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The Tragedy of Justice: An study of the Hecuba--Helen Debate in *The Trojan Women*

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Abstract: This paper centers on the intense and philosophically rich debate between Hecuba and Helen in Euripides' classic tragedy, *The Trojan Women*. It systematically analyzes the profound conflicts among three distinct discourses of justice presented within the narrative framework: divine justice, moral justice, and power justice. The comprehensive study finds that although Hecuba's rigorous moral accusation and Helen's calculated, fate-based defense stand in sharp rhetorical opposition, both arguments ultimately succumb to the overwhelming force of hegemonic power. Through a detailed textual examination, it becomes evident that moral justice and divine justice inevitably yield to the sheer power of the military victor. Furthermore, Menelaus' final verdict serves as a critical turning point, confirming that justice is fundamentally distorted, manipulated, and monopolized by brute violence in the context of wartime. By dramatizing this ideological clash, Euripides thus reveals the inherently tragic, relative, and fragile nature of justice, poignantly pointing out that absolute and universal justice simply does not exist in the chaotic realm of war. In response to this inescapable existential predicament, the playwright suggests that profound compassion for human suffering and an unwavering adherence to fundamental human dignity must become the core humanistic values. Ultimately, these enduring principles are embodied in his tragic thinking, offering a timeless critique of imperialism and a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit amidst catastrophic destruction.

Keywords: *the Trojan Women*; Euripides; justice discourse; Greek tragedy; humanism

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As an innovator of ancient Greek tragedy, Euripides distinguishes himself from the other two ancient Greek tragedians with his creative focus on human nature, war, divinity, and vulnerable groups. While Aeschylus and Sophocles emphasize the conflict between humans and fate as well as the power of the gods, mythical elements are greatly diminished and human elements are significantly enhanced in Euripides' dramatic works. Characters in Euripides' plays are closely aligned with ordinary people of his era. He not only increases the depiction of female characters and non-traditional tragic figures but also delves into the inner world of humans to trace the root of human tragedy [1].

The intricate and hidden relationship between emotion and reason in the inner world becomes the starting point for Euripides to explore the origin of human tragedy. As a core anti-war tragedy, *The Trojan Women* directly confronts the destruction of individuals and the collapse of moral order caused by war. The debate between Hecuba and Helen is the focal point of dramatic conflict in the play. It not only encapsulates the contradiction between individual fate and collective disaster but also reflects Euripides' philosophical inquiry into the essence of justice, providing a key perspective for interpreting his tragic vision [2].

Against the historical context of the Peloponnesian War, the representation of the absence of justice in this debate carries strong realistic implications. In 416 BCE, Athens sent a large army to conquer the small island of Melos in the south. The Melians declared:

Received: 04 May 2026

Revised: 21 June 2026

Accepted: 03 July 2026

Published: 07 July 2026



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"For if we were to submit to you without a struggle, we should be cowardly and base." The war was extremely brutal, and Melos ultimately fell. All adult Melian men were put to death, while all women and children were enslaved. This tragedy became the inspiration for *The Trojan Women*. The play was performed in 415 BCE, the year after Athens captured Melos. Would not the Athenian citizens watching the performance in the amphitheater have been alerted?

The philosopher's reflection not only endows the play with imaginative space but also resonates with reality, lending the tragedy a realistic dimension [3]. In *The Trojan Women*, Euripides reconstructs the mythological narrative through the debate between Hecuba and Helen, implying the moral crisis of Athens during the Peloponnesian War. The debate is not merely a dispute over individual responsibility but a dramatic critique of the absence of justice under violence.

1.2. Literature Review

As a core anti-war tragedy by Euripides, studies on *The Trojan Women* have taken different directions in Chinese and international scholarship due to diverse cultural contexts and theoretical perspectives. War ethics constitutes the central consensus across research: scholars universally focus on how the play deconstructs wartime violence and connects to historical reality [1]. Yet international research tends to emphasize imperial critique, while Chinese scholarship pays more attention to the humanistic expression of anti-war themes.

