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Michael J. Sandel's Justice: What's the right thing to do? It's more than just a philosophy book, it is the opportunity to really think about what justice means for ourselves. The book takes us throughout some of the history of philosophical debate. Sandel uses these historical takes on philosophy and ties them into real life dilemmas. This allows us to draw our own conclusions and decide for ourselves what is morally right for each individual situation. When I first read this book, I was expecting it to be mostly philosophy focused. What I ended up finding was a way to not only question what is morally correct, but redefine it all together. Sandel explores five main philosophical frameworks, utilitarianism, libertarianism, Kant, Rawls, and Aristotle, and connects them to real life experiences.

Sandel starts off with the idea of what is right and what is wrong. He brings up the idea of price gouging during natural disasters and the ethical and moral implications behind it. He wants the reader to draw their own conclusion on where exactly to draw the line before it becomes ruthless. From here, Sandel uses price gouging as an introduction into what exactly is right and wrong. He gives perspective to both sides, arguing that while some might find it morally incapable. If bottled water costs more, maybe people won't scalp and hoard it as much, and water bottle companies now have more incentive to rush shipments to affected areas. This is the welfare idea, that it should be judged on the overall outcome, not how it got there. I personally don't like the idea of profiting from desperation, and I think most people would agree with me.

The idea of this is that Sandel isn't trying to tell us what is right and what is wrong, he is trying to get us to use our instincts in order to draw these conclusions for ourselves.

Sandel begins with the idea of utilitarianism, the idea that the most ethical action produces the greatest overall happiness for the greatest number of people. In his book, he talks about famous philosophers like Bentham and Mill. He uses Bentham's claims that it can all be quantified, like calculation of morality. From his perspective, the right action will be what leaves the world or public with the highest balance of happiness to dissatisfaction. John Stuart Mill sort of refines this viewpoint by distinguishing between exactly what is being benefited and lost. Mill argues that certain benefits may be more valuable than others. Sandel presents these because they are still relevant today. Many of Bentham's ideas are still shown in today's policy making like sentencing and things like cost-benefit analyses. The idea of utilitarianism is that it gives us the ability to handle hard tradeoffs that we as a society are constantly facing. During Covid for example, the government had to weigh the overall happiness of the public against the welfare of the public. To consider the utilitarian idea when assessing a problem, you have to ask yourself, which choice maximizes the overall well-being of the public, despite the consequences to get there. Scientists do this all the time when assessing things like safety controls, or protocols. They assess how many lives it saves, despite how many it may cost in order to justify their reasoning.

Sandel argues that utilitarianism is far from a perfect system and I agree. One glaring weakness of utilitarianism is the idea that only caring about the sum of happiness and overall satisfaction can lead to oversights and risks trampling on certain people's individual rights. He references the idea that in ancient Rome, they would throw the Christians to the lions in order to

amuse the crowd and raise the overall happiness for everyone. But by doing so, it destroyed the individual human innate rights of those christians. It feels wrong, not only because of the consequences of those people dying, but because it disrupts the balance between what is good and what is evil. Another weakness of utilitarianism is the idea that everything can be measured on a single scale. Is it morally acceptable to judge the happiness of someone's friendship perhaps with someone's happiness for life? Sandel suggests that some values just can't be compared. For example, if I get called by a friend at 4 in the morning to pick him up at a bar because he is afraid to drive, can I compare my happiness for good quality sleep to his happiness for safety and life? How about the happiness for safety of anyone else on the road that night. In my own experience I can see the idea of utilitarianism in my own everyday decisions. My point is that some things just can't be compared equally.

Sandel also explores the idea of libertarianism and the right to choose and limit freedoms. It focuses less on the collective happiness of the public, and puts more weight on the rights of the individual. He argues that from this perspective, we are all our own person and have the freedom to do what we want with our lives and property so long as it doesn't negatively affect others. I really like this viewpoint because it resonates with the natural idea that my time and my body are mine to control and no one else's. It puts forth the idea that the freedom of choice is what makes a society just, not the actions that are taken. Sandel really forces us to put this to the test and see if it's true in all cases. Sandel talks about the volunteer army _____. He argues that on the surface it might seem fair because the individual person is the one choosing to enlist, but in reality the majority of the people enlisting come from poor or desperate communities where enlisting in the

army might be the only opportunity for them. Sandel wants us to think is this choice really voluntary is it a choice of necessity. Can unequal conditions truly undermine freedom?

