"Justice as a Problem: Reconstructing the Philosophical and Civilizational Understanding of Justice in the Contemporary World"
 (Introduction to the book: *An Overview of Key Theoretical Problems in Justice, Published by UniDialogue Publication, 2025*)

Translated Text of the speech by Reza Gholami, the author of the book, delivered at the online book review and critique session on November 25, 2025 (Azer 4, 1404), at the Research Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies.

Before beginning the main discussion, I would like to sincerely thank my colleague, Dr. Abdulmajid Mobaleghi, who organized this event. I am also deeply grateful to the two other professors who kindly accepted to attend and speak at this session. Furthermore, I thank all the respected attendees and esteemed scholars present today.

Introduction: Justice – An Ever-Living Question

Social justice has always been a central, major issue in political thought, ethics, and the humanities. In our contemporary era, this concept is especially important for three reasons:

First: Globalization (meaning close competition combined with convergence) has created huge opportunities, but at the same time, it has produced very deep inequalities.

Second: The industrial world caused a massive wave of injustice. The new technological world, despite all its benefits for human life, has given injustice many hidden, visible, subtle, and complex dimensions.

Third: This point concerns Iran. After the Islamic Revolution, achieving justice became a very serious public demand. However, until today, and despite claims that an Islamic government has been established, Iranian society has not come close to real justice and remains stuck at the level of slogans about justice.

In today's Iran, we do not see:

- a deep understanding of justice,

- a strong will to achieve it,

- serious academic discussions about justice theories and models in universities,

- and certainly no intelligent practical action in this field.

The book *A Look at Key Theoretical Issues in Justice* starts from theoretical problem-identification. It begins where our perception of justice needs to be corrected and deepened, and it clears the way for building ideas and theories of justice.

In fact, this book does not try to create new theories or give final answers to theoretical questions. Instead, it tries to clarify the field of theoretical problems in justice. Because if the problem is not properly understood, no theory can be meaningful or effective.

As Karl Popper said: Science and philosophy move forward only when we identify a problem and turn it into a question.

I should also recall Bertrand Russell's saying: "Philosophy is, more than giving answers, the art of asking the right questions."

The book follows this path through five main parts:

- Chapter 1: Fundamental theoretical problems

- Chapter 2: The link between justice and core values

- Chapter 3: Global justice

- Chapter 4: Application in specialized fields

- Chapter 5: Practical feasibility and implementation

Why Problem-Identification? Why Is Asking the Right Question So Important?

In the philosophical tradition, identifying the problem has sometimes been wrongly seen as just an introduction to theory-building. In reality, it is the very heart of philosophical thinking.

True thinking means asking the right question. Philosophy stays alive only when it can see problems in a new way and redefine them. Heidegger has a beautiful saying: Authentic thinking only appears when questioning stands at its center.

The same is true in the field of justice. Many theories have reached dead ends not because philosophical reason is weak, but because the problem was poorly formulated.

Problem-identification in justice means returning justice to its natural place – the space where ethics, reason, and society talk to each other.

Why Is "Being Problem-Oriented" Essential in Justice?

As mentioned, the history of philosophy of justice shows that most theoretical dead ends come from wrong problem-formulation, not from weak arguments.

When some famous theorists define justice only as "fair distribution of primary goods," they actually reduce the problem of justice to an economic problem – while justice also has moral, cultural, and spiritual dimensions.

This book shows that until we ask: "At what levels is justice a problem?" and "How are these levels connected?" no theory can be comprehensive.

Problem-identification teaches us to avoid useless general statements about justice. Of course, philosophical broad vision is different from empty general talk. Philosophical broad vision has its own role and cannot replace detailed scientific analysis.

I firmly believe that the saying "Understanding the problem is half the solution" is not just a slogan – it is an epistemological truth.

Of course, every researcher looks at a problem through his or her own lens. Therefore, perspectives on problems are naturally very diverse. The researcher's viewpoint, the distance (close or distant), the depth of analysis, and the layer being examined – all affect how the problem is understood and interpreted.