International studies mostly proceed from historical context, political ethics, and dramatic rhetoric, with in-depth investigations into imperial violence, the discourse of justice, and rhetorical power. One analysis examines how *The Trojan Women* employs dramatic techniques to integrate and subvert Athenian war ideology. It argues that this ideology is challenged and overturned through the experiences of war victims and theatricalized visual representations, thereby deconstructing traditional war ethics [1]. Another study analyzes the debate between Hecuba and Helen, highlighting the rhetorical confrontation and the conflict between rational argument and mythic narrative.

Domestic research in China mainly centers on anti-war themes, ethical dilemmas, the fate of women, and tragic consciousness [4]. One perspective, adopting approaches from rhetoric and the Sophistic movement, argues that *The Trojan Women* exposes the tension between reason and force after the decline of divine justice, criticizing the appropriation of language by power. Another approach, drawing on literary ethics and feminist theory, explores the dual ethical identities and existential dilemmas of Trojan women after the fall of Troy, revealing how war destroys ethical order and forces difficult individual ethical choices.

Overall, existing studies have achieved fruitful results in the macro narratives of war criticism and gender oppression [5]. Although scholars widely acknowledge the play's exposure to the injustice of war, most studies remain at the level of thematic assertion. Sufficiently systematic analysis of the distinct discourses of justice, their conflict mechanisms, and their philosophical implications within the tragedy is still lacking, leaving considerable room for further exploration.

1.3. Research Ideas and Methods

This study employs close reading as the primary method, with rhetoric and discourse analysis serving as core approaches [6]. It conducts a detailed line-by-line examination of the debate scene between Hecuba and Helen, systematically analyzing the logical structure of three intertwined justice discourses: moral justice, divine justice, and power justice, thereby establishing a micro-textual foundation. Ultimately, it demonstrates the central argument that Euripides presents a profoundly tragic relativist perspective on justice in *The Trojan Women*. Justice is an essential ethical ideal for human society, yet it is inherently fragile, relative, and frequently undermined by violence and war.

2. Justice Appeals in Three Forms

2.1. Divine Justice

By emphasizing the inherent predestination of fate and the inviolability of divine will, Helen asserts that divine will constitutes justice [7]. Based on this, she absolves herself of agency and moral culpability, portraying her role as that of a sacrificial victim in the gods' rivalry rather than the primary cause of Troy's disaster.

2.1.1. Fate Predestined

"First, Paris was the cause of all our trouble [2].
This woman here gave birth to Paris, so she's
The mother of the cause of all our trouble [8].
Secondly, her husband, the old king,
Led to Troy's downfall and mine by letting him live,
The infant, Alexander, as he was called then,
The murderous firebrand Hecuba dreamed of."

Helen does not simply shift blame to others; she traces the origin of the Trojan War back to Hecuba's dream and prophecy, using the logic of predetermined fate to make her excuse unassailable [5]. Her subtext is: Paris was a "doomed firebrand," and my involvement is merely one link in the chain of fate. At the same time, Helen transfers responsibility to Hecuba and Priam, accusing them of knowing Paris's destiny yet failing to kill him, letting him grow up and thus defy the oracle, which brought about the present war and catastrophe. By faulting the Trojan court's negligence, she weakens the causal weight of her own actions, implying that Troy's fall is the result of its own disregard for divine prophecy.

2.1.2. Divine Will Inviolable

"Aphrodite promised me
To him if he would say she far surpassed
The other goddesses in beauty [9]. Consider
What followed from that: Aphrodite won."

Helen directly attributes the root of her elopement to Aphrodite's intervention, treating divine will as an irresistible absolute force. Helen claims that the goddess's promise to give her to Paris was a divine pact, not a matter of personal choice [4]. She stresses that the rivalry among Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite was essentially a game of the gods' private desires, and she was merely the "prize" in that game. Mortal will is powerless before the gods; her elopement was not betrayal but the necessary outcome of divine will.

It is worth noting that Aphrodite, the ancient goddess and symbol of primal human desire, is the core figure used to reveal human weakness, deconstruct mythological evasion, and question the true source of tragedy. She represents an irrational, destructive force that takes the form of desire, beauty, and passion, ultimately triumphing over wisdom, order, and reason [10].

