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What is Justice?

The author of "Justice: What is the right thing to do?" is an American political philosopher and professor at Harvard University named Michael Joseph Sandel. This book is a New York Times bestseller that explores political philosophy and moral dilemmas by applying theoretical and analytical thinking to real-world issues. Sandel invites the readers to engage in reasoned debate about justice and the common good in society. He challenges the shallowness of debates focused solely on personal gain or individual liberty, arguing for a third basis: the impact on the common good. In "Justice: What is the right thing to do?", it focuses on and examines different philosophical approaches to justice, including those of Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and Rawls, to understand contrasting ideas. While engaging with complex philosophy, the book is written in a lively and accessible way, making it suitable for a broad audience interested in making sense of politics, morality, and their own beliefs.

Chapter 1, "Doing the Right Thing," of "Justice: What is the right thing to do?" talks about the central question of justice: how should we decide what's right? He uses real-world problems and dilemmas to depict this, for example, his trolley problem, Hurricane Charley, or the Afghan goatherds. He uses these examples to show three main approaches to justice: maximizing welfare (utilitarianism), respecting freedom (libertarianism), and promoting virtue/common good (Aristotelian traditions). The runaway trolley dilemma proposes the question of saving one life or saving five when the solution is in hand. The brakes on the trolley

stop working, and there are two groups on the track. You can pull the lever and move the trolley to the right, killing one worker and sparing five. A little bit later into the story it proposes another question: if you are just watching from a distance and see a bigger man standing there, you could push him onto the tracks and avert this disaster. In my opinion, I would not push this man onto the tracks, knowing in doing this I just killed him and put myself into a bigger situation. I would just let the train go, knowing I could not do anything aligning with my morals. It would be on my guilty conscience that I just killed this man when I could have removed myself from the situation and not done anything. Obviously this is a hard and terrible situation, knowing you could have people but at the loss of others.

In chapter 2, “The Greatest Happiness Principle/Utilitarianism,” it speaks about utilitarianism, defining justice as maximizing overall happiness or pleasure. Sandel explores strengths like simplicity and impartiality and weaknesses like knowing utilitarianism can justify sacrificing individuals, ignores rights, and undervalues higher ideals. Like, for example, the lifeboat story when there were four stranded sailors, and when the cabin boy got sick, the group killed and ate him. They claimed they did this out of necessity to survive and promote the general well-being of keeping the majority alive. Bentham, an English moral philosopher, founded the doctrine of utilitarianism to maximize happiness. Mill contradicts this idea, thinking refinement emphasizes quality of pleasures and liberty as essential to well-being. Chapter 3, “Do We Own Ourselves?/Libertarianism,” goes hand in hand with this. Libertarianism holds that individuals own themselves and their labor, so government oversight should be minimal—protecting life, property, and contracts. Sandel examines issues in the book like taxation as it is seen as forced labor, drug laws, and military conscription. For libertarianism, taxation is seen as forced labor because “if you are taxed, you can always choose to work less

and pay lower taxes; but if you are forced to labor, you have no such choice." Basically saying that people are forced to pay the government money, and it should be voluntary; if they wanted to pay and help the community, they would. The tension arises between absolute self-ownership and the social responsibilities that come with living in a community. Personally, it's hard for me to lean one way completely because in certain situations I could agree with either. I do think that taxes should be something everyone has to pay and should not be voluntary because it helps the majority, but I also don't think some people should be sacrificed unwillingly to help the majority.

Chapter 4, "Hired Help / Markets and Morals," asks whether everything should be up for sale. Sandel considers markets in controversial areas like military service substitutes, surrogate motherhood, and organ sales. He argues markets aren't neutral: they can corrupt or degrade the value of certain goods and can create inequality by allowing the wealthy to "buy" advantages. One story that gets brought up to demonstrate this is "Pregnancy for Pay," which is about a family paying a surrogate to have their baby since they can't. It comes up with the question of if they are paying for the baby itself, which is baby-selling, or paying for the service of having the baby. Mary-Beth is the surrogate for the Sterns, and eventually when she has the baby for them, she tries to take it, but they go to court and fight for custody of the child. The baby ultimately went to the Stern family for the child's sake. In my opinion, I think they were paying Mary Beth for the service of having the child and the burden of carrying it to term for them, not for the baby itself. Also, I think it is a good idea that the child ended up in the custody of the Sterns because they had a contract set and paid Mary Beth; not only that, but she tried to flee with the child.

