SOC 250-001

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Reflection #1

Introduction

In the book "Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do," Michael Sandel explores different theories of justice through real-world cases. He is good at showing how theories connect with real moral questions. He focuses on theories such as utilitarianism, libertarianism, Kantian ethics, Rawls' theory of fairness, Aristotle's virtue ethics, and debates on equality. I will be focusing on certain arguments from some of the chapters and reflecting on how they connect to my lived experiences, then critiquing their strengths and weaknesses to pose questions.

Doing The Right Thing

In chapter one, Sandel talks about the famous trolley problem, which is: You are stuck on a trolley and the brakes have broken. You now see five workers on the track in front of you, but you can't stop the trolley. You suddenly notice another track to the side with one worker. You know you can turn the trolley onto the side track to save the five people and kill one person, or you can stay on the main track and kill five people but save one. What would you do in this situation, and is it justifiable to sacrifice one person to save five?

One simple example of this is when I'm driving and two of my friends in the car want something to eat, but they each want to eat somewhere different, and I don't have time to go to both places. So instead of not going anywhere, we all find somewhere that has something we each want, even if it's not our favorite. The strengths of this compromise are fairness, efficiency,

that it's a short-term solution, partial satisfaction, and partial inequality.

Utilitarianism

In the second chapter of the book, Jeremy Bentham and Jon Stewart Mill argue that justice means maximizing happiness for the greatest number of people. One main example in the book was throwing Christians to lions. In ancient Rome, they threw Christians to lions for the amusement of other people in a coliseum. In the utilitarian view, the Christian suffers, but the collective cheering of the people in the coliseum makes it "morally okay." Does happiness really justify injustice? Is there anything that happiness cannot override?

A scenario I want to mention was back in high school, when I would see a group of people making fun of another person. The person getting made fun of suffered, but everyone else was laughing. Some strengths from this scenario are that it is relatable and realistic, and it has a personal connection. The weaknesses from this are that it depends on someone's point of view, and it is not as morally shocking as the lions example.

Libertarianism

In chapter three, Sandel uses the example of Michael Jordan's money. He focuses on Jordan's large earnings from the NBA to touch on the libertarian views of justice. During the NBA season, if someone wants to watch Jordan play, they have to deposit five dollars. These proceeds go to him, and by the end of the season, he has made around 31 million dollars. As a result, Jordan has more money than others. Robert Nozick believes that there are two problems with theories like this of distributive justice: "liberty upsets pattern" and "intervening in this way – taxing Jordan to support programs that help the disadvantaged – violates Jordan's rights by taking his earnings." He believes that taking taxes from Jordan to help the poor violates Jordan's

example is that Michael Jordan's success depended on social conditions and were not things that he earned by himself.

This example reminds me of school sports in high school. I saw athletes getting special treatment because their abilities and skills brought money or attention to that school. Meanwhile, other students who worked just as hard in their academics didn't receive the same praise or treatment. This raises larger questions: How much of school athletes' success comes from effort rather than the school already valuing sports more than academics? Also, if athletes' talents bring money to a school, does that mean they actually deserve more privileges than other people?

What Matters Is The Motive/ Immanuel Kant

In chapter 5, Michael Sandel discusses a problem called "Is It Wrong To Lie To A Murderer?" Immanuel Kant believes lying is wrong no matter the circumstance because it is considered immoral behavior. This specific scenario asks what would you do if a friend was hiding in your house and a murderer with an axe came to the door asking where they were? Would you lie to save your friend or would you tell the truth and let your friend get murdered? The strength in Kant's position is its consistency because it steers clear of making exceptions that could justify lying whenever it is convenient. However, the weakness is that refusing to lie in this situation could most likely result in someone dying.

A less harsh example that can tie into this is when my friends ask me for honest feedback about an outfit. Usually I tell the truth because my friends and I are very transparent with each other, but with people I am not as close with, I sometimes avoid telling the truth because I do not want to hurt anyone's feelings. In moments like these, I choose compassion over Kant's rule to "never lie." This makes me think; can compassion sometimes be more respectful than honesty?

myself seem harsh or inconsiderate?

The Case For Equality/ John Rawls

Michael Sandel focuses on John Rawls' "veil of ignorance" in this chapter. It is a metaphorical term about choosing something without knowing anything in particular about who we are as people. Sandel says, "We don't know our class or gender, our race or ethnicity, our political opinions or religious convictions. Nor do we know our advantages and disadvantages." He wants to know which principles we would choose if this happened to us, and he knows we won't choose utilitarian or libertarian. Rawls believed in two principles: one is equal basic liberties for everyone, and the other concerns social and economic inequalities. Philosophers don't know if anyone would actually choose what Rawls said they would. Michael Sandel poses an important question: "Is Rawls' thought experiment the right way to think about justice?"

When I was applying for financial aid before my freshman year at UNC Wilmington, I saw how scholarships and financial aid make it possible for students to get into colleges that they couldn't afford before. This helps and protects the least advantaged while also rewarding the most privileged, just like Rawls's principle. It made me realize that education systems should not just focus on grades and performance, but also on equal opportunities. Would society look different if everyone made decisions behind a veil of ignorance?

Arguing Affirmative Action

In this chapter, Sandel mentions the argument that affirmative action can be justified if it promotes diversity, which benefits everyone. Universities usually say, "a racially mixed student body is desirable because it enables students to learn more from one another than they would if all of them came from similar backgrounds" and "the diversity argument maintains that

university's civic purpose and contributes to the common good" (page 171). This argument is strong because diversity helps prepare students for real-world environments, increases empathy, and tries to get rid of assumptions. This argument still has a weakness, which is that diversity can feel like a "means to an end," which means that students can feel like they aren't represented enough, but still may have to try to speak for their peers. A lot of the time, I like to hear about other people's cultures and backgrounds because hearing stories from people who have had a different life experience than me made me reconsider my own assumptions that I may have had a long time ago. With that being said, would my own education be less valuable without learning about other people's backgrounds and perspectives?

Conclusion

In "Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do?," Sandel shows us that questions about fairness, equality, and morality are not just theories but real issues that everyone deals with every day. Whether it is deciding if happiness can excuse harm, wondering if honesty can go too far, or asking if success is really earned, these connect to everyday choices. Each theory had strengths and weaknesses, and many arguments and objections. My own experience with school, friends, and my education helped me realize that justice isn't just about following strict rules, but instead it's about finding a balance between all of them. Everyone needs to have respect, compassion, and empathy for one another, but also have time to focus on what is right for them and what will make them happy. Sandel's book reminded me that justice is not only something that philosophers debate, but something that everyone shapes through the decisions we make and the values we follow.