

ASHLEY
KENNEDY

Justice in Action

Brooke A. Ackerly (2018). *Just Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press).

•

Ackerly's work is a welcome addition to the literature on global justice. It stands out from other works, too: Ackerly is, for the most part, not concerned with the details of whether or why a situation is unjust, but instead primarily with what we should do to address injustices around the globe (and how we should do it). To that end, she proposes a political, rather than a theoretical, theory of injustice. It is her view that it is less important that we understand all of the reasons for an injustice and more important that we, together, as a political community, work to address it. Her book, then, is a call to political action for everyone: academics, activists and citizens alike.

The book is divided into three parts. In Part 1, Ackerly addresses the politics of injustice, where she asks the question, 'What is injustice?' In Part 2 she answers the question, 'How do we know what to do about it?' by proposing a feminist critical methodology for addressing injustice, and in Part 3 she proposes a human rights theory for taking responsibility for what she calls 'injustice itself.' The distinction between 'injustice' and 'injustice itself' plays an important role in the theory Ackerly proposes by enabling us to distinguish between instances of injustice and instances of mere misfortune. According to Ackerly, '[i]njustice itself is the exploitable power inequalities, social epistemologies, and normalization that foster and render invisible (except to those who experience them) all manner of injustices' (2018: 7) while an instance of injustice is the result of injustice itself. In other words, the term 'injustice itself' refers to underlying power structures that cause instances of injustice. Further, and interestingly, what this means is that injustice itself often conceals instances of injustice – something that we might view as a tragedy, such as a famine, might (and nearly always does) contain elements not only of misfortune, but also elements of injustice itself – of structural power imbalances that contribute to the tragedy. Thus, in order to address instances of injustice we must be aware of injustice itself.

This does not mean, however, that we must have a full understanding of the complex power mechanism(s) behind an instance of injustice before we can act to address it. On the contrary, Ackerly explicitly rejects what is known as the ‘cognitive condition’ of moral responsibility by arguing that ‘it is [...] wrong to imply that taking responsibility for injustice depends on understanding the extent to which injustice is a function of forces we can perceive and understand’ (*ibid.*:105), and instead argues that ‘because incomplete knowledge is a fact of life and never a reason to set aside concerns about injustice’ (*ibid.*: 107), we must act to address an instance of injustice as soon as we recognize it. This involves not only ‘working toward a political community able to take on emergent manifestations of injustice itself,’ but also ‘looking consistently to those in struggle to develop the means to address’ it (*ibid.*: 46).

By drawing on her own extensive field research experience in Bangladesh, Ackerly aims to show us what all of this means in actual everyday practice. The first thing that it means is that we must be attentive not just to training ourselves to recognize injustice but also to listening to and being aware of people’s experience of injustice. Our collective political responses to injustice must themselves be just, Ackerly argues, and this is only possible insofar as we take into account the lived experience of those who themselves are suffering the injustice. That is, our political actions against injustice must be accountable to and informed by those who experience the injustice. When they are, they are more likely to address both the causes and the consequences of the injustice.

The second thing that this means is that we should understand that there is a relationship between justice and political action. In particular, according to Ackerly, there is a relationship between human rights and political action. On her view, human rights are not merely theoretical entities, but instead, ‘having rights means exercising them, enjoying them, and using them to transform exploitable power inequalities’ (*ibid.*: 206).

While the book does an excellent job of arguing for action over reflection, and draws on specific examples to support this argument, still, at least this reader came away with questions unanswered. Ackerly makes a good attempt at answering the questions of ‘What should we do?’ and ‘How should we do it?’ when it comes to addressing injustice, but these aren’t the sorts of questions that lend themselves to step by step answers, which can at first feel unfulfilling. Ackerly’s book, though, is well worth reading. Through and through, it is a call to action and a reminder that justice first and foremost requires action informed by epistemic modesty. Though we won’t always understand all of the reasons behind an injustice, still we are called to act, in just ways, to address it. And we must not allow philosophical theorizing to stand in the way of that action.

Ashley Kennedy
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Honors College of Florida Atlantic University
email: kennedy@fau.edu



Bibliography

Ackerly BA (2018). *Just Responsibility: A Human Rights Theory of Global Justice* Oxford: Oxford University Press)