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What Do We Owe One Another? / Dilemmas of Loyalty

Michael Sandel is a political philosopher and a professor at Harvard University. He is known for diving into the world of moral and political philosophies and how they apply to everyday life. He is also best known for being the author of “Justice: What’s The Right Thing To Do?”. He is admired for his knowledge of philosophy and making it more easily accessible through his classes and book, inspiring each new generation of students. As well as being great at connecting real world issues and having enlightening debates. Sandel’s book “Justice: What’s The Right Thing To Do?” is thought provoking and a great way for people to learn and reflect on morals and philosophies in society in a non-bias way. From the ideas of philosophers like Kant, Rawls, and Aristotle, Sandel developed a deeper understanding of justice. Sandel applied these ideas to society through discussions of ethics, morality, and politics.

Modern liberal philosophy emphasizes equal moral obligations to all people. All our lived experiences say something different. It is shaped by our personal loyalties to family, friends, community and nation. I chose chapter nine, What Do We Owe One Another? / Dilemmas of Loyalty because it stuck out to me the most. Specifically, apologies and reparations, should we atone for the sins of our predecessors and moral individualism are what I found to be most interesting in the chapter. This chapter goes into how our sense of right and wrong is not merely based on universal rules. Sandel dives into loyalty, history and community, and how it shapes what people feel they owe to others.

Sandel opens the chapter by discussing public apologies for past wrongs. He uses the example of Germany apologizing for the past wrongs the country did by recognizing the Holocaust, and Japan's contrasting approach by being reluctant to apologize. Sandel goes on to say, "Germany has paid the equivalent of billions of dollars in reparations for the Holocaust, in the form of payments to individual survivors and to the state of Israel. Over the years, German political leaders have offered statements of apology, accepting responsibility for the Nazi past in varying degrees" (Sandel, Ch. 9). This shows the nation's willingness to confront its past, reshape its identity, and express a genuine desire for reconciliation. Unlike Japan who took a different approach, "Japan has been more reluctant to apologize for its wartime atrocities... Since the 1990s, Japan has faced growing international pressure for a formal apology and restitution to the so-called "comfort women." ... Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe insisted that the Japanese military was not responsible for coercing the women into sexual slavery" (Sandel, Ch. 9). These differing approaches raise important questions about how nations and individuals should take responsibility for past injustices. And whether sincere apologies can help heal historical wounds.

In the text I found these two examples to be good models for how a nation can handle their past. A question I still have is whether gestures like apologies and reparations truly matter without significant change behind them. Who gets to decide when an apology is enough and what happens if it is too late or doesn't go far enough?

A relevant example that I have found in my own community is when there were racially restrictive covenants discovered in property deeds on Boston's North Shore. My family owns properties in the Boston area and are of Greek decent. Recently, I heard the news of these property deeds having racially restrictive covenants that include people of, "Negro, Jewish, Italian, Greek, Polish or Armenian blood" (Farrar). It was absolutely shocking to read that these

deeds still had such racist and discriminatory language in them. The good news is Harborlight Homes, and the North Shore NAACP had discovered them and took action to erase these racially restrictive covenants. Change is thankfully being done, “Harborlight Homes and the NAACP were able to find the racial covenants on the North Shore with the help of the Mapping Prejudice Project based at the University of Minnesota Libraries... In 2019, Harborlight provided the Mapping Prejudice Project with property records from the Southern Essex County Registry of Deeds... Local volunteers are now going through the deeds to see if the language still exists in the current or most recent deeds for the properties. Harborlight and the NAACP said they will assist homeowners who want to erase the language from their deeds” (Leighton). I think Harborlight and the NAACP are taking the correct steps in correcting the situation and finding a solution.