In response to the question of why she did not return to Greece after Paris's death, Helen defends herself by claiming that she tried to escape and resist, but her resistance was negligible before fate and the gods, shaping the image of an involuntary victim:

"The tower guards will tell you, for they saw me,
And the watchmen from the walls, they saw me too,
And often caught me as I tried to let"

She attributes her failure to return to the surveillance of the Trojans rather than her own will, implying that she always remained loyal to Greece but was unable to break free from physical constraints [11]. She further suggests that Aphrodite's power did not dissipate with Paris's death; fate continues to control everything, preventing her from escaping Troy's bonds.

2.1.3. Divine Will as Justice

"I married Paris, and Greece reaped the benefit [3].
No barbarians have taken you in thrall,
Either through warfare or the tyrant's lash,

And yet what's given Greece such great good luck
Has only meant bad luck for me."

Helen presents herself as a suffering victim and defends herself as just, claiming that she obeyed divine will and endured suffering, thereby bringing divine favor to Greece. She attempts to prove, through the positive consequences of divine arrangement, that her actions were not unjust but possessed a hidden legitimacy.

Helen's defense appears to conform to a mythological conception of justice, yet it actually reveals its absurdity [2]. If divinity can arbitrarily intervene in human affairs, then "justice" becomes an excuse for the powerful, and the unjust can escape punishment by shifting blame. Through this device, the logic of "divine will as justice" within the mythological context is deconstructed.

2.2. Moral Justice

2.2.1. Deconstructing Divine Narrative

Helen attributes her elopement to Aphrodite's compulsion, claiming that the gods' will is irresistible, and attempts to use divinity as a shield to dissolve personal moral responsibility. Hecuba's rebuttal strikes at the very core:

"Would Hera
Or the virgin goddess Pallas Athena ever
Be so incredibly foolish as to either
Sell out Argos to the barbarians
Or let Athenians become the slaves of Troy?"

Hecuba points out that the virtue and status of the gods could not possibly stoop to the private desires of a beauty contest; what Helen calls "divine intervention" is in fact a moral evasion of her own autonomous desire. She sharply states that Aphrodite is nothing but a name we give to "desire." By redefining Aphrodite, Hecuba reduces the divine name to a human psychological phenomenon, deconstructs the mythical narrative, and, using the collective suffering of Troy as her moral foundation, directly attacks Helen's autonomous desire and essential betrayal.

2.2.2. Desire as the Driving Force

Hecuba further traces the motive behind Helen's actions, reframing her from a passive abductee to an active accomplice:

"you saw my son dressed up
In Asian splendor, his gold all glittering,
And you fell hard for him; he made you crazy."

She emphasizes that Helen's choice originated from her own lust and greed—a pursuit of luxury and an escape from marital bonds—rather than external force, thereby establishing the moral tone of betrayal.

Moreover, in response to Helen's claim that she had repeatedly tried to flee Troy but was stopped by guards, Hecuba dismantles the argument with rigorous logic. She sharply notes that the Trojan guards and watchmen Helen refers to were all killed in the sack of the city. Thus, Helen's statement becomes an unverifiable case, an excuse that cannot be tested and therefore carries no weight.

By exposing the complete rupture in Helen's chain of evidence and interrogating the internal logic of her actions, Hecuba demonstrates an overwhelming rational force. Her refutation acts like a precise scalpel, stripping away the emotional and evasive disguises of Helen's speech and exposing the hypocrisy and emptiness at its core. This is not merely a courtroom victory; it also manifests the dignity and power of clear reason and a commitment to fact amidst the chaos of suffering.

2.2.3. Moral Ethics as Justice

"You had no loyalty to anyone,
But followed fortune, drifting where it went."

Hecuba's moral accusation against Helen displays a sophisticated rhetorical skill: she not only makes clear that Helen, as the source of the war, brought suffering to Troy, but

also turns her attention to Menelaus, the leader of the victorious Greek forces, reminding him that Helen's betrayal is a stain on her husband and his household.

"Now crown your country's honor with a deed
Worthy of your own, and kill this woman."

She perfectly stitches together personal revenge and public justice. She convinces Menelaus that the justice he is about to serve is both a grand narrative of revenge for the thousands of dead Greeks and Trojans, and a necessary and glorious cleansing of his own stolen marriage and mocked role as a husband [2]. Although the audience knows that this justice will ultimately fail, at that dramatic moment Hecuba's words successfully forge compassion for Troy and the inflamed honour of a wronged husband into a moral sword aimed at Helen's heart.

