

Michael Sandel – a people’s philosopher

Based on the first two 2009 Reith lectures by Michael Sandel. 1. Markets and morals. 2. Morality in politics.

Born in Minneapolis in 1953 to a Jewish family, which moved to Los Angeles when he was thirteen. A high achiever, he was the President of his senior class at Palisades High School (1971), graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Brandeis University with a Bachelor's degree in politics (1975), and received his doctorate from Balliol College, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar, where he studied under philosopher Charles Taylor

1. What do we think a people’s philosopher might be?

2. When asked why 15,000 students had taken his course at Harvard he answered...

“It’s a chance for students not just to read what philosophers in the history of ideas said, but to challenge their own ideas about morality and politics and justice. There’s something dangerous in that, but also exhilarating, and I think that’s at the heart of the appeal. “

3. Sandel thinks Economics is a “spurious science” because it is used to tell us what to do “.....Economists can inform us about possible implications of policy choices, but they can’t tell us - and they don’t really claim to tell us - what’s right and wrong, what’s just and unjust.” Many people seem to think that Economics does tell us what to do...

4. “There’s now a widespread sense that markets have become detached from fundamental values, that we need to reconnect markets and values. But how? Well it depends on what you think has gone wrong. Some say the problem is greed,..... But the greed critique is flawed or, at best, partial. Markets have always run on self-interest. From the standpoint of economics, there is no real difference between self-interest and greed. Greed is a vice in personal relations, but the whole point of markets is to turn this vice into an instrument of the public good. This is the moral alchemy that markets are said to perform.”

5. “The alternative is to re-think the reach of markets into spheres of life where they don’t belong. We need a public debate about what it means to keep markets in their place. And to have this debate, we have to think through the moral limits of markets. We need to recognise that there are some things that money can’t buy and other things that money can buy but shouldn’t.”

6. “.....markets are not mere mechanisms. They embody certain norms. They presuppose, and also promote, certain ways of valuing the goods being exchanged. Economists often assume that markets are inert, that they do not touch or taint the goods they regulate. But this is a mistake. Markets leave their mark. Often market incentives erode or crowd out non-market incentives.”

7. Morality in Politics ... some believe than governments should not engage moral and religious issues? "Isn't it safer for a government to try to be neutral and avoid taking sides on the moral and religious convictions its citizens espouse?" I say no, not necessarily, for two reasons. First, it's often not possible for government to be neutral on substantive moral questions; and, second, the attempt to do so can make for an impoverished public discourse. "

8. One solution to the Gay marriage issue...Quote: *Let churches and other religious institutions continue to offer marriage ceremonies. Let department stores and casinos get into the act if they want. And, yes, if three people want to get married or one person wants to marry herself and someone else wants to conduct a ceremony and declare them married, let*

'em. "That's Kinsley. So he proposes in effect to replace all state sanctioned marriages, gay and straight, with civil partnerships."

".....relatively few people on either side of the same sex marriage debate have embraced the disestablishment proposal, but this third option helps us see why proponents and opponents of same sex marriage must contend with the substantive moral and religious controversy about the purpose of marriage and the virtues it honours."

9. ".....the question of revitalising our public discourse in democratic life. But if, as I've argued, it's not possible for government to be neutral on these disagreements, is it nonetheless possible to conduct our politics on the basis of mutual respect? The answer, I think, is yes. In recent decades, we've come to assume that respecting our fellow citizens' moral and religious convictions means ignoring them, leaving them undisturbed, conducting our public life in so far as possible without reference to them. But this stance of avoidance makes for a spurious respect. Often it means suppressing moral disagreement rather than actually avoiding it. This in turn provokes backlash and resentment, as we see in the rise of religious fundamentalism.

A more robust public engagement with our moral disagreements could provide a stronger, not a weaker basis for mutual respect. What would that look like? Well rather than avoid the moral and religious convictions of our fellow citizens, we should attend to them more directly - sometimes by challenging and contesting them, sometimes by listening and learning from them. It is always possible that learning more about a moral or religious doctrine will lead us to like it less, but we cannot know until we try. A politics of moral engagement is not only a more inspiring ideal than a politics of avoidance. If it's true, as I've tried to argue, that our debates about justice are often inescapably arguments about the good life, then a politics of moral engagement is also a more promising basis for a just society."

10. This was a question from the audience by Evan Harris MP for Oxford

HARRIS: I do a lot of public policy on abortion and gay rights and assisted dying and embryos, and it seems to me that it's not the morality that's missing on either side. I come from the non-religious side and I would say that I bring morality - the principle of non-discrimination, the principle of not harming someone unless there's evidence that your policy creates harm. Obviously the religious side bring their morality. But one side, I think, tends to bring evidence and an acceptance that their position might change with evidence; whereas another side, the religious side, is much less likely to accept and consider evidence and bring that to the table because their moral position is relatively absolute. And so shouldn't we be arguing that we should bring evidence into the moral arguments, where appropriate, not bring morality in when it's already there on both sides?

MICHAEL SANDEL: I agree with what may be the impulse behind your worry, which is that if people simply assert dogmas rather than offer reasons and listen to the reasons given by their interlocutors in public debate, that's not a very valuable contribution. Where I think you and I may disagree is on this. I don't think that those who enter into public discourse and advance moral arguments that may be informed by faith traditions, I don't think they have a monopoly on dogmatic assertions. I think there are dogmatic secularists, just as there are dogmatic religious fundamentalists.