Furthermore, in chapter nine Sandel approached the next section by discussing “should we atone for the sins of our predecessors” (Sandel, Ch. 9). He touched upon different political figures who debated on taking accountability for past actions they were not involved in. One example of this is, “John Howard, the Australian prime minister, gave this reason for rejecting an official apology to the aborigines: “I do not believe that the current generation of Australians should formally apologize and accept responsibility for the deeds of an earlier generation” (Sandel, Ch. 9). I see the perspective in this argument; how can the people of today be held to the mistakes or wrongdoing of those before them? The section gives another example on this side of the debate, “When the New Jersey state legislature debated the apology question in 2008, a Republican assemblyman asked, “Who living today is guilty of slaveholding and thus capable of apologizing for the offense?” The obvious answer, he thought, was no one: “Today’s residents of New Jersey, even those who can trace their ancestry back to . . . slaveholders, bear no collective

guilt or responsibility for unjust events in which they personally played no role” (Sandel, Ch. 9). This raises an important point about the distinction between collective guilt and collective responsibility. These concepts are crucial to the question of whether people today should take responsibility for the past actions of their society or nation. Furthermore, while the argument that people of today are not responsible for the past I disagree. It makes sense from an individualistic perspective but fails to recognize the bigger picture. Society was shaped from the past and still has overlapping affects happening today. To completely disregard how and what choices were made is to neglect the people who are still suffering from generational trauma and setbacks due to the past. Even if we are not personally guilty for the past, I think it is still important to acknowledge the wrong doings and be proactive to make improvements.

Lastly, Sandel touches upon moral individualism, meaning individuals are only responsible for their own actions and not for the actions of others or for historical events beyond their control. Sandel wrote, moral individualism is, “It rests on the notion that we are responsible only for what we ourselves do, not for the actions of other people, or for events beyond our control. We are not answerable for the sins of our parents or our grandparents or, for that matter, our compatriots” (Sandel, Ch. 9). This idea could sound fair in theory, but I personally find it flawed. If people were only concerned with their own actions and did not take responsibility for the society they inherit, I think society could not morally function. Sandel brings in an argument in favor of moral individualism, “Immanuel Kant offered a more powerful version of the choosing self. Against the utilitarian and empiricist philosophers, Kant argued that we must think of ourselves as more than a bundle of preferences and desires. To be free is to be autonomous, and to be autonomous is to be governed by a law I give myself. Kantian autonomy is more demanding than consent. When I will the moral law, I don’t simply choose according to my

contingent desires or allegiances. Instead, I step back from my particular interests and attachments and will as a participant in pure practical reason” (Sandel, Ch. 9). This opinion fails to recognize that people are social beings and not truly individualistic. This overlooks how people are intertwine with one another and a part of society. People have strong morals, relationships and families, we are not simply individuals but also social creatures. Sandel also has a point against moral individualism, “...freedom leaves little room for collective responsibility, or for a duty to bear the moral burden of historic injustices perpetrated by our predecessors” (Sandel, Ch. 9). I agree with this quote, many takes on moral individualism fail to truly acknowledge the past. He debates, if we only recognize obligations we choose, we risk ignoring the remaining effects of past injustices and the moral ties that connect us to people around us. This perfectly sums up my opinion as well about collective responsibility and how we are all connected as people and past, present and future. Moral individualism is appealing can seem fair because it says we should only be responsible for what we personally do. It protects people from being blamed for things they didn’t cause. But this idea can become a problem when it’s used to ignore the unfair systems we still benefit from today. An example of this is even if a person today didn’t create slavery they could to this day still be benefitting from it. If people did not take responsibility for the past nothing would change or improve. Justice needs us to take a deeper look into societal issues and the bigger picture, not just stay in our own bubbles.

Lastly, Sandel’s examination of moral responsibility, loyalty, and justice make us think further and outside of our own bubbles. Chapter nine brought up important points such as, what do we owe to one another, should we feel responsible for injustices we didn’t personally commit. Even though moral individualism can be appealing, it can also be used to avoid difficult realities.

I believe that true justice means not only having individual accountability but also knowing that we are all connected to each other by history, community, and shared responsibility.

Sources

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