

Michael Sandel



Michael Sandel, who is professor of government at Harvard, is one of the most popular political philosopher of his generation. His famous course on Justice regularly draws hundreds of students every year and is freely available on line and on television.

Sandel endorses a certain type of communitarianism or republicanism, although he is not particularly fond of these labels. In his first book, *Liberalism and the limits of Justice* (1982), Sandel develops his critique of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. In this fundamental work Rawls attempts to provide a universalist justification of liberalism based on the priority of the right over the good. According to this approach we can define the *principles of justice* that shape the institutions of the society independently of the existing moral, religious views or conceptions of the good. On the contrary, Sandel argues that dealing with serious moral issues like same sex marriage, abortion or slavery is impossible to be completely neutral towards controversial moral or religious doctrines. Thus, any meaningful political public discourse cannot avoid discussing moral or religious matters. Sandel argues that Rawls has presupposed a controversial theory of self-identity: a conception of an unencumbered and abstract self that can choose to be attached to any community. Sandel claims instead that personal identity depends deeply on his communal ties and values he is committed to.

In his *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (1996) Sandel defends his preferred version of communitarianism: civic republicanism. He argues that current liberalism makes government the referee of fair procedure and guarantor of individual rights, but when it comes to pass judgment upon the substantive end of life (the good life) the government is supposed to be absent or neutral. This type of liberalism rejects any attempt to identify a common good since there can never be an agreement about it. He believes that

liberal-neutralist philosophy is completely inadequate for the needs of a democratic republic since it fails to develop the civic virtues and quality of character necessary to sustain liberty and self-government. Therefore, republicans, unlike liberals, do not praise the ideal of the freely choosing, unconditioned, unencumbered, autonomous individual, and the “negative liberty” he enjoyed. Rather, they praise public life, participation in the process of self-rule and in the civic life of the *res publica*, pursuing the common good.

In *What Money Can't Buy* (2012) Sandel challenges the idea that markets are morally neutral. In order to understand the importance of this work, one has to be aware of the triumph achieved in the last few decades by the market-incentive thinking as a comprehensive approach that is applicable to all human behavior. This way of thinking tends to portray economics as a discipline which focuses on the study of incentives in a sort of ethical vacuum. “The most fateful change that unfolded in the last three decades,” Sandel writes, “was not an increase in greed. It was the expansion of markets, and of market values into spheres of life where they don't belong.” The purpose of the book is to disprove the idea that markets have no moral impact assembling a large number of real life examples. This doesn't imply that Sandel is against markets per se. “No other mechanism,” he writes, “for the production and distribution of goods had proved as successful for generating affluent and prosperity.” However, he believes that there are certain moral and civic goods that markets do not honor and should not be for sale. Let's look at the first examples presented in Sandel's book: paying for jumping the queue. In recent years selling the right to cut in line has become a familiar practice. In airports, in amusement parks, at concerts, in the waiting rooms of doctors, “the ethics of queue – first come, first-served – is being replaced by the ethic of market – you get what you pay for.” For example, each summer New York City's Public theatre offers free outdoor Shakespeare performances in Central Park. Free tickets are made available several hours before the performance. Line standers offer their service for queuing up for as much as \$125 per ticket for the free performances. What's wrong with that? Apparently, there is nothing wrong. Economists argue that market exchange benefits buyer and seller alike. Both the buyer of the ticket and the stander are better off. Not only that but markets allocate tickets to those who value them most highly and, thus, contributing to maximize the economic well-being of everyone in society. This latter argument however is not quite right. The reason is that willingness to pay a certain price reflects both the ability and desire to pay. An individual that value very high the performance may very well be in the position not to be able to pay that price, while an individual that value the performance relatively less may be in the position to easily afford that price. Markets discriminate buyers both on their capacity to pay (income) and their willingness to pay (utility). But this which is an argument based on justice and fairness is not the Sandel's fundamental objection. “Certain good have value in ways that go beyond the utility that they give. How a good is allocated may be part of what makes it the kind of good it is. The NYC's Public Theatre want people to have that experience for free. It is a kind of a civic celebration. A gift of the City to its citizens. Something is lost when a free public theatre is turned into a commodity. It is at odd with the real purpose of the initiative. It is a kind of corruption. This example shows that in specific cases markets are not morally neutral. They corrupt a good or a social practice treating it according to a lower mode of valuation that is appropriate to it. Sandel sees the phenomenon of degradation of values at work in many areas: from carbon trading to population control policy to the growth of the executive boxes at stadiums to pay kids for studying and readings. Of course, some of these examples are debatable, but the merit of Sandel's argument is to have asked the question if we want to live in a society where everything is for sale.

