

Madi Chester

Soc - 250-300

18 September 2025

Reflection #1

In Chapters 9-10 of Michael Sandel's *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, the focus is on economic inequality, the role of markets in society, and moral questions about fairness and justice. Sandel draws heavily on John Rawls' idea, especially the difference principle, which says that inequalities are only fair if they help the least advantaged. He also examines the limits of markets, asking whether all goods and social activities should be bought and sold or left outside market influence.

Reading these chapters prompted me to reflect on my own experiences and beliefs regarding fairness, opportunity, and community. I realized that Sandel's ideas are not just theories. They affect how we live, learn, and interact. In particular, I have come to understand how diversity in education has shaped my perspective on fairness and equity, helping me appreciate different viewpoints and recognize the broader impact of inequality.

One part that really hit me was the tension Sandel describes between meritocracy and fairness. He questions the idea that the people who succeed the most automatically deserve their rewards. This made me think about my own schooling. Growing up, I sat in classrooms with students from all different backgrounds, cultures, family situations, and life experiences. I noticed how much diversity improved my learning. I also realized that diversity didn't just make me a better student but also made me a better person. Sandals' point about meritocracy helped me connect those classroom experiences to learning that fairness isn't about rewarding only the top performers but about creating conditions where everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

My high school experience also connects to Sandel's ideas about meritocracy and fairness. I was at a school where you had to pry your way to the top. I attended one of the only two schools in my district that offered the International Baccalaureate program. Out of the twelve schools in the district, my school quickly became known as the most competitive one. Where success was measured almost entirely by GPA, test scores, and how many AP or IB classes you were taking. In my graduating class, the IB cohort alone had nearly a hundred students, where most of them finished in the top 10% of my class. This created an environment where students often felt judged if their GPA was under a 4.0, as if anything less meant they weren't working hard enough or weren't as capable.

Another example is from an education class I took at UNCW, where a black student shared her experiences in the classroom. During a discussion where everyone went around talking about their educational backgrounds, her story really stood out. She told me about the challenges she faced growing up in less privileged schools and how those experiences shaped her opportunities. Hearing her perspective made me realize how differently students' starting points can affect their education. It challenged me to think about fairness in a deeper way, not just as treating everyone the same but as making sure everyone gets a real chance to succeed. Her story stayed with me and changed the way I think about diversity, opportunity, and the responsibility we all have to recognize and address inequality.

Diversity also helped me think about merit in a different way. In classrooms where students start from different points, rewarding only grades or test scores can actually make inequalities worse. Being in a diverse classroom helped me grow not just academically but also emotionally. I learned empathy, critical thinking, and a better understanding of fairness. I began to see that the “merit” is not just about who scores the highest or gets into the most advanced

program but it's also about reliance, creativity, and the unique perspectives people bring to the group. Some of the most impactful classmates I learned from weren't always the ones with the highest GPAs but the ones who could explain concepts differently, share personal experiences that related to the topic, or challenge the class to think beyond the textbook.

These lessons aren't just learned inside the classroom. They happen outside of school too. Last year, my roommate, who is now one of my closest friends, is black, and we often had conversations about not only our very different educational experiences but also life outside of school. I had never met someone so insightful and well-rounded until I met her. She shared with me how difficult life has been for her because of the color of her skin. While I've never judged anyone based on race, hearing her stories reminded me that many people do, and the things she has endured were heartbreakingly sad. She never deserved the hateful comments or treatment she has faced. Her experiences helped me realize how important it is to listen, empathize, and to recognize the ways privilege affects everyday life. It also made me more aware of standing up against injustice when I see it.

Looking back, I see how these personal conversations connect directly with Sandel's point about fairness. Privilege is not something we notice when we have it, but its impact is very real for the people who don't. Justice, as Sandel explains, requires us to think beyond our own successes and ask how our systems either help or harm the least advantaged. My roommate's story gave me a firsthand view of what inequality looks like in daily life, and it motivated me to take responsibility for how I respond to it.

Another part that stood out to me was Sandel's discussion about markets. He says some things, like education or civic duties, shouldn't be treated just like products to buy and sell. I

agree that schools often feel like competitions where grades and test scores define value. I've seen students struggle when they don't have the same resources as others. Sandel's point reminded me that fairness and ethical responsibility matter more than just rewards. Students are treated almost like products who have to compete for rankings, scholarships, or acceptance into programs. Standardized testing, college admissions, and even class ranking all turn learning into a system where value is determined by numbers. While this system can motivate some students to work hard, it also creates pressure and leaves many behind. Especially for those who don't have access to private tutors, stable home environments, or extra resources. This reflects what Sandel warns against, letting market logic dominate areas of life that should instead be guided by fairness, equality, and shared responsibility.

At the same time, I recognize that markets can motivate growth and innovation, but they can't govern everything. In my education, the balance between merit-based rewards and fair opportunities for all students made a big difference. Class discussions, group projects, and teachers who valued diverse experiences made diversity a strength, not a disadvantage. I realized that when schools focus only on competition, it leaves many students behind. But when schools focus on collaboration, everyone rises together.

Reflecting on these chapters, I realize that fairness is not just about treating everyone the same but about recognizing differences in opportunities and starting points. Sandals' emphasis on the difference principle encourages us to consider how society can structure itself so that even those with fewer advantages can thrive. My own experiences with diversity have shown me that classrooms and communities are richer when we listen to each other's stories and support fair opportunities. It's clear that fairness requires awareness and empathy.

Sandals' ideas about markets also showed me that not everything in life should be treated like a business deal or a competition. Things like education, community involvement, and relationships, and a deeper value that money can't measure. My own experiences in diverse classrooms proved this to me. When students worked together, shared their different viewpoints, and respected each other, everyone gained more than they could have on their own. I've come to realize that real success isn't just about personal achievements, but about building a community where everyone has the opportunity to grow and succeed.

These chapters also strengthened my belief in the importance of diversity, empathy, and responsibility. They reminded me that justice isn't just an idea, it's someone who affects how we treat people, how schools and communities are run, and what opportunities are available. Applying Sandel's ideas in my own life means paying attention to privilege, speaking up against unfairness, and supporting fairness in everyday ways. I want to live in a world where success is not measured only by what one person achieves but also by how much we help and support each other. Applying Sandel's ideas in my own life means paying closer attention to privilege, recognizing that some of the opportunities I've had were not available to everyone. For instance, being able to attend a school with advanced academic programs or having teachers who encouraged me was a privilege that not every student experiences. Sandel's work showed me that justice is about building a world where people are not left behind, where diversity is celebrated, and where empathy and fairness are at the core of decision-making. By striving to live this way i hope i can contribute to a society that reflects the values of fairness and justice that Sandel describes.

