

Sophia Soares

Issues in Social Justice

CRM/SOC 250

Dr. Engleman

20 September 2025

Reflection Paper 1

“Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?” by Micheal J. Sandel is an exploration into the moral questions people ask today and have been asking throughout history. Sandel provides philosophical and historical context to modern questions while outlining different philosophies and theories.

The book starts out by delving into what doing the right thing is. It defines justice and how different that can look within a society. Justice can look like maximizing welfare, respecting freedom, and promoting virtue. Personally, before reading this book I would have defined justice as everybody being treated fairly and having that idea enforced by the Criminal Justice System. To me, that meant if somebody did something bad, they would be punished. And if somebody was mistreated or worked hard they should receive a subsequent reward or help. Price gouging is important, because our criminal justice system operates largely based on the fact that we are in a capitalistic society. The markets let people choose for themselves what value to place on the things they exchange, this gives people freedom to prioritize the products they want as a society. More on capitalism, in the financial crisis of 2008 to 2009 there was outrage about bailout injustice. Wall Street was raking in a lot of profit until this financial crisis, and the government decided that taxpayers money would start to go towards giving money to bigger companies during this hard financial time. I understand that this was meant to incentivize the

economy and keep things working in the world like normal. But to regular taxpayers this felt unfair because they were working just as hard, if not harder, than the workers at these big companies but not receiving the same payouts. I think often in government misinformation and lack of choice is what frustrates people the most. But it raises an essential question on if people would act in the name of the greater good, even if they knew it didn't immediately benefit them.

More moral dilemmas were brought up in chapter one. The Runaway Trolley question was posed: if you would switch the tracks on a running trolley to kill one worker instead of five. Most people would switch the track to save the five but when presented with the question on if they would push a random bystander into the track to save the five they hesitate more. I understand this completely because if you are on that trolley and switch the track there is still reasonable doubt that it will actually kill the one person it is hurtling towards, on the other hand if you act directly not only are people more likely to feel guilty but if you push somebody into the tracks you know for certain you were killing this person immediately. There is one more thought experiment where a special forces team of four US Navy Seals were on a mission in Afghanistan near the Pakistan Border in search of the Taliban when they came across two Afghan goat herders and didn't know whether to release them, at the risk of them informing the Taliban. The SEALs voted and released the goat herders, who in turn told the Taliban who came and killed four out of the five of the SEALs. This was a hard debate for me to come to terms with, because I see the necessity of killing the goat herders because they were in the middle of the war and needed to protect themselves. But, I would personally think that there would have to be some other way to restrain, injure, or keep the goat herders prisoners without killing them or just releasing them at the detriment of the SEALs.

Chapter 2 focuses on utilitarianism, which is the principle of maximizing happiness for the overall balance of pleasure as opposed to pain. The first contextualization of this is of four English Sailors that ate their cabin boy to survive the time on end with no food and no news of rescue. Under Jeremy Bentham's principle of utilitarianism the judge would have found the sailors not guilty, but there's an important argument of seeing people for their own worth and not just as a means to an end. More examples of utilitarianism include rounding up beggars to increase the happiness of the general public. Another example is torture in the name of helping more people who might be at risk if the prisoner doesn't reveal their plans. Both of these examples prioritize the happiness of the many, over the needs of the few. My main argument with these actions is that they disregard people's individual rights. I think that even with the benefit of an entirely perfect society, the downfall of having one child below it: neglected and malnourished, would not be worth the cost because the general public are living in ignorance. I am a big proponent of the idea that everybody should be informed of the decisions they're making and consensual about it. My support for knowledge and consent goes for the beggars and the torture example as well, the general public that the government is protecting at these times is not consenting to these actions so I think that they are unjust despite the utilitarianism principle.

Chapter 3 delves into libertarianism and economic inequality. Libertarianism supports unfettered markets and opposes government interference. Sandel brings up the question of taxing billionaires who can't spend money within their lifetime. Under libertarianism this would not be supported because rich people, Michael Jordan for example, worked really hard to earn their money. I support the idea of taxing and having wealth caps on the 1% and higher upper class because not only can they not spend their money within their lifetime but I think that there are other motivating factors for innovation. If the argument is that with wealth caps and taxes the

rich won't be motivated to innovate, I argue that it will give space for new innovators. I also think that there are other non-financial benefits to innovating: like fame and social motivation. Libertarianism also supports the idea of owning yourself, therefore since you own your body you should be allowed to sell your organs like kidneys. This supports the idea of assisted suicide as well, but I think this idea of libertarianism should only morally be supported as well as the individual isn't a risk to themselves and others.

