

Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?

Michael J. Sandel

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009 (308 pages)

Viewers in the United States and listeners in Great Britain may have caught Michael Sandel's compressed version of his Harvard undergraduate course on justice in his PBS TV series and in the BBC Reith Lectures during 2009. Sandel's eloquence on air is matched by his fluency on the page. In contrast to the turgidity of much contemporary philosophical writing, Sandel's prose is positively crystalline. *Justice* can be read as Sandel's written elaboration of his PBS and BBC lectures. He concludes the first chapter of the book by explaining that the work is "not a history of ideas, but a journey in moral and political reflection ... [meant] to invite readers to subject their own views about justice to critical examination" (30). *Justice* is thus best read as the work of a public intellectual addressing the intelligent and politically engaged general reader.

The book recapitulates many of the themes and motifs reminiscent of Sandel's oeuvre since the publication of his landmark critique of his colleague at Harvard, John Rawls, in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982/1998). Sandel's style of presenting a philosophical argument in *Justice* is to present examples of testing moral dilemmas, often related to contested public policy questions. He then presents the view of a key political theorist or school of thought in order to expound and clarify the underlying positions of the school. Sandel chooses four schools of thought as exemplary ethical-political approaches: Utilitarianism (Bentham and Mill), Libertarianism (Nozick and Friedman et al.), Kantianism (through Kant himself and the early John Rawls), and finally Aristotelianism. This is an engaging and helpful way to approach these competing philosophies, particularly for the reader looking for an introduction to some key issues of principle in political theory. Readers of Sandel's previous books will not be surprised to find that he endorses a (seemingly post-metaphysical) form of neo-Aristotelianism in his final chapter, "Justice and the Common Good."

In the chapter "Markets and Morality," for instance, Sandel takes as case studies the issues of military conscription versus a volunteer army and payments to surrogate mothers. In a later chapter on John Rawls, Sandel considers questions of distributive justice and equality through the lens of Rawls' famous device, the Original Position. In each instance, Sandel takes time to expound concisely the views of his featured theorists, helpfully setting out the usual objections to the theory and potential defenses against them. Sandel's general approach is more Socratic than didactic but the reader is usually aware by the conclusion of each chapter which side of the argument the author favors.

Sandel's recurring theme throughout *Justice* is that we first have to understand the true nature or *telos* of an activity or practice before we can properly determine the right moral or public policy response to it. For Sandel, the human good (and the common good) is fundamentally prior to the right. He critiques those theories that affirm the reverse, such as Rawls's early theory of justice. One surprising omission is Sandel's relative neglect of Rawls's important later revision of his early work when he retracts some of

the Kantian metaphysical presuppositions underpinning his theory, while retaining the Original Position as a device to determine matters of *political* principle alone. Sandel's account might also have been strengthened by briefly familiarizing the reader with some other viable ethical-political approaches that also affirm the priority of the good over the right—such as John Finnis's "new" natural law theory or Martha Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian "Capability Approach."

Sandel's book is very different in style to the contemporaneously published book by Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice?* (Harvard University Press, 2009). Despite the similar titles, Sen's work is an important monograph in the field of normative ethics and political economy. Sandel's book, in contrast, is a cross between an introduction to political philosophy and a thoughtful reflection on some contemporary (and highly contentious) public policy issues. Readers will no doubt be roused to agree or disagree with Sandel's approach to such matters as social justice and same-sex marriage.

In summary, *Justice* is a nearly ideal introduction to the subject for a freshman undergraduate or an intelligent high school junior or senior considering reading for a degree in philosophy or politics. The work is a pleasure to read and is amusingly peppered with a smattering of wry asides to boot. Sandel's method of using real-life case studies to illuminate underlying political and ethical principles generally succeeds in clarifying and challenging those principles. Recommended.

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Prospects and Ambiguities of Globalization: Critical Assessment at a Time of Growing Turmoil

James W. Skillen (Editor)
Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009 (129 pages)

Globalization has become a conventional term but few people know what it actually is and even fewer wonder what they should do in response to this worldwide phenomenon. An interesting aspect of this short book is that Skillen and his collaborators explore the question of how they—Christians and Americans—should attempt personally to influence this earth-shaking development.

As Skillen emphasizes in the book's first chapter, we know only that some world-global phenomenon is already at work, but we have no systematic knowledge of its nature or its dimensions and consequently cannot develop a coherent policy to control it. All we can do is to develop some pragmatic responses. In this sense, globalization is a challenge especially for Americans, as (1) this world event will fundamentally alter the place of their country in the world, and thus (2) challenge them to deepen their historic culture of "moving forward to the West" in meeting this new challenge even more pragmatically.

In several chapters, specialists examine various aspects of one of the major consequences of globalization: the restructuring of the governance of human affairs through