"What Matters Is the Motive/Immanuel Kant" is the name of chapter 5, and it focuses on how Kant shifts focus from consequences to motives. Thinking that the only truly moral actions are those done from duty, guided by reason, and acting only on principles you would have as

universal laws, treat people as ends, not means. Justice, in Kant's eyes, requires respecting human dignity, not maximizing welfare or efficiency. He believes that actions represented as good in themselves are necessary: "Kant contrasts hypothetical imperatives, which are always conditional, with a kind of imperative that is unconditional: a categorical imperative" (pg. 112). I don't fully believe in Kant's ideas; for example, if an axe murderer was coming after my friend, I would lie about where they were. I would want my friend to survive, and I would not want to be the reason they got found and killed. There are reasons to lie sometimes, which Kant doesn't believe. In Chapter 6, "The Case for Equality / John Rawls," Rawls argues that justice is fairness. Using the "veil of ignorance" thought experiment, he claims people would choose two principles: equal basic liberties for all, and inequalities are just only if they benefit the least advantaged, involving social and economic equality. Kant and Rawls agree on the importance of universal principles, autonomy, and justice over consequences. Rawls ideas challenge libertarianism and utilitarianism by emphasizing fairness over luck or efficiency.

In Chapter 7, "Arguing Affirmative Action," Sandel examines debates over affirmative action in college admissions. He outlines three justifications: correcting past injustice, promoting diversity, and promoting meritocracy. Critics argue it violates fairness or demeans achievement. For example, the Hopwood study is based on Cheryl Hopwood, a white applicant who was denied admission to the University of Texas Law School despite strong academic credentials. She argued that the school's affirmative action policy discriminated against her, since minority applicants with lower grades and test scores were admitted. In my opinion, I think there are many different things that go into college applications that could be bigger than test scores and academics. Like their essay, extracurriculars, athletics, etc. Even if they were even on that standpoint and just differed in academics, I think the school is still entitled to choose who they

want if they want to include more diversity. She did not have to go to this college, and college is a choice and privilege for many people. The discussion highlights deeper questions: what counts as merit, and should admissions reflect individual achievement or social purposes?

In chapter 8, “Who Deserves What?/Aristotle,” it kind of goes along with chapter 7, saying that Aristotle sees justice as giving people what they deserve, but this depends on the purpose or telos of the good being distributed. For example, the purpose of a university is cultivating knowledge, not rewarding legacy or wealth. Justice thus requires reasoning about virtue and the common good, not just neutral principles. In the book, they talk about the story of Callie Smartt, a high school freshman with cerebral palsy. She was a cheerleader during the football season, but at the end she got kicked off for not being able to perform the gymnastics and tumbling required to be on the team. “Callie’s story raises two questions. One is a question of fairness. Should she be required to do gymnastics in order to qualify as a cheerleader, or is this requirement unfair, given her disability?” (pg. 149). My response to this question would be that it's not fair to kick her off the team when she has an abundant amount of school spirit and shows her worth of staying on the team. Just because she cannot do flips or tricks, she can still cheer the team on while her other cheerleading teammates fulfill the requirements.

Chapter 9, “What Do We Owe One Another?/Dilemmas of Loyalty,” explores moral duties rooted in ties of loyalty, community, and identity, such as family, country, or religion. Sandel contrasts universal moral principles with particular obligations, for example, patriotism and solidarity. He raises the question: are we only bound by impartial and unbiased principles, or also by the “moral weight” of our personal attachments? Part of this chapter asks the question of if the government and people should apologize for the sins and wrongdoings of our predecessors. Even if we did not personally harm those, and it was the previous generations, we should still

acknowledge and apologize for it. For example, slavery—although slavery is not a thing anymore, racism still exists, and we can acknowledge that so that history does not repeat itself. Finally, the last chapter, "Justice and the Common Good," argues that justice cannot be morally neutral. Decisions about justice inevitably involve debates about virtue, purpose, and the common good. Sandel critiques liberal neutrality, like Rawls and libertarianism, and concludes that a just society must engage in moral and civic dialogue about what kind of people and community we want to be. This chapter brings up one point about justice and the common good, talking about how John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama had very opposing ideas about religion in politics. John F. Kennedy felt that even though he was Catholic, he was not going to base any of his ideas or concepts on religion, knowing people would disagree. On the other hand, Obama thought that his Christianity should be involved in his politics, since the majority of America would be influenced and believe the same as him. Personally, I think religion has no place in the government or politics, especially in America, knowing that we have such a diverse country and not everyone believes in religion or the same religion at all. I do understand where Obama was coming from, though, because both he and JFK were doing what would get them the most votes.

In the end, "Justice: What Is the Right Thing to Do?" pushes readers to wrestle with difficult questions about morality, fairness, and the common good. By exploring contrasting philosophies and applying them to real-world dilemmas, Sandel shows that justice is never simple and cannot be reduced to one principle alone. Instead, it requires thoughtful reflection, open debate, and a willingness to balance personal freedom with responsibility to others. His work ultimately challenges us not only to think critically about what is right but also to consider the kind of society we want to build together.