

Anna Palmer

SOC-250-001

21 September 2025

Reflection #1

Michael J. Sandel is a Professor at Harvard University. He has taught political philosophy since 1980 and lives in Brookline, Massachusetts. In his book, ‘Justice: What’s The Right Thing To Do?’, he speaks on the developments of morality and justice through different philosophers throughout history, as well as how it applies to situations in society today. Throughout the book, he provides us with many pressing issues in society and the development of the issues over history. He provides debates about college acceptances, surrogate mothers, abortion, same sex marriage, and many more. The book was intended to draw up questions about what is considered “right” versus what is considered “good”. It was written to progress one’s understanding of morality and justice.

When reflecting on this book, one of the main debates that I felt I could connect with the most throughout real life was the debate on college acceptances. When I was applying to colleges, I didn't have many extracurriculars to put on my application. I did gymnastics growing up, meaning I trained 17 hours a week for ten years of my life. I was also the head coach of one of the gymnastics teams and would coach 8 hours a week. I was able to fit in a few clubs, such as the Food Ark and Nation Organization for Women, but not nearly as much as most people were. I kept up good grades and finished high school with above a 4.0 GPA. While all seven of my weekdays were slammed, it still looked like I did very little in my free time on my applications. Most people had more clubs and were able to take Wake Tech classes, I was barely getting through all the responsibilities I already had. So, while applying to colleges, I looked much less

impressive than many others applying. This reduced the amount of colleges that I was accepted into. Friends of mine that had lower GPAs and more quantity of extracurriculars were accepted into colleges that I was not.

In Chapter 7, “Arguing Affirmative Action,” it speaks on this debate, what should be considered when accepting people into colleges. On page 169 it says, “A 700 SAT score from a student who attended poor public schools in the South Bronx means more than the same score for a graduate of an elite private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. But assessing test scores in light of students’ racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds does not challenge the notion that colleges and universities should admit those students with the greatest academic promise; it is simply an attempt to find the most accurate measure of each individual’s academic promise.” An SAT score is not the measure of one’s academic success, but rather one’s academic potential. The idea is that someone from an elite private school would have more time and resources to study for the SAT to in turn get a greater score. Someone in a poorer neighborhood and school would likely have less time to study due to family and money struggles. They would also likely have less resources due to budget within the school and lack of ability to pay for personal classes. These are all issues that happen in real life and create an education gap between students. It is important to weigh these things when it comes to acceptances into colleges. This is discussed on pages 178 and 179 where it says, “The belief that jobs and opportunities are rewards for those who deserve them runs deep, perhaps more so in the United States than in other societies. Politicians constantly proclaim that those who “work hard and play by the rules” deserve to get ahead, and encourage people who realize the American dream to view their success as a reflection of their virtue.” It is assumed that if one does what they are told and do the right thing, they will get ahead of others. However, since not everyone comes from the same

background, it is difficult to determine that everyone has a fair starting position. Maybe someone who comes from a wealthy family has connections for internships and are able to put themselves out there easier while someone who comes from a poorer family has to work to afford college and doesn't have time for an unpaid internship that could put them in the position to work in the field they want to be in.

While my situation with less time for other clubs and activities is much less of an issue, it can still tie into this debate. Is it fair for one who does not understand the amount of time and work that comes with being a gymnast to review my application? Is it fair for one to make a judgement on my time management levels when they do not understand that I would leave school to go to a five hour practice before even starting the homework I had for the night? While there is not a direct answer to these questions, we can look into the morality and justice behind why people are accepted into colleges that they are. Earlier in the book, on page 154, it states, "One way of remedying this unfairness is to correct for social and economic disadvantage. A fair meritocracy attempts to do so by going beyond merely formal equality of opportunity." While this is not directly about the college acceptance debate, it ties into it quite nicely. When looking at this through the lens of college acceptances, we can see that while college admissions may not know the differences between sports or how much time they take up, we can see that they try to go beyond looking at economic and schooling opportunities. They want to see what you did with your time, how well you were able to keep up with your academics with the extracurriculars you were participating in, and how involved you were with said extracurriculars. They want to see that you took initiative and did these things all out of your free will and motivation. So, morally it may be seen as wrong since there will be some colleges that find it more important for you to be participating in sports while some may believe clubs are more important. Morality will be

different between different colleges, but justice will stay very similar or the same. Justice is the equality that the book was talking about. It is important to look into the way each student lived, maybe they had more time for extracurriculars and maybe they didn't have any time. This doesn't mean that one student is better than another, it just means that each person comes from a different background and it is important to understand that when accepting people into colleges.

Another very important debate that I found very interesting to read about was the same sex marriage debate. Religion was brought up many times and how one's morality should not cross into the justice of others. In the book, on page 253, it states, "Can you decide whether the state should recognize same-sex marriage without entering into moral and religious controversies about the purpose of marriage and the moral status of homosexuality?" This is asking us to think about whether we can say if same-sex marriage is fair without bringing up our own personal beliefs and moral standards. The book then says, "Some say yes, and argue for same-sex marriage on liberal, nonjudgmental, grounds: whether one personally approves or disapproves of gay and lesbian relationships, individuals should be free to choose their marital partners. To allow heterosexual but not homosexual couples to get married wrongly discriminates against gay men and lesbians, and denies them equality before the law." This is claiming that despite the differentiations on morality between people in society, same-sex marriage is still something that is justified because everyone should be allowed to marry who they want to marry. Getting married to someone should not be prohibited by law according to justice. Later in the book, on page 255, it says, "If marriage were an entirely private affair, ... all the disputes over gay marriage would become irrelevant. Gay marriage would not have the official sanction of government, but neither would straight marriage." If marriage is private and between two people, then it would not be of issue to anyone else. The argument that I hear often is, "if it has

no effect on you, why should you be worried about it.” This argument is very important and ties into the quote pulled from the book above. Why would one worry about what others choose to do with their lives if it has nothing to do with them? The only argument that I have heard in response is that it is against what God would want. In this case, we can go back to the morality argument and say that religion has zero place in deciding whether people should be allowed to get married or not.

Through reading this book, it changed my perspective on how I look at certain issues. It raised questions that I would have never thought of and provided me with greater insight on morality versus justice. Morality and justice are both very big issues in society today and people tend to have a very difficult time differentiating between the two of them. In conclusion with what I have read, morality is the public’s ideologies and thoughts on certain issues, while justice is the balance of virtue, freedom, and welfare. Justice is the most important thing to look into when understanding different societal issues.