

# Preface

The last words of the American Pledge of Allegiance are “with liberty and justice for all.” These are powerful words. They stir our souls and help us remember what is best about America. They also provide the opportunity to ask, are we living up to this ideal? And would it be possible to have not just a nation, but a world, with liberty and justice for all? What would a world of liberty and justice for all be like?

A world of liberty and justice for all would be a world of security and choices, a world of freedom, possibility, variety and love. Every person would have opportunities: choices about where to live, with whom to affiliate, what line of work to pursue. People would find meaning in their lives. Effort would be rewarded with the possibility of success, though not a guarantee. People would be reasonably secure against attacks on their persons and possessions. Governments would provide the public services that people regarded as worth their costs, and would not levy oppressive taxes or enforce overly confining regulations. Communities would differ from one another, so that people would have choices about the rules to live by. The global environment that we all share would be respected by all and would be managed by a process in which all could participate. Nations would be at peace with one another.

The world today is so very far from liberty and justice for all. There are still pockets of slavery in the world, places where women are forced to work in the sex trade or forced into marriages against their will, where men are forced to serve as soldiers. Crime, wars and terrorism all contribute to insecurity. Millions of people are born into grinding poverty that offers almost no hope of escape. Many government officials have no regard for the public and use their offices only to enrich themselves at the expense of the public. The environment deteriorates as people pollute and hunt species to extinction without regard for the consequences. Nations are in conflict with one another.

Still there are places where the world is making progress. Nowhere is slavery legal. There is a general recognition among nations of an obligation to provide refuge to those who have good reasons to fear persecution in their native countries. The United Nations provides a forum where standards of good conduct for nations are developed, and where nations are sometimes able to resolve their differences. When scientists realized that emissions of certain gasses destroy the protective ozone layer in the upper atmosphere, nations cooperated to greatly reduce those emissions. Yet this progress is very slow. Why?

The principal obstacle to more rapid progress toward liberty and justice for all is the lack of a good understanding of justice. The most serious problems that the world faces—the problems of poverty, environmental degradation, and war—are all problems that arise because people appropriate for themselves more than they should. The world needs a common understanding of the limits of what it is proper for people to appropriate for themselves—a theory of justice.

The best prospect for a common understanding of justice and for a world that works, I shall argue, lies in adherence to two interrelated principles of justice:

1. People have rights to themselves.
2. All people have equal rights to natural opportunities.

This book explains what these principles mean, why they describe a good theory of justice, and what they imply.