The moral justice upheld by Hecuba is an ethical appeal rooted in reason, responsibility, and universal humanity. Her argumentative power derives not only from rigorous reasoning but also from her lived suffering as a war victim, a mother, and a queen of a fallen city. Yet, through this, the tragic predicament of moral justice is revealed: Hecuba occupies the high ground of logic and morality, yet her voice is completely silenced in the real order of power, showing that before violence, pure moral reason, though shining with human dignity, is often powerless to reverse the cruel scales of fate.

2.3. Power Justice

Unlike Helen's divine justice and Hecuba's moral justice, power-based justice is not explicitly advocated by any party in the debate; instead, it is embodied in Menelaus's verdict [11]. As the victor of the war and the arbiter, Menelaus, by virtue of his victory, monopolizes the power to define, adjudicate, and enforce justice, forming the core logic that might is right. This logic not only overrides moral reason and divine order but also exposes the tragic essence of justice being completely distorted, appropriated, and instrumentalized by power in a state of war.

2.3.1. Power Precedes Justice

In the debate scene of *The Trojan Women*, the assignment of justice is determined by victory or defeat, and the right to judge is exclusively held by the victor [6, 9]. Menelaus, as the representative of the victorious Greek army, possesses absolute authority over Helen's life or death, while Hecuba, despite having the upper hand in rhetoric and logic, has no real adjudicative power due to her status as a defeated captive.

"I have decided to sail back to Greece with her and kill her there."

Even before the debate begins, as soon as Menelaus appears, he declares his power of disposal as a conqueror: he has come to take back his wife and execute punishment as her master, not to act as an impartial judge. The debate between Hecuba and Helen is from the outset conducted within the limits permitted by the victor. Euripides thereby makes clear: in war, power precedes justice, and victory defines right and wrong. No matter how intense the debate between morality and divinity, the final judgment remains exclusively in the hands of the powerful.

2.3.2. Private Desire Overrides Public Morality

The essence of power-based justice is that the powerful replace universal morality with their personal will and private desires. Menelaus initially takes a firm stand, vowing to kill Helen to appease public anger and honor the fallen soldiers. However, at the point where Hecuba's rebuttal has completely prevailed on moral and rational grounds, and according to traditional Greek notions of justice Helen ought to be executed to pay for the collective disaster, Menelaus's final judgment does not put Helen to death. He compromises because of his private desire—Helen's beauty and emotional allure—even evading Hecuba's warning with a joke about "whether she is too heavy."

This betrayal is deeply ironic: Menelaus was one of the initiators of the war, rallying the Greek coalition in the name of "retrieving my wife and upholding honor." Yet when he actually faces Helen, the proclaimed justice is immediately replaced by personal desire [11]. The victor can casually abandon the moral commitments he once swore by; the

standard of justice is entirely determined by his subjective will at the moment. Through this, Euripides reveals that power-based justice is essentially a tool serving the strongman's private interests, possessing no stable ethical core.

2.3.3. Justice as Decoration for Power

The debate scene between Hecuba and Helen deliberately mimics the courtroom procedure of Athenian democracy: the plaintiff's accusation, the defendant's defense, and the judge's verdict. Yet this formally complete "trial" ultimately becomes a tragic satire of justice dominated by power. The audience's familiarity with Helen's fate, knowing she will not be executed, removes any suspense regarding the justice of the debate from the outset. This intensifies the tragic sense that any claim to justice is destroyed under the influence of violence.

More profoundly, power-based justice not only monopolizes the authority of judgment but also appropriates the outer trappings of legal form. Menelaus allows the debate to proceed and hears both sides, appearing impartial, but in reality, he is merely performing a formal procedure [7]. When his personal desires conflict with the judgment, formal justice is immediately discarded. Euripides critiques this dynamic: when might becomes the sole source of justice, any seemingly impartial legal procedure becomes a mere decoration for power. Justice ceases to be an independent value worth pursuing and instead becomes a rhetorical tool for the victor's self-legitimation. The more compelling Hecuba's and Helen's arguments become, the more absurd the final verdict's departure from justice appears, amplifying the tragic force.

