

Market Economy Versus Market Society The Relevance of Communal Versus Individual Values And Ethical Versus Moral Perspectives

2012

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This essay emerges as a result of reading Michael J. Sandel, "What Isn't for Sale?" The Atlantic, 309, no. 3 (April, 2012) pp. 62-66; adapted by the author from his, What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) 2012.

Sandel's work examines one of the key questions facing modern World Culture and especially modern Western Culture: the proper place of markets in the overall societal dynamic. Do we want a market society as well as a market economy? Do we want to continue the pervasive trend of the last 40 years to allow markets to have an ever-increasing role in decision making in the non-economic spheres of life? Sandel suggests that this trend needs to be restrained and that certain aspects of life [public health, public education, justice, law enforcement, public infrastructure, elections, etc.] should be largely excluded from the forces that would reduce them to commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace [market triumphalism]. Sandel further suggests that the domains of social relations and social functions are ones where moral sensitivity should be the major determinant in decision making, not economic cost-benefit analysis.

I agree! What Sandel offers is valuable and well written, and I recommend it to the attention of both social scientists and those involved in the social and political arenas. At the same time, I think Sandel's argument could be improved if it were refined in a couple of ways. In all societies communal values are in tension with individualistic values at all levels of both individual and institutional relations. And determining what constitutes the appropriate balance between these two forces at all of these levels is always in flux. In western society since the advent of the industrial revolution and especially in the period since WWII, individualistic values that support biological survival in the natural environment, and competition, individual achievement and accumulation in the social realm, have ascended to prominence. Countering this trend have been moderate and mostly temporary periods of regulation in the name of benefiting the common good [communal or social values] to address the most egregious excesses during this individualistic ascendancy. Witness the brief times of introducing regulation after economic depressions and recessions followed by the expanded periods of loophole hunting and deregulation. Through these

oscillations, the dominant force has been a capitalistic system in an expanding economy as led by individualistic values. And as Sandel argues, the tendency for this system to influence and seep into the social domain and to commoditize basic social and biotic functions has escalated. In my view, Sandel's argument would benefit if it was clearly tied to this fundamental individual versus communal value dynamic that is universal in all cultures.

I would make a second distinction that I think would be useful to Sandel. This is the distinction between ethics and morality. In the vernacular, these terms are often treated more or less synonymously, but they can be differentiated. Ethics is a philosophical system of secularly derived social or communal values while morality is a system of social and communal values derived from and associated with particular religious belief systems. What constitutes ethical behavior can be debated, while what constitutes moral behavior cannot because religious belief systems are absolute and based on faith while secular belief systems are relative and based on the observations of what is needed and the proof of what works. I argue in my several works [www.Dynamic-Humanism.com] that a spiritual perspective underlies the religious point of view and is the true source of morality unencumbered by the complications of religious beliefs.

If Sandel were to make the distinction between moral and ethical systems, he could more effectively argue that communal values [social or cooperative values] appropriately should contribute to the decision making process in the public policy arena. He could argue that societies need to support and sustain ethical behavior and that the moral basis for social behavior need not be tied to religion per se.

Indeed, it is exactly the failure to make this distinction between morality and ethics that seems to undermine the effort of progressives to argue for the importance of communal values in arriving at decisions in the political arena. Progressives seem to think it is necessary to make themselves over as "moderate" or "tolerant" religious believers to be credible in proposing ethical [social/communal] considerations in the political process. The result of adopting this religiously leaning, weak ethical position is that decision making in politics becomes mostly a battle between the proponents of the individualistic, materialistic, capitalist view and the moralist view based on religious fundamentalism. The ethical center in the debate is largely lost in the process, not to mention the potential relevance of a spiritual position in support of communal values. See elsewhere my argument in my essay, "Religion and the Sources of Social Values," for spiritual awareness actually being the primary source for morality in human communities rather than religion.

The very motive for much of the social activism of the religious right would be diminished if the social/cooperative values it espouses in politics were accommodated from non-religious, ethical and spiritual perspectives. Gay rights, women's rights, abortion rights, affirmative action, equal opportunity, and ethnic, racial and class rights can be debated on ethical and spiritual grounds. And reasonable decisions on public policy can emerge from these debates. The issue should not be whether social or communal values should be included in the political decision making process. As Sandel argues, they should be – among other things for their value in countering the excessive tendency to commoditize our social domain. But to be appropriate in the American context, the promotion of these communal values must come from ethical considerations and moral considerations based on spiritual awareness. Religion offers secondary support, but it is not necessary to justify a moral basis for the importance of social values in the arena of public policy and to deny the market a primary role in defining communally oriented activities.

The principle of the separation of church and state in American culture in no way precludes the legitimacy of promoting ethically and morally based communal values in political decision making. As in virtually all things cultural, the answer lies in locating the position in all of our relations and institutions that reflects an appropriate balance between the forces for individualistic and for communal values and in keeping the tendency in the direction of either extreme in check. In line with Sandel's position, presently it is the individualistic values emanating from the economic marketplace that are over-weighted, that are inappropriately defining our social world, and that need to be restrained by reclaiming the primacy of communal values in making decisions in the many areas that do not properly reside in the realm of providing goods and services.