

The limits of liberalism

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<http://www.open2.net/society/socialchange/liberalism.html>

Michael Sandel is Professor of Government at Harvard University. He made his name in philosophical circles with the publication of his book, 'Liberalism and the Limits of Justice' (Cambridge University Press, 1982). In order to understand why this was so important, one needs to understand something of the debate of the time.

In 1971, another Harvard Political Philosopher, John Rawls, published 'A Theory of Justice' (Oxford University Press, 1972). It is widely accepted that this book revived the tradition of political thinking known as 'liberalism'. This is connected to, but not identical with, the belief characteristic of political parties that have words such as 'Liberal' in their title. Liberalism is difficult to define, but one part of it, and this looked to be part of Rawls' liberalism, is that each of us is able to stand back from our roles and commitments, in order to evaluate those roles and commitments. That is, we can think of ourselves as free from such things as our religious commitments, or our commitments as members of a certain community (whether narrowly defined, such as a particular club or broadly defined, such as a particular nationality) and (i) question these roles and commitments, and (ii) think about how these roles and commitments fit in with other people's different roles and commitments. That is, we can take a neutral stance towards them and think about how they fit into our lives, and, more importantly, into a society.

Clearly there is a place for this kind of thinking and the result of it may well be that we, as individuals, decide that membership of a community is a good thing, and that place should be found for being members of a community both within our lives and within a society. Sandel argued that there was something suspicious about this. Can we really think of ourselves as individuals without any of these commitments, and, from there, evaluate these commitments? As he put it, "On Rawls' view, a sense of community describes a possible aim of antecedently individuated selves, not an ingredient of their identity as such," ('Liberalism and the Limits of Justice', Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 64). That is, can we even think of ourselves as individuals without these commitments?

An example might help. There would be something frankly odd about a family sitting around the dinner table, and one of them saying: "Right. Let us think of ourselves not as Father and Mother, or son and daughter but just as bare individuals without these roles and then take a look at ourselves and see what we think." These things are not options (like clothes) which we can take off and put back on again; they are part of what we are.

It is controversial whether liberals (including Rawls) are really committed to an objectionable version of this very individualistic claim. However, you can start to see a broad dividing line here: between those who think that things (let me just leave it vague about what 'things' are), can be thought of as a matter of choice, and those who think there are all sorts of important things (broadly those that make up who we think we are), that either cannot, or should not, be thought of as a matter of choice.

This divide has effects further down the line: between those who think protecting individual freedom of choice is important, and those who think that there are matters that should be protected (importantly, our communities), and are not up for choice; between those who think what is good for us is simply the sum of all the goods of different people and those who think we can appeal to a 'common good'. Sandel's work inspired what is broadly known as 'communitarianism', although that label applies to a whole variety of positions some of which are closer to Sandel's original ideas than others.

It is 27 years since 'Liberalism and the Limits of Justice' was published. Having Professor Sandel as the Reith lecturer gives us all a chance to hear how his thoughts have developed, and how the conflicting views of liberalism, and those who think liberalism has some important limits, have played out. In particular, the Reith Lectures are concerned with how ideas of morality and community are part, or should be part, of contemporary political debate. This demonstrates how Sandel's work has been enormously influential both within philosophy and political theory, but also in contemporary politics, where particular parties, and even particular policies of particular parties, are identified as being on either one or other side of the liberalism/communitarian divide.