3. The Conflict and Collapse of the Three Forms of Justice

Aristotle identifies plot as the foremost element of tragedy, noting that effective plots rely on "peripeteia (reversal) and anagnorisis (recognition)." Reversal describes a sudden shift from good to bad fortune, creating dramatic tension and arousing pity and fear in the audience [4]. Although Hecuba's rational, morally compelling accusation seems decisive, the outcome reverses sharply: Helen escapes death, and justice is never served. The mutual conflict and collective failure of the three forms of justice reveal Euripides' central claim: no absolute or universal standard of justice exists, and any single conception of justice collapses amid wartime violence and human complexity.

3.1. *The Opposition between Moral Justice and Divine Justice*

The moral justice defended by Hecuba and the divine justice claimed by Helen represent two opposing paradigms—one rooted in human reason, the other in divine will—and neither achieves ultimate validity in reality [2, 3].

Hecuba's moral justice rests on the belief in individual free will. It holds that human actions must follow moral principles, and wrongdoing demands proportional responsibility. Justice is achieved through rational reflection and moral integrity. This view rejects the idea that divine compulsion can erase personal accountability, seeing Helen's appeal to the gods as a mere excuse for immoral choices.

Helen's divine justice presumes that divine authority overrides human agency. Human behavior is treated as a passive product of divine will, leaving no room for free choice or moral guilt. Justice is defined by the gods, and fate supersedes human standards. This view deliberately ignores that divine will often operates through human desire, shifting all blame to external forces.

Moral justice requires individual responsibility, while divine justice denies it [8]. The two premises are irreconcilable. More importantly, neither model has a practical mechanism of enforcement: moral justice prevails in argument but cannot compel judgment, while divine justice, though traditional, is discredited by Helen's opportunistic use. Under violence, adherence to either moral or divine order brings no just reward, and suffering becomes universal.

3.2. *The Monopoly of Justice by Power*

If the conflict between moral and divine justice reflects an ideological dispute, the intervention of power-based justice represents the complete subordination of ideal justice to reality [9]. Menelaus' verdict demonstrates that in war, power not only defines justice but also suppresses moral claims and distorts divine principles.

On one hand, Menelaus entirely disregards Hecuba's moral appeals. As the victor, he prioritizes personal desires over collective morality, reducing justified moral judgment to an empty formality [7]. Moral justice requires a peaceful and equal context, but under the dominance of wartime power, reason and morality are easily discarded.

On the other hand, Menelaus manipulates Helen's divine justice as a convenient pretext [3]. He does not genuinely adhere to divine will but uses it to legitimize his own biased judgment, framing his submission to lust as an acceptance of fate. Divine justice, intended to transcend power, is thus reduced to a tool for its exploitation.

Menelaus' ruling exposes the dual monopoly of power-based justice: the victor controls both the definition and execution of justice. The Greek army justifies violence under the guise of revenge, reducing justice to a mechanism serving the strong. This monopoly undermines the universality of moral justice and the sanctity of divine justice, revealing the alienation of justice in the context of war.

3.3. *The Collective Failure of All Three Forms of Justice*

In the play, Hecuba's moral justice fails completely. Her moral framework and logic break down before overwhelming violence, injustice, and divine silence. The more eloquently she speaks, the more clearly the world abandons her rules. Helen's escape, the enslavement of Trojan women, and the Greeks' violent plunder all demonstrate the collapse of moral justice.

Helen's divine justice never convinces anyone or truly redeems her. Trapped under the victor's power, her appeal to the gods serves only as weak rhetoric. It never challenges oppression but becomes subordinate to power, using divine authority to retroactively justify domination. Helen survives not because she persuades anyone, but because power allows it.

The power-based justice in *The Trojan Women* destroys itself—a tragic confirmation of the refutation of "might makes right." Justice is not a tool for the strong but the harmony of soul and city. Menelaus' pardon of Helen embodies this error: power breeds internal conflict between desire and reason, and eventually brings ruin. The Greeks' later punishment by the gods shows that unjust power destroys itself.

The collective failure of all three forms of justice pushes humanity into a paradox of justice vacuum: virtue goes unrewarded, divine faith serves tyranny, and power leads to endless violence [9]. Euripides' central concern is revealed: when justice loses its standard and power rules, humans are trapped in suffering and injustice. This existential crisis underlies the tragic essence of the play.