Putting a price on people has been a big question throughout history. The main question raised is if people should be allowed to pay for substitutions to being conscripted. I feel that it could still be partly moral to get out of conscription by presenting another volunteer, even if that volunteer is paid, because not only is the need of a soldier filled but there are valid reasons and people who have responsibilities that should have another option other than forced conscription. Although, if we allow conscription to turn into something that only the wealthy can get out of then obviously everybody would agree that's unfair. Even with a volunteer army it is unfair because it will be attracting those with less opportunities and privilege to join the army and risk their lives just for the benefits. On a different note, should people be able to pay for pregnancy through surrogacy? I think that with the right contracts that surrogacy can be seen as a business arrangement. As with other business dealing, people's individual rights need to be protected and there need to be protections in place for the surrogate should the pregnancy become dangerous. But, if a surrogate signs a contract, gives birth and then decides she wants to keep the baby and thinks it's her right I would argue that it is not because of the contract that she signed.

Another important philosopher is Immanuel Kant, who believes humans are people worthy of respect and not just members of the public to be used. He is against the utilitarian idea that just because it gives many people pleasure means it's right. Kant thinks humans are rational

beings that avoid pain. I found his idea of “heteronomous determinism” really interesting, that we all do everything for the sake of the purposes we pursue. I think I really resonate with this, although I feel like in my personal day-to-day life I will do a lot of small things for simple reasons like being happy. In the main scale of my life I think most of my long-term decisions are based on pursuing a certain future, and even while performing small tasks every day I will consider the future and not make decisions that would negatively impact it. Kant believes that actions should be judged by intent and not the consequences, posing the idea that it is wrong to lie even to a murderer to save a friend. Although I agreed with Kant before, I do not agree with this line of reasoning. I think that when people are in danger or at risk, the need to protect life overweighs the need to be truthful. Kant also only believes that people are only free when their will is determined anonymously, because otherwise they don't choose their desires. I think that although humans are very influenced by their environment, we each do consciously choose our own desires or at the very least to act on them, and therefore I think we are free while we are pursuing them.

John Rawl's social contract is that the less privileged in society should benefit from any economic and social inequalities. He poses the idea of the veil of ignorance in which everybody is unaware of their role in society and has to design a new society not knowing their own place in it. I think that John Rawls had a great idea with this thought experiment, and that if it was able to be played out we would have a much more just society. But, I am skeptical that the perfect society would last, because it is really hard to make and keep everybody equal because of people's different biology and interests there will always be changing social and power dynamics. Rawls also thinks that talent and hard work do not necessarily deserve reward, and that justice is just a means of keeping the rules and social obligations in place. I agree because it

is nobody's right to be rewarded for their work, but that does not mean that they should not continue working for the sake of a functioning society. The more people working and functioning in society, the more chances of people being rewarded for their work in turn.

Chapter 7 delves into affirmative action, specifically in universities. Sandel argues that it is nobody's right to be admitted to colleges, and universities should be free to discriminate if their choices of acceptance are aligned with their values and purpose as a university. Although I agree with this basic reasoning, I think that correcting for the test gap and the history of many years of different opportunities given to people because of discrimination, racism, and situations beyond their control is important. The redlining of our past and the systematic racism that still exists because of it makes affirmative action important to give minorities and underprivileged more opportunities. Aristotle believed strongly in rational thought and “telos”, which is the search of finding the purpose of things so they can be properly valued for their nature and people can figure out what to do with them. I think Aristotle's reasoning pairs well with our modern day idea of capitalism, and ties back into how the book first introduced the idea of our markets that allow our general population to influence the value of items.

In Chapter 9, Sandel explores questions of reparations, government neutrality, and moral responsibility in the eyes of differing philosophers. Aristotle believed the purpose of government is to form good citizens, while Kant and Rawls argued that people act for themselves and therefore need a framework of laws to guide them. Sandel distinguishes between voluntary obligations, which require consent, and natural duties or obligations of solidarity, which do not. He also raises the issue of patriotism, asking whether it is blind obedience or a justified pride in one's country despite its flaws, and considers whether actions like a man patiently guarding a border are virtuous. Chapter 10 continues these

themes, questioning whether true neutrality in government is possible and whether religion should play a role in politics. I think that everybody has views on different laws, and there is no way to exclude your morals from these views. On that same note, not being religious myself, I think that it is hard for people to separate their morality and their religion. So although I think that the government should not enforce any religion or restrict people's ability to freely practice their own religion, I do not think it's fair to ask politicians to completely keep religion out of their reasoning.

References

Sandel, Michael J. *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.