WHY SOCIAL JUSTICE? Paul Ernest University of Exeter, UK This issue like its predecessor no. 20 is devoted to social justice in mathematics education. This focus raises the question of social justice and its relevance to the themes treated in this journal. However, the question "Why social justice?" Can be interpreted in several ways. It can be asking: Why devote a special issue of The Philosophy of Mathematics Education Journal to social justice? What is the justification for a social justice approach or focus in mathematics education? Why do individuals believe in social justice, so that it is top of the agenda for some mathematics educators and at best a peripheral concern for others? The first question is the easiest to answer. First of all, social justice issues are ethical issues and ethics is a branch of philosophy. So it is appropriate to include them in a wide ranging exploration of the philosophy of mathematics education, such as is aspired to by this journal. In addition, a significant part of the literature on social justice in mathematics education also challenges traditional, absolutist philosophies of mathematics, for absolutist philosophies of mathematics have powerful social implications, e.g., Burton 2003, D'Ambrosio 1985, Ernest 1991 & 1998, Powell & Frankenstein 1997, Skovsmose 1994). This also places it squarely among the concerns of the philosophy of mathematics education. The second question is not difficult to address but a full answer would be quite extensive. One relatively brief answer is that mathematics education – referring to the processes of the teaching and learning of mathematics – is a social process (and institution) within education. As such it is concerned with improving and bringing out the best in learners. Thus it has a responsibility to develop and improve each and every learner, and needs to be sensitive to the varying needs and circumstances of all. Unless the aims of education are curtailed by some divisive ideology that separates out learners into subsets of unequal value the default position aspires to fair treatment of all. A fair education system requires proportionate (in the qualitative sense) distribution of educational resources within society so that there are no major disparities in the life–chances afforded by it. In other words, to parody the premise of socialism, all should be given education according to their needs and not according to their ability to pay. This justification of social justice in terms of fair treatment of all raises the issue of the ways of conceptualising the social differences to be overcome, at least partially, through education, in terms of some of the major divisions of society. These include race, class, gender, special needs and disability. There are other further divisions implied by these or in addition to them such as sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, social affiliation and identity, creed, religion, as well as other divisions in terms of economic background, and so on. A social justice concern also raises broader geopolitical issues such as the impact of globalisation, and founded sites. While 'racial differences' can be observed we are all part of a single animal species and social labelling in terms of race is often a social construction. Thus many persons identified or even self identified as 'black' are more than 50% Caucasian. My Caucasian spouse Jill has just (proudly) discovered that her family carries the sickle cell genetic marker and this means that she has West African blood somewhere in her ancestry. Despite these problems the above descriptors will still be used, but this caveat should be borne in mind. Many of the papers in this issue and the previous one have been grouped under a single thematic heading for convenience when several different headings could have been chosen. The headings used are: Aims and social justice, Equity and teacher education, Gender, Globalization and social justice , Inclusion, Politics of mathematics education, Race, Research methodology and social justice, Social class, Social disadvantage, Special students, Theories and reflections. Clearly there is a great deal of overlap between several of these, for example, the four themes: Inclusion, Social class, Social disadvantage, and Special students although not identical have a great deal of overlap. However, using these labels at least gives a second indication of the articles' contents beyond their titles. The overall justification of a social justice orientation, both within education and in society at large, lies in the acknowledgement that fairness and justice are social goods themselves, and stand as the desired ends of a good and just society/world. As a good, social justice is then a desirable goal for all forms of social organisation and education, including mathematics education. The latter, irrespective of its own special characteristics, should contribute to this goal. However, mathematics has been remarked upon as playing a special role in sorting out students and preparing them for and directing them to different social stations (Dowling 1978, Ernest 1991, Ruthven 1987). Indeed, Sells (1978) coined the term critical filter for this social function of mathematics. Thus the teaching and learning of mathematics seems to occupy a special place in the provision of social justice – or its obstruction – within the education system. In the West, the critical social function of mathematics is exacerbated by the preconception that mathematical ability is largely inherited (Lim 2002). This prejudice coexists with the other research result (Task Group on Assessment and Testing 1988), that educational success is strongly (statistically) correlated with class/socioeconomic status, and indeed more so than with any other social characteristic. The prejudice that mathematical success largely derives from inherited characteristics, at least among adherents of the ideology, obviates the need of striving for mathematical success with students other than those of the already privileged. Thus a social justice orientation in mathematics education is necessary not only in a positive striving for a social good, but is also needed to overcome the negative perception that inequitable educational outcomes are an inevitable result of the teaching and learning of mathematics. In addition, given the historical role of mathematics in the anglophone West in separating the sexes, and indeed in defining the difference between them, there is much room for attention to social justice in mathematics education. The third question is why do some individuals believe in social justice? There is great divergence in interest and commitment to social justice among mathematics educators. Some view it as central to their professional concerns, whereas others take no personal or professional interest in pursuing social justice issues. Why this divergence? Of the three, this is the least addressed question in the literature and potentially the hardest to answer. Indeed it is an interesting topic for empirical research. Human beings are social beings whose identity is constructed and defined by their relationships with other persons. Central to the capacity to relate to others is empathy, the awareness of what others are feeling. Empathy derives from the knowledge that we as human beings are all the same, combined with our ability to imaginatively project ourselves into another person's situation and being. If another feels joy, sorrow, or pain, as human beings we have the capacity to share that feeling, to a varying extent. If we see another treated badly, unfairly, or unjustly we have the capacity to share the feelings of unfairness and injustice of the other that we would feel ourselves if it were us in their situation. ("That could be me.") However, in this brief introduction I can only offer a number of speculative reasons that might possibly, in combination with further as yet unidentified causes, account for some of these differences. We sympathise more with groups of persons we are closer to or connected with. Hence many will be more concerned with social justice for such groups as are proximate to themselves. Many persons who belong to a social group that has suffered disadvantage or discrimination will be committed to social justice for the group. This commitment is based on an enhanced empathy with that group as a result of having personally shared the same oppression coupled with membership of the group and a group-based identity. Some persons have for whatever reason suffered strong negative feelings including pain and sense of injustice as a consequence of their life histories, and may identify with others in the same position irrespective of kinship and shared social groupings. Some persons develop an ethical/social justice political perspective that is concerned with social justice everywhere on an abstract and principled basis for whatever reason, but one that is also felt and lived out. Some persons develop an intellectual/ethical system than may be termed connected (Gilligan 1982), or based on an ethic of care (Larrabee 1993) which pervades their whole life and work including their research interests in mathematics education. Other persons develop an intellectual/ethical system that may be termed separated (Gilligan 1982) that pervades their professional life and interests including their research interests in mathematics education. Such persons may be very ethical but may be primarily interested in psychological, mathematical or other technical aspects of mathematics education in which social justice dimensions are backgrounded or perceived as irrelevant. This last category, which might well include many mathematics educators and mathematicians, should not be disparaged or viewed as politically incorrect. To make such a negative judgement about others' beliefs may itself be to lack empathy and understanding for legitimate differences between persons and their views. As such it would contradict the empathetic basis of ethics and social justice. My speculations about the sources of personal commitment to social justice in mathematics education research so far is rather shaky. This remains a very interesting area needing more careful attention. These two issues of The Philosophy of Mathematics Education Journal addressing social justice have brought together a very interesting and broad ranging set of contributions from diverse range of contributors. Readers are also invited to look at The Montana Mathematics Enthusiast Monograph 1 (International Perspectives on Social Justice in Mathematics Education), 2007, which is edited by Bharath Sriraman, and is freely available online at . References Burton, L. Ed. (2003) Which way social justice and mathematics education? 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