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JUSTICE

What's the Right Thing to Do?

By Michael J. Sandel

308 pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2010.

Harvard University professor [Michael J. Sandel](#) has been on a twenty-plus-year crusade, code word "Justice." The course, attended by hundreds in Cambridge. The edX course, [online](#). A twelve-episode TV show, on [PBS International](#). I read the paperback. Sandel offers three analytical frames to think about justice and what defines a just society: do we (1) maximize welfare for the greatest number? (2) respect freedom of choice? (3) cultivate virtue and reasoning about the common good? (19, 260). He applies these frames to ethical dilemmas, a mix of classic thought experiments ([the runaway trolley problem](#)), timely issues ([the case for reparations](#)), and urban mercy (remember squeegee men, who washed car windshields unbidden at red lights?). The short answer to the book's subtitle *What's the Right Thing to Do?* is: it depends. Sandel hosts philosophers Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and company to respectfully argue, object, and rebut contemporary political, economic, and social issues such as price gouging after a natural disaster, reproductive rights, redistributive taxation, and affirmative action. Sandel believes that we cannot always extricate morality from the fairness debate. Thus, moral reflection becomes a collective responsibility, a civic duty, and to do otherwise (to avoid, shun, or disengage, in essence, to secede from public spaces) "undermines the solidarity that democratic citizenship requires" (266). Direct moral

engagement in civic life is a choice with a good possible outcome.

—Lisa Thaler, 3 September 2022