

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

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## Summary

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Throughout this book, *Sandel* discussed approaches to the question of morality, and its derivation - justice. He divided the decision-making process into three main parts: the evaluation of what is beneficial, the evaluation of what is moral or just, and the decisions or policies themselves.

He raised examples such as, utilitarianism versus libertarianism, deontology versus teleology, and equality versus equity. While he believes that it is beneficial to have a set of guidelines for policy-making, he criticised all of the above ideologies of being fragmentary of the complete picture, that they are too idealised that they could not feasibly exist in the real world to any significant scale. He suggested that the basis of justice is not to set rules or guidelines for the determination of justice itself, but rather to cultivate virtue among the people, especially the decision-makers. He proposed that the act of engaging people into evaluate justice is the basis of justice, since it would encourage communal discussions of socially-recognised standards with the end goal of building a justice evaluation system that everyone would be satisfied with.

## Analysis and Thought extensions

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### Comments

*Sandel* pointed out that despite the discussion about morality and justice spanning centuries, or even as long as humans have lived, the systems that philosophers have derived are nothing more than fun thought experiments with little real-world implications. While I agree with his viewpoint that cultivating morality within the community instead of only in the decision-makers would be beneficial overall, I am sceptical about the execution of such approaches. I believe that the act of cultivation may imply a framework be utilised in order to achieve this goal efficiently, especially in larger units of community. However loose this framework may be, the existence of one would mean that it must have been devised by someone, and it would inevitably make this framework fundamentally biased, which would go against the principles of justice itself. For example, if the moral standards were to teach the community that justice is the benefit of the many, it would serve to display that the value of utilitarianism is the true way of justice. As long as there is a human in the chain of the preaching of morality, it would skew the values and evaluation principles of the people by some degree inevitably.

Consider that the practice of cannibalism, which is generally considered to be unacceptably immoral and horrendously unthinkable, it is merely the fruit of the life-long preaching given by our society. In contrast, in communities like primitive tribes, or even in the animal kingdom, it would not be a rare sight. After all, the influence of values and moral standards of the society is what define cultures. Therefore, I propound that unless one was to be raised in an environment free of cultural influence, free of societal values, free to establish standards from scratch since birth, it would be impossible that one would be able to make impartial judgements to their fullest extent.

## *My own take*

I believe that *Sandel's* proposals ultimately failed to truly escape the fallacies despite trying to avoid over-idealisation. Considering that it is completely infeasible that there could exist a person, for example, a judge, who can make impartial but informed decisions of justice, I propose that we should instead embrace the bias. Instead of recruiting groups who are as unbiased and as morally just as possible, groups of people with opposing judgemental evaluations should be employed. I believe that this suggestion could sidestep problems that the current system that the majority of the world uses, and the over-idealised ones have.

For starters, someone who is trying to be unbiased must first study the interests of all stakeholders, the moral evaluation of all cultures, the values of all societies, et cetera. Let's first assume it was possible to enumerate all ideas across the entire human population for the sake of argument. It would still not be possible to study, and more importantly, experience those ideas in-depth, when compared to those who live by those ideas. Hence, any decisions that they might make would be no better than superficial pseudo-justice. However, multiple representatives of each method of evaluation and ideas could provide a varied sample of moral standards without sacrificing any of in-depth nuances and insights. While having debates between representatives wouldn't necessarily make an efficient system of judgement, I believe it would indeed evolve eventual consensus that most would agree with. This model can actually be seen in the Legislative Council of Hong Kong, where representatives of each field could contribute to hopefully propose policies that everyone is happy with.

To continue, I invite you to realise the flaws that any ideology must have. Even those that fundamentally consider mathematical fairness cannot agree on what fairness means. Equality concerns that each party be allocated equal portions of resources, while equity concerns that the resources be distributed based on the parties' need for them in a way that the necessitous would receive the most generous division. The example was to demonstrate that any one ideology can only concern a piecemeal extent of true justice, each with values they concern more or less of. By employing the various combination of them, they could mask each other's short-comings and average into a favourably fair outcome. This is the principle of "the wisdom of the crowd", where all opinions combined could achieve greater than the sum of their individuals.

## *Denouement*

Looking back, while most of the points raised concern policies of a larger scale, I believe the principles could also concentrate into principles we could use to evaluate our moral decisions. I propose that rather than considering the most seemingly reasonable "fair" option, we should first consider all the extremes. By compromising trade-offs, we can at least guarantee that mostly all aspects of the dilemma had been considered, instead of ditching ideas that might seem outrageous on the surface as we otherwise would have. As *Sandel* has written, the cultivation of morality is indeed the essence of morality. By studying unconventional or questionable modes of thinking in-depth, it might just allow us to consider ourselves and this world more holistically, to judge more morally and justly, no matter micro or macro.