

Cynthia Willet

The soul of justice

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Willet argues that we do not need simply to enact more fully Enlightenment or classically liberal values of individuality, autonomy, equality, freedom, and deliberation. Instead, we need different values consistent with global interdependencies and the “social eros” of human identity and individuality.

How shall we understand injustice and what should we do about it?

If we substitute history and contingency for metaphysics and necessity, we will turn away from pessimism and optimism, and we will turn toward pragmatic meliorism. We won't ask if things are bad or good--which way is the way it is or will be?--but instead ask how we might act without any metaphysical guarantee of success to establish a more just global society.

This is the underlying political concern of Cynthia Willett's original, ambitious, timely *The Soul of Justice*. This book primarily seeks to create a way of thinking that makes possible more just social lives, practices, arrangements, and institutions. Accordingly, it is not primarily *about* Gilligan and Habermas (Part I), Freud, Marcuse, and Irigaray (Part II), or Patricia Hill Collins, Frederick Douglass, or Toni Morrison (Part III); instead, it moves *through* these writers--moves *by means* of these writers--in an effort to articulate a post-liberal view of the self, its individuality and its freedom, and social justice.

So, what is to be done?

Willet argues that we do not need simply to enact more fully Enlightenment or classically liberal values of individuality, autonomy, equality, freedom, and deliberation. Instead, we need different values consistent with global interdependencies and the “social eros” of human identity and individuality: “My central contention is that while liberal theory is absolutely right to raise the individual to the ultimate principle of justice, liberalism cannot resolve the contradictions of modern life because of the way in which it conceives of the individual. Based in the Enlightenment, liberalism interprets the person through an oppositional scale with autonomy at one end and dependence at the other” (2).

What follows if this is so? Autonomy would have to be reconstructed or re-understood not as the opposite or absence of (inter)dependency, but rather as a particular kind or subset of (inter)dependency. This points to a large research agenda: the need to understand which interdependencies foster autonomy and which interfere with it, and the need to understand how specific institutions play educational roles and the ways in which they play manipulative roles. However, Willett isn't concerned with reconstructing the notion of autonomy in a theory of justice but, instead, with revaluing the place of autonomy in such a theory. She writes, for

example, that “the valorization of the capacity to make choices undervalues what I will argue to be our more important need, the need to cultivate diverse relationships based on friendship, emotional intimacy, and economic cooperation in a thriving social milieu” (3). This may seem, though, to buy into the very dualisms Willett wants to avoid--reason and emotion, individuality and sociality, and self-interest and communal goods. Are having friendly, intimate, and cooperative relationships really separate from the capacity and exercise of choice? Don't friendship and intimacy and cooperation involve centrally and internally the exercise of choice? Isn't this role of autonomous choice in valuable personal relationships one of the reasons, for example, we don't think of rape as a relationship of personal intimacy? For persons concerned with justice, the problem with Enlightenment liberalism may not be its valorization of the capacity to make choices, as Willett writes, but rather its impoverished, non-social notion of the self to which it attributes this capacity to make choices. From this perspective, today we suffer less from the over-valorization of the choice than we do from its under-valorization, from the prevention of large numbers of persons from developing and, above all, really exercising this capacity. Indeed, the absence of this choice-making may be seen as a key part of “the social pathos” of injustice, and it is a key reason why social justice movements are movements of empowerment, movements that give a voice, a stake, an opportunity, choice to those who have not had it.

The absence of choice-making is also a measure of the distance that social groups must travel to become democratic communities, to reach the soul of justice. In this context, Willett seeks to understand the social pathos of injustice through the category of *hubris*. This is the most distinctive, most original, most engaging feature of the book. Willett understands that she cannot simply import this notion from classical Athens where it was understood as a serious crime of the privileged elite against the poor masses. This Athenian notion of hubris is at odds with a genuinely egalitarian understanding of justice. So, because Athenian democracy failed to develop an egalitarian ethic, Willett locates the soul of justice elsewhere: “An ancient view of democracy reemerges in the African-American context, but in a radically egalitarian guise” (5). She continues: “Sociality, or social eros, and not honor is the origin and goal of the person and the positive core of freedom” (24).

What, then, is the connection between the social bonds of eros and justice? In “the African-American context,” these social bonds, race and class divisions, are themselves contested. This work, Willett summarizes, carries forward “the discussion of eros and hubris through a three-dimensional vision of human identity and social freedom”: “First, these conceptions of identity and freedom reach down deep into the power of the erotic at the core of personality;” “Second, they pose the person as a social event;” and, “Third, we learn from these writers how the child might mature through erotic rites of reconnection rather than stoic rituals of separation” (185-186), how a child might come to inhabit a “home for the extended family of humankind” (202), as Willett writes in illuminating chapters on Douglass and Morrison.

Willett concludes pluralistically, making clear that eros does not demand “perfect reconciliation”:

In our loves and our friendships we seek in the other something that corresponds with our self. We must not expect that the soul of the one is the same as the soul of another. The pathos of

shame and the catharsis of love differ for men and women, for mothers and for their children. We grow in spirit as we seek and find those whose stories we can lay next to our own. These relationships do not require fusion. (225)

I would add: We also may grow in spirit when we seek and find those whose stories we cannot lay next to our own, those whose stories lead us to become different and to tell our own story differently. I would like to think there is room in the soul of justice for pluralism this thoroughgoing. In any case, Willett rightly recognizes that if social relationships do not require fusion, still they make requirements. In the language of traditional liberalism, they require (though they do not guarantee) something like harmony or compatibility or respect or tolerance or equality of opportunity or individual rights or personal freedoms. In the language of *The Soul of Justice*, relationships of growth require that one sings songs of love and that one does not commit the crime of hubris (now understood in an African-American context). But here too, eros in theory cannot guarantee eros in practice; history shows us that lovers, family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers frequently do terrible, even horrific, things to one another. Do these contradictions between erotic just theory and practice indicate something amiss in the principle itself? Or is this principle, like liberal principles, really a hope, a hope for justice yet to be achieved, an ideal? If so, readers of this book will find that they can lay its story next to their own. In doing so, we all may forge anew and more fully the bonds that make us human. The articulation of this task in *The Soul of Justice* is a remarkable achievement.

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