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Understanding Justice and Morality

Justice is a concept that opens the door for ongoing debate about what actions can be considered wrong and what actions can be considered right. Very often in society, individuals are faced with moral dilemmas that may directly challenge their personal values, sometimes resulting in harm being caused to another person or to something else of value. Michael J. Sandel engages with this topic in depth in his book *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*. Sandel is not only a political philosopher but also a best-selling author and a professor at Harvard University. His main focus in teaching centers on the themes of justice, morality, and what can be determined to be in the best interest of the common good. Throughout this book, Sandel provides a variety of real-world examples as well as carefully constructed hypothetical scenarios that force the reader to pause and think seriously about what decision they would make if they were caught in the middle of a difficult moral dilemma. Would you personally be able to make the right decision? The answers will almost always vary from person to person because of the larger underlying question, which is: What truly counts as the right decision?

In the opening chapter of the text, Sandel raises the famous question of what an individual would choose to do if they were placed in the middle of the so-called Trolley Problem. Most people might respond by saying they would save the five individuals on the main track and sacrifice only one person on the side track, while others would argue that interfering at all is not

the morally correct action to take. Personally, I have never been comfortable with this question and often choose not to answer it, because if I were the person with control of the lever, I imagine I would be desperately searching for another possible way to stop the train altogether. I have come to realize that, in a sense, I may have been subconsciously avoiding the harder task of thinking deeply about this issue. When I read this chapter and later discussed it with my classmates, I found myself mentally exhausted and even upset that there was no single correct answer. Being caught in the middle of a situation like this forces us to confront and reconsider the very meaning of justice itself.

Two important terms appear frequently in the first few chapters of the book: libertarianism and utilitarianism. Libertarianism places its focus on protecting individual rights as well as personal freedoms, whereas utilitarianism aims to promote the greatest happiness by supporting the common good of society. Predicaments involving these two contrasting perspectives emphasize how the idea of “what is just” can vary greatly depending on the viewpoint of each person. A common example in which these concepts are especially relevant is the issue of the wage gap in the United States. A utilitarian would likely argue that redistributing wealth through higher taxes on the wealthy would ultimately help more people than it would hurt. They might also claim that individuals being taxed at higher rates would be able to recover financially, while lower-income families would gain more stability in adjusting to the economy. A libertarian, on the other hand, would strongly disagree and maintain that billionaires in the United States should not have their hard-earned money taken away through redistribution. Once again, the question of what is truly just presents itself in this kind of situation. An ideal solution to this problem would involve factoring in public opinion and considering where the majority of

society stands. Placing emphasis on protecting the common good begins with having a genuine desire to promote what is best for the community as a whole.

I was raised in a large family as the youngest daughter of four. I learned throughout my childhood the importance of protecting the well-being of the greater good and considering the context in a disagreement. I also discovered individualism and how, in some cases, bringing joy to the majority is not fair if it brings harm to an individual. Once, when my family and I went cross-country when I was about ten years old, I really wanted to go to the Mall of America. It was the one thing I had asked for on this trip, so I was very upset when my parents told me it was too far off our route. I remember wanting to start a fight but realizing how annoyed my sisters would be if we got home any later than we were. I considered how everyone had to sacrifice something for this trip and put aside my personal interest to keep the majority happy. Another situation from my childhood I can remember where I stood up for myself in a disagreement was while playing our Nintendo Wii. I was maybe seven years old when my sisters and I were goofing off and broke a centerpiece in our living room. They all agreed to blame me because I was the youngest and would get into the least amount of trouble, but I argued that it was a group effort, and I should not have to throw myself under the bus to protect everyone else involved. I can't remember what happened from there, but I do know that this memory shaped my idea of individualism. I feel as if events like this from my childhood helped shape my morals and understanding of contextual significance. When discussing moral dilemmas in school environments, I try to carry these traits with me. It is important to consider morals, context, and outcomes when making decisions to protect the greater good or one's individual rights. My understanding and efforts to consider circumstantial value differ from some ideas of Immanuel Kant. I usually act on things with reference to the situational context, whereas Sandel

describes in the text that Kant says you must tell the truth in every situation and that the outcomes do not matter if you acted in a way that was morally correct. I disagree with this take specifically, and I feel that if you are lying to protect someone or something, it can be okay, considering the context. Kant emphasizes the idea of duty and universal law and how we should ignore consequences to protect morality. I can see more of where he was coming from with this assertion, and I do believe it is important to contribute to your society and keep the best interest of others as well as yourself.

My first interactions with true morality began in elementary school. I was raised in a Catholic home and attended Catholic school my whole life. I learned a lot about ideas of good vs. evil and how to properly treat others. While there are some notable flaws and controversy, I really admire the Catholic Church, specifically its structure and services. I learned general moral principles and virtues while also understanding privilege, injustices, and how I can personally give back to my community. That being said, my personal experiences and learning will not align with everyone in the country or even some Catholics themselves. I have always found it important to remember this when understanding others' political beliefs, actions, or ways of life. In class, when we touched on the topic of morality in the justice system, I felt strongly opinionated on this. Most Americans uphold different morals and virtues on a microscopic level, but there is so much overlap in overall beliefs that needs to be considered. After taking ethics, yoga, and many theology courses over the years, I have connected countless trends within the religions I studied. The disagreements about morals in the justice system are not persisting because people have drastically different moral opinions, but they are rooted in the desire to help their community and the greater good.

The last few chapters of the text discuss philosophical concepts from John Rawls and Aristotle. Sandel writes about how Rawls believed equality is about fairness and not utility or merit. Rawls' idea is similar to the contrast of equality vs. equity. Sandel uses his ideas when discussing the Grutter v. Bollinger Supreme Court case. He claims that universities should not grant acceptance based on merit or utility, but rather how well that person would fit in and uphold the campus motto. These ideas are similar to the ones from Aristotle that Sandel connects. Aristotle preached his theory of justice, which was that everyone should be given what they deserve based on purpose or “telos.” I think this is really important to focus on when discussing affirmative action. In a situation where two students have the same qualifications but only one will be let into a university, the acceptance should be awarded to the person who will best fulfill the purpose of the university. My personal opinion on this is that universities should take into account the disadvantages that students may have had that could have limited their academic success, but they endured and achieved high levels. Both the philosophers and Sandel showed me a more detailed interpretation of equality and affirmative action, and what factors should be considered when dealing with the two.

After reading this novel and gaining insight into what my classmates believe, I feel much more confident in my understanding of justice, morality, and welfare. I was able to unpack real-world moral dilemmas and conflicts while also connecting teachings with present-day or personal issues. At times, while reading this novel, I became frustrated or confused, but I am pleased with the fact that I had to stop and think about the material. Sandel’s mention of philosophers like Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and Aristotle sheds light on the fact that ethical opinions have been around for centuries, which brings hope to me that our country’s injustices can be dealt with.