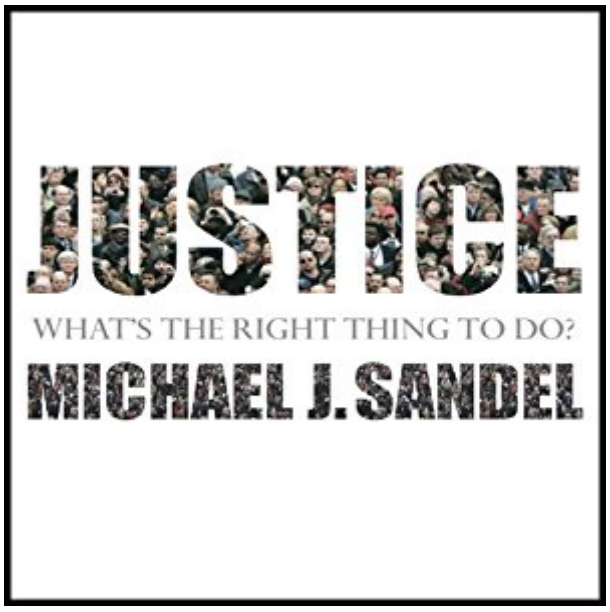
Justice



Synopsis

Michael Sandel’s Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do? invites readers of all ages and political persuasions on a journey of moral reflection, and shows how reasoned debate can illuminate our lives. Is it always wrong to lie?Should there be limits to personal freedom?Can killing sometimes be justified?Is the free market fair? What is the right thing to do? Questions like these are at the heart of our lives. In this acclaimed book Michael Sandel - BBC Reith Lecturer and the Harvard professor whose ’Justice’ course has become world famous - gives us a lively and accessible introduction to the intersection of politics and philosophy. He helps us think our way through such hotly contested issues as equal rights, democracy, euthanasia, abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as the ethical dilemmas we face every day. ’One of the most popular teachers in the world’ Observer ’Enormously refreshing ... Michael Sandel transforms moral philosophy by putting it at the heart of civic debate’ New Statesman ’One of the world’s most interesting political philosophers’ Guardian ’Spellbinding’ The Nation Michael Sandel is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Government at the University of Harvard. Sandel’s legendary ’Justice’ course is one of the most popular and influential at Harvard. Sandel is the author of many books and has previously written for the Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic and the New York Times. He was the 2009 BBC Reith Lecturer. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I came to this book by Professor Sandel from his MOOC, a series of videos on the subject of Justice given as his actual lectures in Harvard. The book follows them closely but is not identical to them. I

had not expected it to be based on philosophy, and certainly philosophers are not my favourite reading material, nor do I admire a man who has himself preserved for posterity by taxidermists, but he takes their points of view sequentially building on their arguments and using actual case material from the UK and the USA to provoke thought. Much of the issues remain unresolved and the foundations of the controversies are explored. Is cannibalism under extreme duress legitimate? Can you give permission to be killed and eaten? Is taking one life to save five legitimate? Questions of surrogate motherhood, sale of body parts and other current vexatious issues are explored.Ultimately he expresses an enthusiasm for Bobby Kennedy which I do not share, but the book and lectures are thought provoking and force on to clear one's own mind

This is a great book for people like me who did not study philosophy and have come to realize the need to have larger conversations in order to make better political arguments. Michael J. Sandel 'teaches.' His presentation is easy to grasp. Like any good teacher, he offers examples and then repeats the theories as they apply to his stories. I came away with a good understanding of Utilitarian and Libertarian, as well as a "narrative" story of being a member of the human species. It was easy for me to 'see' how these philosophies are alive in our political system. (Particularly important in 2013, is Libertarian, given the attention to Rand Paul.) I was surprised at how many times I recognized ME, without knowing my 'philosophy' had already been named. Did I get these ideas by osmosis, I wondered. Are they really such an integral part of so-called American life that 'we' don't even know they have been named "philosophy"? (Those thoughts are in addition to Sandel's teaching.)My only slight criticism is his brief 'promo' for Pres. Obama. It just didn't seem necessary to 'discussion' and introduced a partisan tinge. I was also disappointed in Sandel's seeming unwillingness to "imagine there's no religion." Some examples of philosophical questions have been revealed by asking the 'thinker' to strip away his/her personal identity - no color, gender, ethnic heritage, etc. This would give the 'thinker' a new base-line to imagine how majority/minority ideas would look. It's a very effective exercise, essentially forcing one to not know who you are before political decisions are made. You cannot know if you are a member of the majority or a minority member. Yikes! My complaint is that I view "religion" as one of the identifiers, as strong an influence as ethnicity, color, etc. Sandel asks that the 'thinker' not take a totally secular point of view, and then writes many sentences that include, "moral and religious" and says they should not be separated. As an atheist, I consider "religion" a fairy tale. At the same time I can acknowledge that the Bible has a 'philosophy' written by people. Religion is dogma. Maybe it's just a 'word' thing, but I don't want to include "religion" -- Catholic, Protestant, the fundamentalist Christians, Hindus,

