmony. True justice emerges when individuals act with benevolence (ren), moral fairness (yi), and awareness of their role in society (li). This perspective reminds us that justice is not merely a matter of systems, but also a matter of the heart and moral responsibility.

Thus, justice should be understood as a dialogue across civilizations, not a single dogma. Combining Western rationality with Eastern moral wisdom opens up opportunities to build a society that is not only structurally just but also ethically virtuous—a justice that is alive, humane, and rooted in empathy.

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