Critics can challenge the problem-identifier about the standpoint from which he sees the issue. They can question how realistic or important that standpoint is. They can point out whether the view is clear or blurred, deep or superficial.

But what a critic cannot deny is the natural plurality of perspectives. This plurality is not a flaw to be removed; it is part of human knowledge and the diversity of viewpoints.

Even more important is understanding how problems are connected to each other and how problems change shape over time. Contemporary problems intersect and create new problems.

Moreover, since society is not static, every problem we observe and analyze is itself changing while we study it.

Naturally, proposed solutions are also diverse. Some people fear this relativity. In my view, we should not fear it – this is the nature of knowledge. Every theory gains more or less value compared to others based on how well it resists criticism and how effective it is in practice.

Based on what I have said:

1. Justice is a multi-layered issue: it cannot be limited only to law, ethics, politics, or economics.

2. Justice problems are historical and context-dependent: what was a problem in 18th-century Europe is different from challenges in the first or second half of the 20th century, and certainly different from every decade of the 21st century.

3. Every theory of justice is a response to specific problems: Rawls' theory was a response to the legitimacy crisis in post-war liberal societies, not necessarily to the crisis of meaning in today's modern societies.

I can claim that in Chapter 1, the book maps the field of problems.

In that chapter, I present dualities such as subjective–objective, moral–legal, individual–collective, and universal–particular not as simple classifications, but as inherent tensions within the very concept of justice. These discussions contain deep insights that are the result of my own original thinking.

Moreover, this problem-centered approach turns the reader from a passive receiver of theories into an active analyst of problems. In other words, the book not only provides answers – it teaches the reader how to ask the right questions.

I should briefly explain the phrase "key issues" in the book's title. A "key issue" is a major problem whose understanding unlocks a whole chain of other problems. Conversely, solving a key issue resolves many scientific puzzles. So I have chosen to focus on those issues that are truly key.

Methodology of the Book: Philosophical Analysis of Justice Issues

The method used in this book is "philosophical analysis of justice issues." Philosophical analysis is different from scientific analysis because:

1. It is foundational,

2. It is broad and holistic,

3. It places great importance on coherence and lack of contradiction.

Philosophical analysis seeks the conceptual foundations and fundamental principles that lie behind all theories and systems of justice. It tries to go to the root of concepts, avoid apparent conflicts between different views, or turn them into a coherent system.

In fact, philosophical analysis of justice issues does not merely describe existing states – it tries to discover the inner logic and rational structure of these issues.

Unlike empirical-scientific approaches that rely on data and observation, this method emphasizes conceptual analysis, logical examination of arguments, and evaluation of intellectual coherence. Therefore, it can provide a solid foundation for deeper and more comprehensive understanding, and opens the way for both more theoretical and more practical discussions.

Accordingly, the analytical method of this book rests on three principles:

1. Systematic analysis of issues: distinguishing between conceptual, moral, institutional, and civilizational levels of justice.

2. Dialectic between issues: recognizing that the moral issue of justice is inseparable from its political or social issue.

3. Civilizational and historical reading: understanding issues within the context of human experience, not in abstract vacuum.

From this perspective, the book draws a kind of "philosophical geopolitics of justice" – a map in which Western thought, Islamic philosophy, and contemporary global questions engage in constructive dialogue.

The Architecture of Issues: Four Interconnected Levels of Analyzing Justice

The book analyzes justice on four interconnected levels:

1. **Conceptual and theoretical level**

    ○ What is justice and its relation to right, good, and law

    ○ Conflict between individual and social justice

    ○ Is justice a universal concept or culture-specific?

2. **Epistemological and moral level**

    ○ Can justice be known and measured, or is it only an inner feeling?

    ○ Relation of justice to virtue and human nature (fitrah)

    ○ Possibility of a global ethics of justice

3. **Institutional and social level**

    ○ Realizing justice in education, health, environment, and science systems

    ○ Justice as an indicator of legitimacy of social institutions

    ○ Connection between justice and public trust
       (For example, Chapter 4 shows how in education systems, the conflict between

parents' freedom to choose schools and equality of educational opportunity is a key theoretical issue that needs moral balance.)

