

SOC 250

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Reflection on *Justice*

As a fourth-year Philosophy student, I have learned of J.S. Mill's utilitarianism, libertarianism, Immanuel Kant's ethics and categorical imperatives, Aristotle's virtue ethics, and the general ideals of ethical justice. I am a young woman in America who is a media consumer and has experience in Political Science courses. What I have yet to do is plainly lay out how my philosophical views align with my social and political views outside of the connections I make in my head, and that is what I plan to use this reflection paper for.

I found it unexpectedly hard to read and discuss utilitarianism and libertarianism in a way that is solely sociological and political rather than first discussing them in a philosophical sense and making my own connections to those disciplines. It made me realize that maybe I make it harder on myself to learn and draw connections with these topics because of this sense that I must first understand the philosophy of the thinker or the ideals. I personally think in a way that pulls from the philosophies of happiness and ethics so that is the lens through which I will be recollecting my thoughts on Michael J. Sandel's *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*

Stripped bare, utilitarianism is the idea of acting in a way that causes the most happiness for the most people. In the same vein, libertarianism is the idea that as humans, we have the right to do whatever we want as long as we respect that other people also have the right to do whatever they want. I personally started reading as being most familiar with J.S. Mill's view on

course would seem to be the focus. Pain and pleasure are our “sovereign masters.” Mill tries to reign the “utility” of Bentham’s utilitarianism back into how we can make it work for the individual. Mill says, “over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” The contrast between pain and pleasure being sovereign versus the individual being sovereign might seem to be a fine line but no worries, Mill, like many philosophers I know, likes to explain in much, much detail...

While rejecting Bentham’s take, Mill explains that focusing on the individual is, in fact, still prioritizing the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Bentham, to me as a Mill-reader, focuses on a large-scale system. He tells us that politicians should be asking themselves about what legislation will be best for the greatest number of people. Mill says we can focus more effectively on the individual rather than these larger systems like the government of societies. Sandel even says “Bentham’s argument for the principle that we should maximize utility takes the form of a bold assertion.”

This is why I agree with Mill on having to reject Bentham’s take on the principle. Over time, Mill argues, as Sandel puts it, “respecting individual liberty will lead to the greatest human happiness.” This is what I rest my ideals of utilitarianism on. Like the nerd I am, one of my favorite quotes is from feminist scholar Margaret Mead and I first heard it on my favorite show, Aaron Sorkin’s *The West Wing*. “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” My philosophical studies have revolved around ethics and that one quote is one that I think of constantly. Not only is it empowering but it is proved to be true by history time and time again. The main idea of utilitarianism being to act in a way that causes the most happiness for the most people is

not.

Something I've learned is that it is near to impossible to be a modern person and agree wholeheartedly with everything one philosopher or one theory ever upholds. Most philosophies that are the building blocks of society today were formed at least hundreds of years ago. To not only survive but be moral and happy in modern society, not one of these theories will be fully accurate to what you need or believe you need. I am not a utilitarian, and I am not a libertarian. And yet, as archaic as these terms can be, they still are, as I said, the building blocks of modern society. I've been trying to reflect on why that is. Yes, it is hard for anything not made in modern times to be fit for modern standards but there has got to be more to it than that...

"Justice and the common good" is a phrase used over and over, let alone being a whole chapter in Sandel's book. I've been wondering why "justice" and "common good" are put together so often. The thing is, politics today is seemingly supposed to be surrounded by these ideas. That justice and common good are what drive legislation, economy, civics, and all aspects of any sort of democratic society. As Sandel puts it, our challenge is to "imagine a politics that takes moral and spiritual questions seriously." We all want our personal beliefs and experiences to be heard and put into consideration when politicians are making decisions because we each are individuals and must work ourselves to make sure our society works for ourselves as individuals. What makes it harder is also that which makes it clearer; we all have various personal needs and beliefs. It is good and bad in a society. As Sandel points out, "society requires a strong sense of community."

Something I found interesting about what Sandel says a little later is how Kennedy managed to invoke Americans' pride in America while simultaneously appealing to their sense

able to separate his personal preoccupations from his point about the injustices he mentions, Sandel knows that isn't true and I agree with him. Even drawing back to Mill's sense that the individual level is just as important if not more important than the whole, I believed before reading *Justice* and even more now that the individual cannot separate their personal beliefs from what they bring to society and into every speech and decision. But is this not what people hate about politicians? Their ability to appeal to the whole while also keeping their personal beliefs on track with all the work they do? Is that not the work of a politician in the structure of modern society that these old philosophers helped build?

A one of the things Immanuel Kant is most known for believing is that humans are not ends in themselves. According to Kant, an "end" is something that is valuable all on its own but a "means" to an end is just that: something that is used to achieve that end. Philosophically, something unique just to human beings is that we have rational thought. That is the difference between humans and animals plainly, that we have rational thought while animals and non-living things cannot possibly possess that. That is the main argument for why humans must be seen as ends and not means, let alone because they deserve it morally. I agree with this aspect of Kantian philosophy. In this sense, as Sandel explains, I am not a utilitarian because a utilitarian would treat others as a means to the end of collective happiness. So how, if individuals are how community is made, are we not supposed to use humans as a means to make things better for everyone? How am I supposed to want universal human rights while simultaneously not using humans as a reason to get there?

We had a discussion in class one day, and it was mentioned that Kant likes to contradict himself. At the time, knowing the Kantian philosophies I know, I disagreed. But after reading the rest of Sandel's *Justice*, I might just believe it. If Kant is one of the many great philosophical

works today feels so contradictory to the idea that happiness is the ultimate goal? It is not just Kant that contradicts himself, it is every philosopher. It proves just what I was thinking before, that it is nearly impossible to agree fully with everything one philosopher or one ideology purports. So again, it is hard for anything not made in modern times to be fit for modern standards, but are the things made in modern times even exclusively made from modern thought? Is there a “veil of ignorance” of sorts for ideas for systems of modern society where we can abandon what older philosophers have said that influenced modern societal systems? As a philosophy major, I grapple with this often; the question of if I can trust philosophers as far back as the Enlightenment period to have theories that still work today. We don’t question it. We don’t question that philosophers a lot of people have never heard of are actually huge sources of inspiration for modern America. The morality of last century isn’t always going to work in this day and age. Never before has the world had such advanced technology that we have today, let alone social media as a whole. These are the many things I am grappling with in this course, in my academic career, and in my journey of being educated in politics and social issues.