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Reflection One

Michael Joseph Sandel is an American author and Harvard professor who teaches political philosophy. His book, “Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?” illustrates the ideas of previous philosophers while discussing real-world dilemmas that still occur today. Michael Sandel displays these philosophies as theories and examples that prove how they are relevant in today’s world. Sandel drew on philosophers such as Rawls, Kant, and Aristotle to develop the examples and theories. Because Sandel illustrates these theories in simple examples, he allows readers to think critically about fairness, rights, and the good for all. Sandel pushes the reader to not only think about what actions people choose, but also why they make them.

Michael Sandel addresses the philosopher John Rawls in his book, “Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do.” Rawls was a philosopher who lived from 1921 to 2002. He is famous for his veil of ignorance concept, as well as theories of justice being fair. Rawls developed a theory of fairness as an alternative to libertarianism and utilitarianism. It created a sense of justice whilst avoiding the downsides of the other viewpoints. Utilitarianism risks the rights of the individual whilst allowing society to be equal. Libertarianism ignores the rights of the community and creates inequality so it can protect the rights of an individual. Rawls’ concept allows us to use both parts of the ideologies to help create a better society. Rawls talks about a hypothetical called The Original Position, where we are asked to design a society where we have to think about justice in a fair way. Personally, I come from a nice background where I have been blessed with

the opportunity to attend college. If I were to design a society right now, I would have a bias for people like me; if I were asked to design a society later in life, I would have a bias for wherever I am. If I were retiring, I would be biased and not want to be taxed more on my retirement fund, despite it being for my community. Thankfully, the hypothetical includes the “veil of ignorance” where I do not know my own role in society. It eliminates my bias because I have no clue the stage in life I am at, which allows me to account for all people in society. It creates a strong sense of justice and fairness that would otherwise not be there because of my bias. Sandel addresses the reasoning behind the veil of ignorance, but I still feel like I would have bias towards myself; I think it is a part of basic human nature to be biased, and I do not know how I would completely eliminate it. If I did not know my place in society, how would my choices about fairness differ from where I am now? Rawls uses two principles of justice: equal basic liberties and the difference principle. His equal basic liberties state that every person should have the same fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to vote, and protection under the law. These certain liberties cannot be traded away for social benefits. I agree with this because they are some of the most important liberties in our country, and they should never be sacrificed. Rawls uses his difference principle, which states that any inequalities in wealth, power, and opportunity are only just if they also improve the positions of those in the lowest advantaged part of society. I also agree on this principle because it allows society to be just. It would not be fair at all for someone to be handed an advantage that only they can use and not all of society. Rawls directly goes against utilitarianism, which tries to maximize people’s happiness and will sacrifice people’s rights to do so. Rawls argues that justice must respect people equally, which I agree with fully. I think that Rawls creates a nice balance between libertarianism and utilitarianism. When either one of the ideologies is used solely, I think it

creates a radical society that can never really exist. It creates such an unjust society that it either only focuses on an individual or only focuses on the maximization of happiness.

Michael Sandel also addresses the philosopher Immanuel Kant in his book, “Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?” Kant was an eighteenth-century German philosopher who influenced Western philosophy. Sandel includes Kant in his book because of his alternative to utilitarianism. Kant wanted to have morality be from duty and reason instead of being from consequence. He argued that morality should come from principles, and rational beings should recognize and follow them. I think that Kant takes his philosophy too far because he focuses so hard on being absolute that he never looks at the outcomes. He looks too hard at the motives rather than the consequences. I do like how Kant’s ideas are about acting morally while also being free. He talks about how being free does not mean you can do whatever you want; true freedom means that you follow moral laws. In principle, I think this is a good idea, but it can never be accomplished. People are inherently bad, so there is no point in following this code. People will exploit and cheat the system. Sandel highlights Kant’s principle in two key points: Universal Law and Humanity. With Universal Law, you should only act in accordance with laws that are always true. So, according to Kant, even when you lie about something that almost anyone would lie about, it is still morally wrong. This part is where I disagree heavily; I think Kant takes the principle way too far. I do like Kant for his view on utilitarianism. I think he points out the flaws very well and displays how you should not be using others as a tool for someone else’s happiness. Kant emphasizes rights, dignity, and moral duty, which later influenced Rawls’ thinking. I think that I prefer Rawls much more because it is not as radical as Kant.

Michael Sandel uses Aristotle in his book to talk about telos. Aristotle's stance on telos is that it is a virtue. He argues that to determine what is just, we must understand the purpose of what we are talking about. I like Aristotle's stance on this, but I do not think he takes into consideration those who come from an unfortunate background. If the best flute player should get the best flute, then how is anyone supposed to improve? If I had no access to any good basketballs or basketball courts, how would I have any chance at going pro? Aristotle also talks about human beings needing to be a part of a community, and the only justice that can be interpreted is the common good. He says that justice is about aligning social roles and rewards with the deeper ends of human beings. I think that Aristotle is somewhat right about justice only being the common good; we can interpret what the common good is, but we should also look to help others in society, even if it does not benefit society as a whole. Sandel frames Aristotle as a communitarian, but I disagree with this take. I feel like Aristotle only looks at the best people in each society and does not focus on the impoverished or less advantaged people in society. I do agree with the framework that Sandel uses on Aristotle's principle of same-sex marriage. I think that at the core of same-sex marriage, people are marrying each other to love and support one another, and that is their basic human right. It is odd to see this view coming from a far different time, and I understand that it was not traditional for this to occur in ancient Greece. I also like how Sandel uses the framework to address golf handicaps. I personally play it for fun, so I do play with extra strokes. If I were to play to win the game, I would play without the strokes so I have the same advantage as everyone. I like how he looks at how we approach the subject, and he does that better than other philosophers.

I really enjoyed reading the book and gaining perspective on each viewpoint. I think I fall in the middle between libertarian and utilitarian. I want to help make society more even, but not

sacrifice individuals' rights. I think that Rawls is the philosopher I relate to the most out of the three because he also talks about evening society. The veil of ignorance creates a great hypothetical where people have to come to terms with how uneven societies are. I think that I heavily disagree with Kant because he emphasizes individuals' freedoms far more than they should be. He would rather someone suffer than take money out of someone's pocket. He focuses way too much on morals, and that could never happen in a society. Aristotle has an interesting take where he focuses on the meaning behind the action. I kind of like his take but I feel like he does not look at all of society.