

‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’ Is it? Does it?

Whilst Luther King’s projection seems optimistic and emotionally compelling; however, when the events in history are juxtaposed to each other — the conclusions drawn seem to contradict his statement. This essay will analyse distinct events in history in order to: firstly, argue that King’s model overlooks the non-linear nature of the moral universe; secondly, compare the awareness of injustice to the justice within these events to suggest that it is the awareness that increases, whereas, justice fluctuates more; and lastly, argue that the arc of the moral universe is perpetual until the death of humanity. For the purpose of this essay, justice will be tested with the lens of discrimination, violence, and rights.

Between 1900-20, the primary events involved mass violence^[1], industrial growth^[2], and gender/race discrimination^{[3][4]}. The impacts of industrialisation included exploitative labour of children and dangerous working conditions^[5] that were ethically polarising at the time; women and certain races were not provided equal opportunities and faced severe discrimination; the mass violence caused by World War I and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre^[6] in 1919 — all elucidate that the ethical landscape was grim and justice was scarce. Although the environment was unjust, there was no shortage of awareness of the injustice. For example, the British and Canadian labour revolts^{[7][8]} demanded a change in the system — especially for wages and conditions; demonstrating how society was aware of the unfairness when it was prominent in the early twentieth century.

In stark contrast to 1900-20, the situation of the same injustice during 1930-50 was not ideal, but was improved. Though the gender and race discrimination was relatively the same, regulations such as the 1938 Fair Labour Standards Act^[9] in the United States, and the 1948 Factories Act^[10] in India — brought justice to the previously contentious conditions. In addition, the independence of India in 1947^[11] demonstrates how justice was brought to India in the form of a solidified constitution^[12] as well as a supreme court bringing in an independent judicial framework^[13] in 1950. The foundational improvements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1947^[14], brought justice to a global scale.

The remaining injustice was met with awareness to a great extent during 1954-68. One major contribution was the Civil Rights Movement where the primary developments consisted of gender and race, fighting segregation in American society^[15]. The Montgomery Bus Boycott and several other integrations spiked the public awareness and triggered protests that ultimately led to the solidification of constitutional laws regarding segregation^[16]. Although the awareness of the injustices was high; that did not fully translate into corresponding behaviour. Even subsequent to the Sit-In Movement^[17] and the Little Rock Central High School Integration^[18], racism was still prominent. On November 14, 1960, Ruby Bridges — a six year old African-American girl attending William Frantz Elementary School — had to be escorted by armed marshals. She was greeted with insults and disapproval^[19]; demonstrating the persistence of racism, even upon prior movements garnering awareness.

Juxtaposing the developments of the Civil Rights Movement to modern, twenty-first century contexts, demonstrates the non-linear nature of justice. It is becoming increasingly apparent that violence is the direction most modern injustice is headed. With nuclear developments and scarcity of resources rising inter-country tension; it is no surprise that thousands of people die in Iran^[20] and the Gaza Strip^[21]. The severely divisive practices of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)^[22] towards immigrants illuminate how the ethics of policy progressively get more polarising the more desperate we get for gaining and protecting

resources — which seems to be the trajectory of international relations. Violence, however, is not the only form of injustice pervading the modern world. Multiple xenophobic insults have developed for anti-immigrant sentiments; one popular quote being ‘Go back to your country!’^[23] Which is the epitome of discrimination. Awareness only seems to increase with the rise of social media, but does not match the actions of politicians.

Of course, that would raise the question of whether awareness would translate into a less unjust change? From the patterns we observe in history, it is clear that it follows the process of: firstly, something being unjust in society; next, awareness is generated of that injustice; thirdly, that awareness forces change into society toward justice; and lastly, the landscape shifts, and the cycle repeats. Viewing humanity as a still, motionless landscape is a fundamental flawed perspective. From all the events in history, we can conclude that awareness and justice rarely exist proportionally. Moreover, most notions that questioned conventional norms faced severe censorship and suppression; illuminating another reason for why justice and awareness are not parallel. Though non-uniform, justice undergoes a perpetual cycle as reality changes. Reality’s unpredictability makes it impossible for justice to be a linear curve. Whilst critics may contend that the premise of this essay is too narrow by exploring justice with discrimination, rights, and violence; testing justice with multiple lenses will end up being contradictory. In the scenario where a person kills another person because they were running late for work; and we test how justified it was with both motives and violence — the outcome we get is both yes, it is justified, and no, it is not — and ultimately, only one can exist. Discrimination, violence, and rights are also the most frequent and prominent sources of injustice in history. Even the harshest realities can be justified if manipulated correctly with enough perspective. Another abstract concept King illuminates is the moral universe. Although the ethical framework underpinning it is concrete, the end point of it is vague. I believe there is no end; it will continue perpetually until humanity exists. The moral universe was created to understand the moral quality of humanity at a given time; therefore, it will last till humanity lasts. Moreover, if justice seems to be a non-uniform oscillation — we cannot predict where it goes. The reason the awareness of injustice seems more unwavering than justice is because ethics is concrete as to what it defines as right or wrong to a large extent; however, when met with the unpredictability of reality — it conflicts with it, which makes the distinction between the two necessary.

