

SOC 250- 001

9/19/2025

A reflection of “*Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*”

Michael Sandel is a political philosophy professor at the University of Harvard and renowned author. Sandel’s books cover themes of justice, ethics, democracy, and philosophy. “*Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*” is one of three of Sandel’s books we will be reading this semester. In “*Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*” Sandel depicts real world current events with historical approaches to justice. Sandel provides the examples, to allow the reader to explore some of the biggest political and moral questions, that also tend to be the most controversial. Throughout the book, the reader is presented with complex ideas, with multiple perspectives that allow us to decipher our personal opinion on a topic.

Throughout the book we are presented with a couple philosophers: Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and Aristotle. Sandel uses their theories and opinions in the book, to connect them with recent issues. In the first couple chapters we are introduced to concepts that work as a framework to how we view the rest of the situations in the book. For example, Utilitarianism and Libertarianism. Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher, economist, and legal reformer, was the founder of modern utilitarianism. The utilitarian philosophy aims to maximize happiness for the largest number of people possible. Even if it is at the expense of individual rights. John Stuart Mill, one of England’s most renowned philosophers and political economists, also believed in utilitarianism. His central idea is that people should be allowed to do whatever they want, as long as they are not harming others. He believes that actions are morally right if they bring happiness to the largest amount of people, yet he refines the theory by also believing that over time, respecting human liberty will lead to the greatest happiness. We are also introduced to

philosopher. He believed that individuals have the rights “so strong and far-reaching” that “they raise the question of what, if anything, the state should do.” Nozick rejects the idea of overall good, and a current example of this being the discourse around income equality. Nozick would argue that redistribution is unjust. Libertarians love the minimal state. That entails: no paternalism, no moral legislation, and no redistribution of wealth. So, I ask myself, is maximizing happiness always the best course of action? I believe it depends on the situation. If most of society is content, without the violation of a minority's human rights then I would agree. But if at the cost of some human rights being violated for the majority's happiness, then I would strongly disagree.

While covering the first three chapters, in class we discussed the Afghan Goat herders situation, it really resonated with me. In June of 2005, a special forces team set out on a mission in Afghanistan in search of a Taliban leader. The Navy SEAL's were informed that the Taliban leader was hiding out in a mountainous region. As they started their trek up the mountain, they ran into two Afghan goat herders, one of them appearing to be a young boy of around 14 years old, both unarmed. The soldiers contemplated their options. They could either kill them or set them free. Without any rope available, they were unable to tie the goat herders to allow time for them to find a new hideout. One soldier argued for them to kill the goat herders. His reasoning was that they were on active duty, they were behind enemy lines, and they had every right to do everything to save their own lives. Officer Marcus Luttrell, advocated for the release of the goat herders. He casted the deciding vote for the fate of the goat herders. Luttrell explains that his faith and morals would not allow him to kill the unarmed men. An hour or so later after they had released them, the four soldiers were surrounded by a numerous army of Taliban soldiers.

U.S helicopter who was trying to rescue them, had been shot down, killing all 16 members on board. In retrospect, Luttrell believes he made the wrong decision, as would anyone, if they knew how this situation would end. He deeply criticizes his decision to vote for releasing the goat herders. For the reader, it may seem to have been an obvious decision: to kill the goat herders. Given that we know the result of the situation, it is hard to disagree with Luttrell that he should've killed them. I like how Sandel addresses the uncertainty of the situation. Sandel brings up multiple perspectives. Although Luttrell anticipated that keeping them alive would be the wrong choice, he could not bring himself to kill two human beings in cold blood. We could also assume that the goat herders were Taliban sympathizers. If this information had somehow been known beforehand, Luttrell and his squad, I believe, would've had an easier decision to make knowing that they are their active enemies. Now suppose they were against the Taliban, and the reason they snitched on the Americans was because they were tortured to release intel. If this information had somehow been known beforehand, I think it would make it harder to kill them in cold blood knowing they are on the same side as the Americans. But one could also see it as sparing them from being tortured and having their position revealed to the Taliban. I appreciate how Sandel did not automatically assume that the two men were guilty of siding with the Taliban. That is definitely a likely possibility, but allowing for the option of them being innocent as well and having to unwillingly release information could have also happened. This example in the book really stood out to me. Not only because it was a real life event, but because there's another level of complexity. As someone who has never had military experience, I could not bring myself to kill anyone. Especially in a morally conflicting situation such as this one. But if I

might be, unfortunately I would vote to kill the two men.

In chapters six through eight, we are introduced to John Rawls. Rawls was an American political philosopher. He argued that the way we should think about justice is to ask what principles we would agree to in an initial situation of equality. Rawl's idea of a social contract is a hypothetical position of equality. He proposed "The Veil of Ignorance". "The Veil of Ignorance" is a unique experiment where people decide on principles of justice for a society before knowing their own social position, race, physical mobility, economic status, gender, etc. Rawls believes that by removing that information, people are most likely to agree to a society that protects all members and everyone's human rights are valued. This creates an impartial society that disregards self interest. Rawls also believes that society should find ways to reduce inequalities. He thinks jobs, opportunity, and education should be available to everyone. Which I agree with. Rawls' difference principle states that inequalities are only allowed if they benefit those with the least advantages in society. A real world example of this is a progressive tax system. With this tax system, those with higher pay will pay a greater amount from their income taxes. And these taxes can be used to fund systems such as public school, healthcare, affordable housing, food assistance, and other programs that people in the lower income bracket can use. According to Rawls's difference principle, inequality would still exist. But, with a fraction of the wealth these high income individuals are making, it is moral to redistribute the wealth and it benefits the least advantaged.

Another topic that stood out to me is in Chapter 7, "Arguing Affirmative Action". As a student of color in a predominantly white institution, I strongly support affirmative action. Sandel provides a couple reasons for the argument of supporting affirmative action. They correct

white high school but it was also wealthy. Therefore, I was privileged to learn from my teachers, other faculty, and classmates, what steps I needed to take to get into college. Coming from a first generation perspective, I was grateful to have the resources I had in school. I cannot even begin to imagine a student's perspective from an underfunded, maybe rural, school. Having parents that guide you through the college process, and fund your ability to take the ACT/SAT as many times as you want is an immense privilege. Another big reason I support affirmative action is that it promotes diversity. If a university wants a preferred demographic to attend their university, that is their personal goal. Throughout history, people of color have been limited to higher education. Therefore, I think a university should be allowed to accept a demographic based on their personal preferences as an institution.

Overall, I enjoyed reading Sandel's "*Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*". Sandel touches on topics that involve my life, but I rarely think about. I have been applying these theories and perspectives to current events that are happening. I have become more open minded. I am really looking forward to reading his other two books.