Muslims, etal, in my deliberations over human rights, responsibilities, and "Justice."(p.s., Seems perhaps my criticism wasn't so "slight" after all. I still recommend this book highly, however.)

In this book prof. Sandel explores three approaches to justice. The one that justice is the maximizing utility or welfare, the second according to which justice means respecting freedom of choice and the third (which author himself favors) that the justice involves cultivating virtue and reasoning about the common good. The book contains a lot of history of political philosophy. I combined the book with author's video lectures at Harvard where a lot of moral dilemmas were discussed with the students. This book makes you reexamine some of your views on moral questions from a more analytical point of view.

I can't quibble with the author's analysis of the limitations of the "liberal" justice theories of Kant and Rawls. I haven't studied them to any degree. However, it does seem to me that the principle of the "dignity of the individual" as an end, never merely as a means, has more substance than the author appears to credit it. He says it provides a foundation for "respect," meaning not to do another harm. But not necessarily any more than that, i.e. not specifically to seek the good of others or even the common good. Perhaps that is right in a minimalist view. The Hippocratic oath states "First, do no harm." One might say that is the first word about justice. But the implications of understanding others as having a fundamental dignity equal to one's own, in effect being a family of man, goes well beyond not doing harm.The "good" advocated by Aristotle appears by the author's own description to be premised on building up the "common good" which implies, first of all, the dignity (if not equality) of persons for whom pursuit of the common good is the purpose. The author also emphasizes Aristotle's focus not on prescriptions or rules about the "good life," but practical wisdom that uses judgment about particular situations. That approach fits the author's argument for seeing the identity and nature of persons through the "narrative" rather than "voluntarist" conception.This kind of empirical evaluation of our concrete interdependence, horizontally within our society and vertically deep into our past, strongly suggests (if not dictates) the conclusion that the fundamental dignity of each human being implies a duty, Kant's categorical imperative, to our neighbor beyond doing no harm. In fact to act for his or her good. If people are not to be treated as mere means to another's personal ends, then in concrete situations we will always be faced with choices about how to orient ourselves. Do we act in a way that is above all self-interested but in which there is at least no intended harm to others? In that case, even if they are not in fact (unduly) harmed they are nevertheless being used as means to our ends.Kant's logic supports the notion that the dignity of

other persons as ends in themselves demands that we must always act in such a way that we are not indifferent to the good to others that may be effected through our actions. After all, in many concrete situations there is no bright line of demarcation between good and harm our actions may visit on others. We may suppose that most often if we pursue our self-interest with an eye only to clear and present harm to others, we will err with responsibility for latent and unintended harm. The Golden Rule, said to be dismissed by Kant based upon its uncertainty in relation to how one wishes to be treated by others, at least can stand for the proposition that we would always want others to take account of our well being in the decisions they make for themselves. We would always want others to act in a practical way as much as possible for my benefit consistently with their own, if not actually making any personal sacrifice to their detriment to effect my benefit.The upshot is that the rationale behind each theory of justice discussed by the author, insufficient and distorting by itself, may be seen as complementary as a corrective to each of the others. For example, the utilitarian model, problematic for failing to insist on fundamental rights, offers a perspective of pragmatism that the author admires in discussing Aristotle's emphasis on practical wisdom. Utilitarians simply carry the pragmatism principle beyond its capability, ignoring fundamental rights and the limitations on our knowledge of weighing consequences. Liberal justice theory arguably corrects for this by insisting only on proscribing the clearest cases of harm (to fundamental liberty interests). The author in fact argues for a middle way that treats fundamental rights as a foundation of personal human dignity (first, do no harm) but insists we go beyond that to address the higher purposes for which we live. Implicit in this approach is a recognition that human dignity which demands respect for basic rights also is the foundation for identifying the higher purposes which in principle must encompass the common good. Individual actions and decisions are always taken within a context of social responsibility.

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