If we display the observations graphically, with the year on the horizontal axis and quantity of justice and awareness on the vertical axis, it would yield (Figure 1):

Analysing the graph, it becomes apparent that justice increased from 1900 to 1950 — where it peaked — and then plummeted in the twenty-first century. In contrast, awareness steadily increased throughout. Awareness and justice only seemed parallel from 1920 to 1950. I contend that awareness only increased because our understanding of right and wrong improved and tightened progressively as well as the contribution of fast-spreading information through mediums such as social media platforms. The reason justice peaked in 1950 could be because of several societal reforms contributing simultaneously whereas, dropping in the twenty-first century because the strain on resources caused a hunt, which dominated the goal over fairness. This is especially active as over-consumption, fast fashion, and the sheer increase in global population interferes with demand-supply chains — putting a strain on resources and ultimately leads to inflation. However, this is no internal matter; it affects the international relationships between countries. For example, in late 2025 and beginning 2026, tensions between the United States and Iran spiked dramatically^[24] — triggering several ramifications. Firstly, Iran had power on major resources such as oil, and the crisis affected

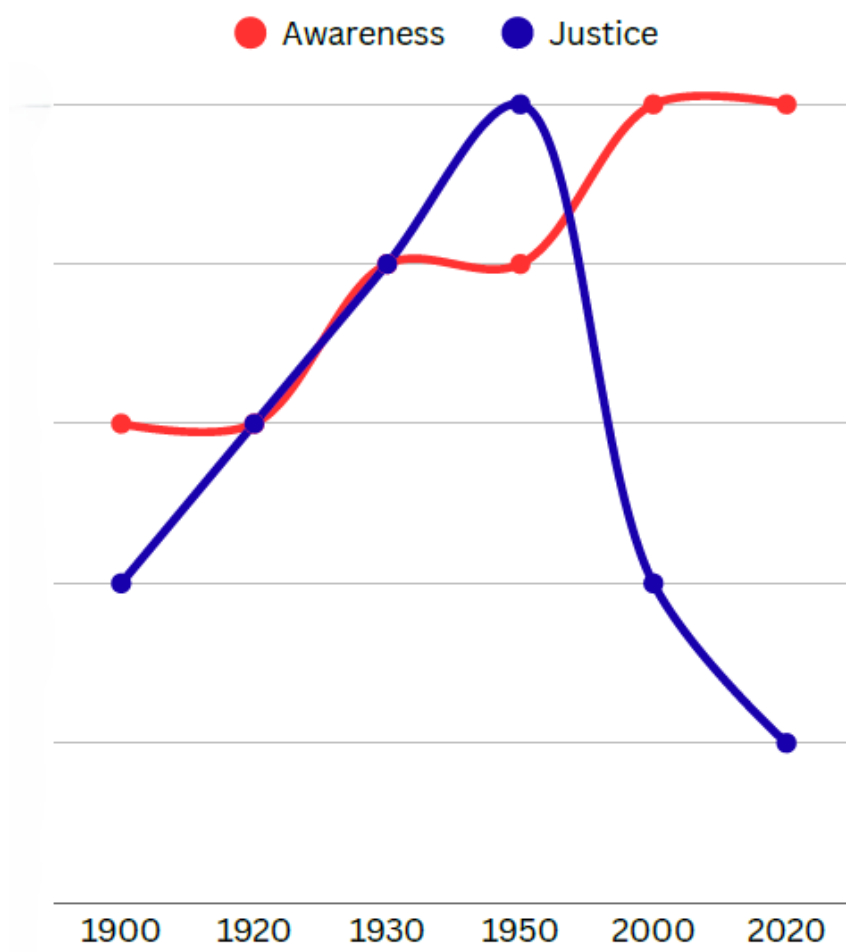


Figure 1:

distribution and gasoline prices, causing them to surge globally^[25]. Not to mention, violence on innocent citizens and the assassination of Ali Khamenei^[26] caused distress and turmoil within Iran. Furthermore, Israel's involvement in both the United States-Iran conflict, as well as low-intensity conflict with Palestine with no definitive resolve elucidate the magnitude of violence that caused the justice levels to plunge in the twenty-first century. The conclusions we can draw from the graph are: firstly, that awareness and justice are not proportional to each other; secondly, that the arc of the moral universe is not bending toward justice forever; and lastly, that the ongoing nature of the increase and decrease suggests that it is perpetual and not linear.