4. **Civilizational and global level**

   ○ Crisis of justice in the modern world: dominance of technology, migration, cultural inequalities

   ○ Global justice in the absence of a shared moral authority

   ○ Reconstructing the concept of global justice around human nature and dignity

These levels are interwoven. Justice is a conceptual network that stretches from individual conscience to institutions, and from the individual to entire civilizations.

The book's logic moves from abstraction to concreteness:
 from foundational concepts (Chapters 1 and 2) → global applications (Chapter 3) → specialized fields (Chapter 4) → practical mechanisms and evaluation (Chapter 5).

Meta-Theory Building: The Position of This Book in Relation to Theories of Justice

A natural question arises: Does this book itself present a new, complete theory of justice, or does it only describe problems?

The answer is: The book is not engaged in classical theory-building. Its goal is **meta-theory building** – that is, it tries to create the necessary conditions and fertile ground so that new theories of justice can emerge on a broader moral and civilizational horizon.

In other words, the book seeks to reconstruct the **logic of theorizability of justice**, not to write one final theory. In this sense, it is an "issue-centered" philosophy rather than an "answer-centered" philosophy.

That said, without intending to, while critiquing certain ideas I have inevitably presented some of my own ideas and made certain judgments along the way.

Dialogue with Rawls: Respect, Re-reading, Critique

One of the most prominent features of the book is its serious and bold engagement with John Rawls's theory of justice. Rawls is without doubt the most important and influential philosopher of justice in the 20th century, and no serious theoretical discussion of justice can avoid confronting him.

The book gives Rawls his due weight – not out of blind following, but out of methodological necessity, because Rawls has become the central reference point in modern philosophy of justice.

The five-fold critique of Rawls presented in detail in Chapter 1 serves as the launching point for my alternative approach.

I have taken the liberty, after analyzing Rawls's limitations, to gradually build my own moral-civilizational framework in the later chapters.

Of course, some may say that certain of my criticisms stem from an incomplete understanding of Rawls. If that is the case, I accept it with full humility – understanding Rawls is not easy, and I am nothing more than a student of political philosophy. I do not rule out the possibility of mistakes in my interpretation.

Nevertheless, the five limitations or shortcomings I have identified in Rawls's theory are as follows:

1. **Ontological Critique**
   Rawls defines the human being behind the "veil of ignorance" – a person without history, culture, or moral identity. This model detaches justice from the real world. In contrast, this book insists that the real human being is a moral and cultural creature; justice must be understood within actual human life, not in abstract assumptions.

2. **Epistemological Critique**
   Rawls assumes that reason alone is sufficient to arrive at principles of justice. This rationalist approach ignores the role of moral intuition, lived experience, and historical wisdom. The present book proposes a multi-source epistemology in which reason, conscience, lived experience, and revelation stand together.

3. **Moral Critique**
   Rawlsian justice is defined in terms of "fairness," but fairness detached from ethics and virtue leads to relativism. The book argues that justice is first and foremost a moral virtue that must arise from human conscience and innate nature (fitrah).

4. **Cultural-Civilizational Critique**
   Rawls builds a supposedly universal theory on liberal-Western cultural assumptions. In reality, justice takes on meaning within different civilizational contexts. With an intercultural perspective, the book sees justice as a civilizational concept that must facilitate dialogue among traditions, religions, and cultures.

5. **Practical-Applied Critique**
   Rawls limits justice to the basic structure of society and the distribution of scarce resources. The book, however, searches for justice in education, health, science,

environment, and public ethics.

Thus, the book adopts a critical yet constructive stance toward Rawls: neither total rejection nor complete acceptance, but rather a reconstruction of the theory of justice on a more moral, spiritual, and civilizational level.