4. Euripides' Justice

Euripides was not shallow or simplistic. He observed keenly that opposites can reverse drastically: moral reason, divine faith, and brutal violence alike cannot permanently resolve the problem of justice. Greek tragedy originated in Dionysian festivals, where rigid social oppositions—high and low, good and evil, friend and foe—blend, shift, and intermingle in sorrow and joy. Yet Euripides' deconstruction of justice in *The Trojan Women* does not aim to deny justice itself but to expose its real predicament amid human catastrophe and to advance his distinctive conception of justice.

4.1. *The Relativity of Justice*

Euripides argues that absolute and universal justice does not exist; its realization depends on specific contexts. The civic justice of peacetime—based on law, debate, and virtue, and upheld by divine favor—collapses entirely under wartime violence and becomes a servant of power [5]. The clash and division of the three conceptions of justice demonstrate that no unified, universal standard exists.

In peaceful cities, morality and law may govern justice; in mythic narratives, divine will defines its limits; in war, the logic of power distorts or replaces all ideal forms of justice. Euripides thus illustrates that the meaning of justice is deeply bound to context and power relations. Absolute, eternal justice exists only as an ideal; in reality, justice is inevitably relative to circumstance and standpoint.

4.2. The Fragility of Justice

The deepest tragedy of the debate scene is that Euripides reveals justice's fragile nature: it can resist neither the overwhelming force of power nor the frailty of human nature. Hecuba's arguments prevail morally and rationally, yet they fail to influence Menelaus' ruling; Helen's flawed sophistry evades punishment because it aligns with the victor's power. The outcome underscores that justice relies not only on moral legitimacy but also on the support of power. When power opposes justice, justice is often sacrificed.

Justice's fragility is further evident in its susceptibility to human weakness. Menelaus succumbs to lust and pride, prioritizing personal desire over collective justice, thereby illustrating how human frailty undermines justice. Helen's deliberate manipulation of divine justice highlights how private interests can distort justice into self-serving rhetoric. Euripides critiques that justice necessitates both individual virtue and external checks on power; without these, justice collapses under the weight of power and desire.

4.3. The Humanism of Justice

Although Euripides emphasizes the relativity and fragility of justice, he does not advocate nihilism. Instead, he grounds the essence of justice in humanism [3, 10]. The true value of justice lies not in abstract moral principles or power dynamics but in compassion for human suffering and respect for human dignity.

One notable innovation in Euripides' tragedy is his focus on the universality and irreducibility of suffering. The injured are omnipresent, particularly women, such as Hecuba and her children, and the enslaved women of conquered Troy. While depicting universal suffering, Euripides also highlights the potential for noble responses in the face of adversity. Even under relentless attacks by power and fate, some individuals reject passivity and choose resistance. This resistance is not exclusive to aristocratic heroes. The interplay between the oppression of power and the elevation of human goodness creates a profound sense of the sublime. In this context, the debates involving both Hecuba and Helen achieve sublimity through their acts of resistance.

Euripides concludes that while absolute justice may be unattainable, humanity must uphold the humanist foundation of justice: empathy for suffering, a commitment to responsibility, and the defense of dignity. Such perseverance may not alter tragic outcomes, but it affirms human worth in the face of injustice and serves as a spiritual force against violence and tyranny [1]. This perspective on justice addresses the moral challenges faced by the Athenian Empire during the Peloponnesian War. It also provides guidance for human choices when confronted with injustice: even when achieving justice is difficult, compassion for suffering and loyalty to humanity remain the ultimate safeguards against darkness.

5. Conclusion

Euripides connects individual fate, collective disaster, and political reality, thereby expanding the realist dimension of tragedy. The debate between Hecuba and Helen serves not only as the dramatic climax but also as the most comprehensive expression of his tragic philosophy: justice is inevitably absent amid the violence of war, divine will, and human frailty. This absence does not signify the end of tragedy but instead reveals profound insights into the human condition.

Through this perspective, Euripides condemns the injustice of war and critically examines the nature and value of humanity. His interpretation of justice remains profoundly relevant across centuries, emphasizing that justice requires not only individual virtue but also the restraint of power and respect for diverse perspectives. By

fostering compassion for suffering and reverence for humanity, we can safeguard the humanist essence of justice from distortion and degradation in the complexities of reality.

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