

From the Editors

Justice deals with our relations to others. As a method for moral resolution of conflicting claims, justice has been a perennial occupation for philosophers. Their principal concern of late has been defining the concept and determining how it should be applied. The gauntlet in the justice debate was nonetheless thrown long ago by Thrasymachus in Book I of Plato's *Republic* when he claimed that justice is simply what is advantageous to the stronger. From that time to this, philosophers have tried to reject his assumption and correct that imbalance of power.

Justice is sometimes equated with "lawfulness," but in matters of healthcare it carries a broader meaning of "fairness." In this context the term presupposes conflicting interests and therefore competing claims. As David Hume pointed out, there would be no point in talking about justice except for the limitations of human benevolence and the competition for scarce goods. In other words, giving each person his or her due, as Aristotle defined justice, is always a challenge in an imperfect world.

Aristotle's analysis of justice continues to inform our contemporary discussions on distributive justice in healthcare. Justice, according to Aristotle, has to be understood as meaning fair or proportional treatment, and consists in treating equals equally and unequals unequally. His impartial approach points us in the direction of what the right to equal consideration really means — not that all cases should be treated alike, but that the onus rests on those who would treat them differently to distinguish relevant distinctions. Personal preference, wealth, or status will not do; and when no good grounds can be shown for treating people differently, they clearly ought to be treated alike. The concerns raised today as to why one person or one group is allotted more benefits than another, say in healthcare, is to ask for precisely the kind of justification required by Aristotle.

As in other areas of ethics, although we may agree on higher order principles, such as Aristotle's view that justice requires equal consideration, disagreements inevitably arise over the criteria of relevance — that is, over the rules to be applied. Whether justice as fair or proportional treatment involves protecting people's personal rights, maximizing their welfare, meeting their needs, or rewarding individual merit, are questions that continue to shape our thinking. It is against this theoretical background that the current discussions over healthcare reform, as set forth in this issue's Special Section, must be understood.