Justice on an Intercultural Horizon: Beyond Western Centrism

One of the major innovations of this book is its attempt to reconstruct the discourse of justice within the framework of **intercultural philosophy**. This effort operates on four levels:

First: Critique of Cultural Centrism in Dominant Theories
Most contemporary theories of justice – from Rawls to Habermas – despite claiming universality, are built on liberal-Western premises. Concepts such as individualism, contractual rationalism, and the priority of right over good are all reflections of a particular historical experience, not eternal truths. I consider modern concepts very important and life-giving, yet from an intercultural viewpoint I challenge their centrality.

For example, in Chapter 2, by introducing the Quranic concept of **ihsan** (excellence/benevolence) as a horizon beyond mere justice, I show that in the Islamic tradition justice is not defined only in terms of reciprocal rights, but is understood in connection with moral virtues and spiritual responsibility. This view does not negate justice; it completes it.

Second: Methodology of Civilizational Dialogue
The book proposes a method that can be called **"civilizational hermeneutics of justice"**. In this method:

- Every cultural tradition has its own conceptual resources for understanding justice

- These resources are placed in dialogue, not opposition

- The goal is not homogenization, but **discovering a shared moral core** that can serve as the foundation for global justice
  In Chapter 3, I show through issues such as migration and climate change that without this intercultural dialogue, a workable theory of global justice is impossible.

Third: Human Nature (Fitrah) and Inherent Dignity as Intercultural Bridges
One of the book's most important proposals is that **human fitrah** and **inherent human dignity** can serve as transcivilizational foundations for justice. These two concepts:

- Are deeply rooted in Abrahamic religions (human dignity as God's vicegerent, etc.)

- Are fully open to dialogue with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (I consider this dialogue vital)

- Move away from cultural centrism and return to shared human experience
  In Chapter 5, I argue that if justice is built on fitrah and dignity, its core can be truly universal without requiring the imposition of a single cultural model; rather, each civilization can reach the same moral truth in its own language.

Fourth: From Shallow Multiculturalism to Spiritual Justice
The book goes beyond liberal multiculturalism (which stops at mere tolerance) and proposes **spiritual justice** – a justice that:

1. Respects people's cultural and spiritual identities

2. Sees human beings not merely as consumers of resources, but as moral and spiritual beings

3. Regards cultural diversity not as a threat, but as a treasure that enriches the theory of justice

This intercultural approach makes the book's discussions not only relevant within the Western philosophical tradition, but truly forward-looking in addressing the needs of today's world – a world that has become the meeting place of civilizations.

Theoretical and Methodological Innovations of the Book

Without unnecessary introduction, I believe this book has introduced innovations in the following areas (these are my own claims and naturally open to critique):

1. Proposing a **four-level model of justice**: conceptual, moral, institutional, and civilizational.

2. Emphasizing **dynamic justice** as opposed to static or contractual justice.

3. Integrating **philosophical rationality** with **innate moral sense (fitrah)** as the foundation of justice.

4. Moving beyond social-democratic or liberal-democratic justice toward **civilizational and moral justice**.

5. Offering an **interdisciplinary and intercultural** approach to the philosophy of justice.

The Book's Place on the Frontier of Contemporary Philosophy of Justice

One may ask: Where does this book stand in relation to global currents in justice theory today?

Perhaps we can say:

- It engages Rawls at the level of method, but strongly emphasizes the link between justice, human nature (fitrah), and spirituality.

- It shares with Amartya Sen a dynamic view of justice, but gives much greater weight to the moral dimension.

- It aligns with Nancy Fraser in paying attention to cultural dimensions and recognition, but adds the spiritual and civilizational elements.

In short, this work is a step toward shaping a new kind of **ethics-centered and intercultural philosophy of justice** – one that can create fresh meaning for justice through civilizational dialogue and a return to ethics.

Justice: From Abstract Ideal to Gradual Reality

A common criticism of philosophy of justice is that it stays in the realm of theory and offers no practical path. Historical experience, however, proves this view wrong. Justice is not a final destination we either reach or miss; it is a **gradual path** that societies walk step by step.

Let me mention a few points in this regard:

1. **From Theory to Practice: Empirical Evidence**
   Today there are countries that, inspired by philosophical theories of justice (especially Rawls and Sen), have taken concrete, measurable steps:

   - Scandinavian countries, drawing on Rawls's Difference Principle, have designed advanced tax systems that sharply reduce inequality and guarantee universal access to education and healthcare.

