

## *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* by Michael J. Sandel

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Professor of Government at Harvard University, Michael Sandel's course on justice is one of the most highly subscribed classes in the university's history. It has since spawned an interactive version online ([www.justiceharvard.org](http://www.justiceharvard.org)) and has been adapted into a twelve-part factual TV series. In this book - based on the 'Justice' lectures - such popularity is easy to understand. Sandel's book uses vivid examples from the real world to motivate the assessment of some of the key theories of justice philosophers have advanced. This includes discussion of the theories attributed to Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and others. Sandel then uses the supposedly unsatisfactory responses these theories give in order to argue for his own Aristotelian view of justice.

*Justice* begins with a chapter of examples - cases which prompt you to take a stance on whether or not an injustice has occurred. These cases include issues of price gouging (increasing prices in the face of great need, e.g. after a natural disaster) and of the recent bank bailouts. Having discussed the likely reactions that people have to such cases, Sandel proposes three ways in which we could account for our beliefs about justice: (1) the idea that justice involves maximising welfare, (2) that it involves always respecting some aspect of personhood, and (3) that ideas of justice involve ideas about

promoting 'the good life'. The remainder of the book discusses these options in more detail.

The most valuable discussions in Sandel's book are those where he assesses the views of the major schools of thought that exist in political philosophy. In the second chapter he explores utilitarianism (closely associated with John Stuart Mill). The theory is explained in terms simple enough to be understood by anyone unfamiliar with it, with examples provided to illustrate what position a utilitarian might take on various issues. As Sandel explains, utilitarianism is the theory that consequences are what matter, and so the just action is that which promotes the best outcome for the greatest number of people. Sandel then discusses some major objections to utilitarian thought. These include the claim that we all have rights that justice demands be protected, even in cases where the violation of individual rights would reap better consequences overall. Again, Sandel is able to provide many vivid cases from the real world that focus the mind and make his objections to such a theory seem very plausible. Examples are included that involve the use of torture against suspected terrorists and cannibalism. These are used to great effect and lend a readable quality to what is an informative discussion and dismissal of a utilitarian account of justice. Sandel then goes on to cover other accounts of justice that differ from the theory he wishes to support later in the book. The reader will find useful discussions and critiques of libertarianism, Kantianism and of the political theory of John Rawls.

Having set out some theories about justice, Sandel discusses one final example (in chapter 7) before going on to give his own view. This is an in-depth discussion on affirmative action, exploring the arguments that have been given for and against, and questioning

whether the discussion of justice up to this point in the book can clear up the issue. Sandel believes that it cannot, and spends the remainder of the book (chapters 8-10) arguing for a different position.

Sandel argues that many of the problems that afflict Western society stem from the belief that public debate and politics should be neutral when it comes to conceptions of 'the good life'. The liberal tradition is to accept that different people can have legitimately different conceptions of what the good consists of, often depending on religious, cultural or historical factors. Given this, it has been thought that the just thing to do in the political sphere is to remain neutral, allowing for different people to pursue their different projects as much as possible. Sandel believes that this is a mistake. It leads to a fracturing of society, a breakdown of civic feeling and to citizens ignoring or avoiding discussion of their differences rather than attempting to resolve them. To give an example from the book, Sandel believes that allowing vast inequalities of wealth in society is unjust, not because redistribution would increase utility or because it is what people would agree to if they were properly unbiased, but because inequality breaks down the feeling of civic solidarity. Citizens lead increasingly separate lives and a lack of interaction causes a lack of identification as members of the same polity. Sandel's proposal is that we ought to engage publicly and politically in proper moral discussion about what the good is for a society and then start enacting those policies that will bring about both the good, and a feeling of solidarity within the community. That is how to achieve justice.

That some of the practical applications of Sandel's own proposal seem plausible may be due to the number of interesting and

thought provoking examples that he uses throughout the book to motivate his position. However, there are many reasons for people to feel uneasy about the proposal that Sandel makes in these chapters. The idea that the state should be able to decide what constitutes ‘the good life’ and then implement policy that will encourage people to pursue that conception has worryingly dictatorial overtones. Certainly, it would remove equality of opportunity for those wishing to pursue different conceptions. Furthermore, even if we agree that it would be ‘good’ for the state to do this, it remains an open question whether or not this is what ‘justice’ amounts to. Simply equating the just state with the state that we think will bring about the best outcome is a questionable move. So we have reason to reject Sandel’s proposed account of justice – either because we dislike the idea of the society it suggests or because we think it is describing some feature other than justice.

And yet, even if Sandel’s own view is not one that should be accepted, the book does contain much that is of value. The discussions of rival theories are clear enough for a beginner without being overly simplistic. Furthermore, the examples given throughout will be of use to even the most experienced philosopher. They provide an impressive resource of cases on which to test out whatever theory of justice you want to advance. Therefore, this book is to be recommended regardless of how much thought you have given to these issues previously. *Justice* is a thoroughly readable book and, perhaps more importantly, it will make you think.