

IS DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT?

And how to protect it

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION PLAN

- ▶ **Sandel on** "the lost art of democratic debate"
- ▶ Refreshment break?
- ▶ **Further topics**, perhaps from:
 - ▶ *Pros and Cons* of morality and religion in politics
 - ▶ The secular state.
 - ▶ The role of *freedom of speech* in democracy
 - ▶ Also the right to demonstrate and its limits
 - ▶ Participatory v. Representative Democracy
 - ▶ Majoritarian v. Consensus Democracy

MICHAEL SANDEL: THE LOST ART OF DEMOCRATIC DEBATE

Shape of the story:

- ▶ **Thesis:** underlying political discourse there are big **questions of moral philosophy and justice**, which are not discussed.
- ▶ **Aristotle:**
 - Justice *means* giving people what they deserve.
 - This cannot be done without considering:
 - What is the *essential* nature (of the activity in question)
 - What activities connected with that deserve to be honoured and recognised
- ▶ **Elevation of Political Discourse:**
 - Introducing moral question in politics is a recipe for disagreement, intolerance and coercion. So best ignore them?
 - A better way is to **engage with moral and religious convictions**.

THREE CASE STUDIES

- How should flutes be distributed?
- Should a disabled golfer be allowed the use of a golf cart in PGA tournaments?
- Should same sex marriage be permitted?

HOW SHOULD FLUTES BE DISTRIBUTED?

- Audience says: “randomly” | “to best flute players” | “to worst flute players”
- Why?
 - ◆ audience says: “greatest benefit to all”
 - ◆ Aristotle says: “that’s what flutes are for” (teleological?)
 - ▶ We have to reason about the purpose, in this case: musical performance.
 - ▶ When we think about justice, we need to think about:
 - The essential nature of the thing in question, and
 - The qualities that are worth honouring and admiring and recognising
 - ▶ We need to know essential character of the activity, and know what should be honoured and recognised.
- NOT CONSIDERED: “to those for whom the value of a flute exceeds its cost”

MICHAEL SANDEL: THE LOST ART OF DEMOCRATIC DEBATE

- ▶ Things to consider:

- ▶ *What is Sandel trying to do?* - improve or re-establish “democratic debate”
- ▶ *How is he going about it?* - Socratic dialogue and Aristotelian justice?
- ▶ *Does his method have a sound basis?*
 - ▶ Socratic dialogue is more a method of teaching than of enquiry, rooted in metaphysical eccentricities (anamnesis, or innate knowledge). Arguably disingenuous and patronising.
- ▶ *What are his assumptions/premises?*
 - ▶ Sandel appears to assume that we seek a just outcome, and therefore need to find what is just, which depends upon moral and/or religious belief. He seems to be assuming that Aristotle’s conception of justice is sound.
 - ▶ Aristotle assumes that justice is absolute rather than conventional, and is dependent on metaphysical characteristics such as “purpose”, and “honour”.
- ▶ *Is this really germane to the democratic process?*
 - ▶ Not clear that socratic dialogue or justice are particularly key to democratic debate, which seeks compromise among conflicting preferences.
 - ▶ If politics is “the art of compromise”, then surely the compromises take place mainly in the drafting of legislation, not in the parliamentary debate before approval (which may result in fine-tuning)? Or is it in the formulation of a platform before a general election?

SOME THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

- ▶ The lost art of “democratic debate”
- ▶ Polarisation and tribalism
 - ▶ Instead of engagement and compromise:
 - ▶ Vilification, misrepresentation, no-platforming
 - ▶ Erosion of distinction between criticism and violence
 - ▶ The subversion of due process.
 - ▶ Systematic erosion of freedom of expression
 - ▶ “Engagement” via protest, intimidation and assault
- ▶ The ascendancy of elite, autocratic, “progressive” ideologies (identity politics), often under the radar.

- ▶ Conservatism won't work.
 - Young people will be progressive.
 - It's always possible to do better.
 - Harness rather than repress this zeal.
- ▶ An effective critique cannot advocate retreat to some golden past.
- ▶ Once established (in academia) anti-democratic tendencies may be vulnerable to "new", even more progressive, ideas.
- ▶ New ideas in political philosophy are needed.