   - Austria (mentioned in Chapter 5) has implemented targeted policies in educational justice that significantly narrow class gaps in access to higher education.

   - Welfare programs in Western Europe show how philosophical principles of justice can be translated into policies that combine economic efficiency with social fairness.
     Moreover, the Human Development Index (HDI), co-shaped by Amartya Sen, has become a globally used tool for measuring justice and development. Digital

platforms have also made it easier to assess justice in many new areas.

2. **Justice Is Not All-or-Nothing; It Is a Spectrum**
   With realism, the book stresses that perfect justice is a Platonic ideal, but that does not make the effort useless. On the contrary: **every step that reduces inequality, increases institutional transparency, and respects human dignity is itself a realization of justice**.
   In Chapter 5, by introducing measurable indicators such as the Gini coefficient, HDI, poverty rates, etc., I show that justice can be tracked, successful policies can be distinguished from failed ones, and we can learn from other societies' experiences.

3. **The Role of Technology in Making Justice Operational**
   Despite the risks that new technologies pose in deepening inequality, the book also highlights their positive potential: artificial intelligence can detect hidden inequalities, blockchain can ensure transparent resource distribution, and big data can support evidence-based policymaking.

4. **From Wish to Program**
   Based on everything the book discusses, justice is no longer merely a philosophical wish. Today we know:

   - which policies actually work,

   - how to measure inequality,

   - which institutions are essential for guaranteeing justice,

   - which technological tools are available.
     Of course, most of these experiences have emerged in Western cultural contexts. Therefore, one of the major challenges ahead is how to **localize and indigenize** these achievements in different cultural, moral, and civilizational settings.

5. **The Book's Message: Hopeful Realism**
   This book is neither naively optimistic nor despairingly pessimistic. It advocates **hopeful realism**: perfect justice may be unattainable, but greater, better, and more sustainable justice is not only possible; it is already happening.
   This path, however, requires two conditions:
   (a) a solid theoretical foundation so we know where we are going, and
   (b) political and social will to take real steps.
   That is exactly what this book tries to contribute to: laying the theoretical groundwork for making justice operational in a world that desperately needs it.

Who Is This Book For?

The book is particularly valuable for three groups:

1. Researchers in political philosophy seeking an intercultural and multidimensional approach to justice.

2. Policymakers and social activists who need a theoretical framework for practical justice.

3. Muslim thinkers who wish to engage constructively with Western philosophy and bring Islamic concepts into the global conversation.

If you ask how the book came into being: its origins lie in a six-month series of lectures I gave at the Iranian House of Wisdom in Vienna. This lecture-based origin gives the book its dialogical tone and accessibility, though it sometimes prioritizes breadth over analytical depth. That same origin has also caused certain weaknesses; for example, references are not always complete (this will be fixed in future editions).

Final Message: Justice as a Living Path

Justice is neither a fixed destination nor a static theory. Justice is a living process in which reason, conscience, and culture complete one another.

The book *A Look at Key Theoretical Issues in Justice* is an attempt to revive precisely this **problem-centered spirit**; to show that justice only gains meaning when it returns to ethics, to the human being, and to innate human nature (fitrah).

In an age when inequalities are deeper, global crises more complex, and the gap between ethics and politics wider than ever, this book reminds us that justice remains possible; not as a distant utopia, but as a path we can walk step by step with strong theoretical foundations and collective determination.

When justice reconnects with ethics, it leaves pure abstraction behind.
 When it respects culture, it escapes one-sidedness.
 When it returns to civilization, it transcends Western centrism.

This book is an invitation to think anew about justice; not with ready-made answers, but with living questions. And perhaps that is the greatest gift philosophy can offer. As Imre Lakatos said: "Unsolved problems are the engine of progress in research programs." In other words, a scientific horizon without problems comes to a halt.

If political philosophy returns to the problem, justice itself comes alive again.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.