This idea of the right to choose really made me think of college students. I have many friends and colleagues that feel they were forced into certain majors or jobs not because it brings them the most satisfaction but because of societal or familial pressures from within. While on paper it may seem they are choosing their path, in reality their options are possibly limited by certain inequalities like financial needs or expectations. A libertarian might argue that this is still a choice, but Sandel pushes us to see that certain freedoms only have real meaning when the conditions behind are truly fair. This is one of the reasons why Sandel criticizes libertarianism as an incomplete system.

After this, Sandel shifts into the ideas of Immanuel Kant, who has a completely different perspective on things. Kant argues that morality is not about maximizing happiness or even protecting people's freedom of choice. He believes that the true level of morality lies in our motives, not our actions. He argues that an action should be judged not on the outcome of said action, but on the reason behind it. Kant introduces two main ideas that I believe are important. The principle of universalization, in which you should only act on a rule that you would want everyone else to follow. The second idea is we cannot use people as tools in order to get what we want, no matter how beneficial the outcome may be. Every individual has dignity and that dignity must be respected.

Kant's perspective also challenges the idea of utilitarianism. His famous thought experiment about lying to a murderer if they ask where my friend is hiding. The utilitarian perspective might say that lying is the right choice because it saves your friend's life, but Kant argues that lying is always wrong because it violates the person's dignity and right to the truth, and treats the murderer as not rational. It definitely seems like an extreme example, but Kant's idea isn't about bending the rules in order to ensure a positive outcome, it's about holding ourselves accountable to the idea that we treat everyone with respect.

After Kant, Sandel introduces the ideas of John Rawls. Rawls argues that justice should not be about maximizing happiness or protecting freedoms, but instead wants us to think about it from a third party perspective. He calls this the "veil of ignorance." This thought process asks us to come up with the rules for a just society without knowing who we would be in the society. Rawls believes that if that were the case, we would choose a society that is more fair for everyone since no one wants to gamble on themselves ending up in a poor societal position. I find this perspective to be really important because it forces me to confront the role of luck in my own life to be born a white American male. None of us choose who we were born as, our families, or even what value we have to society. Rawls says that these are morally arbitrary, and that justice requires us to correct that. Thinking about myself, I realize how much of my life depended on circumstances out of my control. If I had been born into a less than favorable situation, I would want society structured fairly in order to give me a fair shot. That is what Rawls is aiming for.

In the final chapters, Aristotle argues that justice is teleological, meaning the end goal or purpose of a practice determines what is just. To figure out what's fair, we have to ask ourselves what the purpose of something is. Aristotle also says that justice is honorific, meaning that deciding what is just involves deciding what virtues we want to reward. Sandel connects this to modern debates like same sex marriage where the disagreement isn't only about the freedom of choice, but the purpose behind marriage. This framework is important because it reminds us that justice isn't morally neutral. Unlike the libertarian perspective, Aristotle thinks that justice always points us towards what is right, and that politics is where we can reason about what exactly is right. If we only talk about the efficiency behind decisions, or the individual rights that are affected, we miss the important things, in what kind of virtues and morals we want to build our society around.

Ultimately, Sandel doesn't give us one finite answer about what justice is, instead he shows us that justice is a conversation that we have as a society. The willingness to ask the important questions of not just what works, but what is ultimately right. For me, living justly is not only about defending my own rights, but really about thinking of what kind of society I not only want to live in, but what society I want to help create. Justice is not a set of rules, but a platform for us as scholars to continue asking and answering these questions. In that sense, the important of Sandel's work is not just about the theories he lays out, but the dialogue he creates.