King's prediction overlooks the unpredictable aspect of humanity and neglects the constant conflict between awareness and justice. Whilst awareness seems to be on a linear trajectory to increase with time; the same cannot be said for justice, which would continue to oscillate non-uniformly. The arc of the moral universe is not just long — it is perpetual, likewise to change. The fate of the arc of the moral universe remains unpredictable in a battle of eternal change.

Bibliography

- [1] Showalter, Dennis E., Royde-Smith, John Graham. "World War I". Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 May. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I>.
- [2] Britannica Editors. "industrialization". Encyclopedia Britannica, 12 May. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/industrialization>.
- [3] Smedley, Audrey. "racism". Encyclopedia Britannica, 11 May. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/racism>.
- [4] Brunell, Laura, Burkett, Elinor. "feminism". Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 May. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>.
- [5] Rafferty, John P.. "The Rise of the Machines: Pros and Cons of the Industrial Revolution". Encyclopedia Britannica, 13 Jun. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/story/the-rise-of-the-machines-pros-and-cons-of-the-industrial-revolution>.
- [6] Pletcher, Kenneth. "Jallianwala Bagh Massacre". Encyclopedia Britannica, 12 Apr. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jallianwala-Bagh-Massacre>.
- [7] Darlington, Ralph. Labour Revolt in Britain 1910–14. Pluto Press, 2023.
- [8] Wikipedia contributors. "Canadian Labour Revolt." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 3 May. 2026.
- [9] United States, Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, as Amended. Revised May 2011, U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHd/legacy/files/FairLaborStandAct.pdf>.
- [10] India. The Factories Act, 1948. Government of Karnataka, https://esuraksha.karnataka.gov.in/storage/pdf-files/Factories_Act,1948.pdf.
- [11] Teekah, Ethan. "Indian Independence Movement". Encyclopedia Britannica, 31 Mar. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indian-Independence-Movement>.
- [12] Wikipedia contributors. "Constitution of India." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 8 May. 2026.
- [13] Kumar, Aman. "Supreme Court of India". Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 May. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Supreme-Court-of-India>.
- [14] Andreopoulos, George J.. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights". Encyclopedia Britannica, 15 May. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Universal-Declaration-of-Human-Rights>.
- [15] Britannica Editors. "Timeline of the American Civil Rights Movement". Encyclopedia Britannica, 18 Nov. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/list/timeline-of-the-american-civil-rights-movement>.

[16] Britannica Editors. "Montgomery bus boycott". Encyclopedia Britannica, 6 Feb. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Montgomery-bus-boycott>.

[17] Ray, Michael. "Greensboro sit-in". Encyclopedia Britannica, 13 Sep. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Greensboro-sit-in>.

[18] Jaynes, Gerald D.. "Little Rock Nine". Encyclopedia Britannica, 28 Apr. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Little-Rock-Nine>.

[19] Britannica Editors. "Ruby Bridges". Encyclopedia Britannica, 6 Mar. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ruby-Bridges>.

[20] "Death Rate, Crude (per 1,000 People) – Iran, Islamic Rep." World Bank Open Data, The World Bank, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CDRT.IN?end=2024\&locations=IR\&start=1960>.

[21] Britannica Editors. "Gaza Strip". Encyclopedia Britannica, 18 May. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaza-Strip>.

[22] "ICE and CBP Legal Analysis." American Immigration Council, 11 Feb. 2026, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/ice-cbp-legal-analysis/>.

[23] "'Go Back to Your Own Country' Becomes Anthem of Hate." Reveal, Center for Investigative Reporting, 1 Aug. 2019, <https://revealnews.org/blog/the-hate-report-go-back-to-your-own-country-becomes-anthem-of-hate/>.

[24] "Confrontation Between the United States and Iran." Council on Foreign Relations, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/confrontation-between-united-states-and-iran>.

[25] Khan, Shariq. "California Gas Prices Surge as Iran War Creates India Cooking Fuel Shortage." The Independent, 18 May 2026, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/california-gasoline-india-lpg-iran-b2978598.html>.

[26] "Ayatollah Khamenei Death." Islamic Info Center, <https://islamicinfocenter.com/ayatollah-khamenei-death/>.