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Michael J. Sandel, *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005. Hardback, 292 pages including index. ISBN 0-674-01928-8.

This book presents a collection of essays by one of the leading American political philosophers of our time. Many of the essays are drawn from wide-circulation journals like *The New Republic* and are therefore written in a lucid and accessible style. While some deal with issues specific to American political and social issues, others are of global significance. And all of them are informed by a philosophical position that deserves close attention. Sandel has been associated with a critique of liberalism known as ‘communitarianism’ and while he himself uses this term sparingly, the second half of the book, which contains the more theoretical essays, represents as good an introduction to this way of thinking as is currently available.

The heart of Sandel’s position is that liberalism has denied itself the opportunity to debate issues of public policy on the basis of substantive commitments to moral and social values. Basing itself on the moral philosophy of Kant, liberalism conceives of the human subject as a locus of pure choice. The most morally salient feature of persons is that they are able to choose their own values and goals in life. They can decide autonomously what would constitute the good life for themselves. What they choose does not matter as much as that they choose without any hindrance or pressure from others. They are in principle unencumbered by the commitments of the communities or traditions in which they are brought up. The first and most important right that they should enjoy, therefore, is the freedom to make their own choices. The formula that expresses this doctrine was formulated by John Rawls is ‘the right precedes the good’.

According to Sandel, this has given rise to what he calls ‘the procedural republic’. This is a polity that allows everyone to live their life as they please, provided they harm no others. It ensures that everyone’s rights are respected and that due process is followed, but refuses to commit the society as such to any substantive values, visions or goals. In order to avoid the domination of those with minority preferences on the part of the majority – a domination often expressed in moralistic terms – liberals insist that freedom for individuals and minorities can only be secured if the state brackets moral convictions from its decision-making processes. The law should not be used to impose majority moral preferences on minorities.

As applied to America, this has led to the diminution of the role of the state. In the absence of a vision for the good life of members of the republic, the state is left to provide only welfare rights, infrastructure services, and internal and external protection. It can provide no leadership which would shape culture or values and which might attract the allegiance or commitment of its citizens. Citizenship is reduced to the role of client, and commerce is able to define the national agenda in terms of its interests.

The relationship of morality and law also becomes problematic in this context. Whereas most liberals would argue that law-makers and courts should remain neutral in relation to substantial moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality, Sandel argues that many American judicial decisions do, in fact, incorporate substantive moral judgements and also that they are right to do so. In the case of

homosexuality, for example, a judgement that is based on the premise that the state has no business intervening in such an issue is unable to pose a challenge to the view that the practice is immoral. If homosexuals are to gain respect as well as tolerance, it must be possible for the courts to affirm that there is nothing immoral about such sexual practices.

In these and many other cases, Sandel effectively demonstrates the importance of being willing to engage with comprehensive moral ideas in the public sphere. The more specific issues that Sandel discusses range from state lotteries to affirmative action and the way in which they illustrate his thesis makes them fascinating to any reader interested in the broader issue of public values.

In what way might this book be of use to readers of *Practical Philosophy*? The book does not address the existential or ethical issues that would be central to the concerns of such readers. However, practitioners who use philosophical stimulus material to engage clients in philosophical discussion will find many of the essays useful in that they are short and clear. Practitioners who deal with clients who hold minority views or pursue minority preferences and who wish to reflect on the political dimension of their lives will also find much of interest in the book.