



## ARISTOTLE CONTEMPLATING PUBLIC POLICY

Sunday, October 18, 2009

*Every week CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist/philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogues compiled on Sunday, October 18, 2009 after watching selections from "The Chris Matthews Show," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," and "The Charlie Rose Show."*

**Salit:** Charlie Rose interviewed Michael Sandel, the Harvard political philosopher. You interviewed him years ago on the *Fulani!* Show and he's been a prolific author on subjects having to do with democracy, civic life, and the need to reinvigorate a civil discourse. He's now teaching a popular course at Harvard called *Moral Reasoning 22: Justice*, where he tries to examine, as he puts it, the big issues that philosophers have dealt with from the very start of philosophy and how those issues are still rumbling around the political arguments that exist today. I want to talk about how he is framing these issues, and how he sees the intersection between politics and philosophy.

So, let me start with a basic question. Do you think that the "big issues" framed by the earliest philosophers can be "seen" in the political arguments that galvanize our country and the world today?

**Newman:** No.

**Salit:** OK. To flesh this out for our readers, Sandel would identify those core philosophical issues or concerns as utility; freedom and choice; and virtue and the common good. So, when you answer 'no' to my question, does the 'no' mean those philosophical issues are not kicking around the political discourse, or are you disagreeing with the idea that philosophical debates, ancient and otherwise, kick around the political discourse, whatever they might be?

**Newman:** I'm saying neither. I'm saying the society in which we live has not been structured so as to make possible that level of political debate.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** And so it's not here.

**Salit:** It's not here.

**Newman:** Right. Maybe it's at Harvard. But it's not in the world in which we live, perhaps with the exception of Harvard.

**Salit:** My first thought after hearing this discussion with Sandel was that he seemed like a very nice person, but that the political class would eat him for breakfast.

**Newman:** Yes, the political class would make mincemeat of Sandel by virtue of simply saying *You're out of order*.

**Salit:** Even so, let me pursue the particulars of his idea that classical philosophical questions live on in contemporary politics. Sandel says that the question at the heart of the healthcare debate is a moral question: *Should all people living in a society have, relatively speaking, equal access to quality healthcare?* And, he says, the political mistake that Obama made in trying to sell this healthcare program over the summer, was that he forgot to address – these are Sandel's words – he forgot to address the fundamental moral issue. Charlie Rose says to him, 'Well, did he forget to address it, or did he make a pragmatic decision along the lines of *I can't get there with a moral appeal – I can't get to where I'm trying to go with a moral appeal.*' Sandel answers, 'Well, there is a pragmatism that wants to avoid controversy, but because Obama did that, and the cause languished.' So, the core of his argument here is it's a moral issue and that's what you have to go to the American people with, a moral appeal. He's saying something more than this would be a good marketing approach. He's saying that there's something inherently relevant about a moral appeal based on the architecture of philosophy.

**Newman:** Alright, this is my language now. You can construct a language game, a system of language games in which you can make that point.

**Salit:** Right.

**Newman:** Presumably, one can do it at Harvard. But in the political life of the vast majority of the American people, it can't be done. It hasn't been structured or created that way. Should it be? That's another question. But can that happen within the existing structure? No.

**Salit:** Why not?

**Newman:** The structure's been created in such a way as to leave no room for that. That's not what political life is.

**Salit:** Sandel brings up the issue – or the meta-issue – the meta-philosophical concern called utility. The functional definition of utility is that it is the premise that we search for the greatest good for the greatest number, and he pegs this to the debate about torture. The argument for the use of torture is you can torture one individual terrorist for information and if torturing this one individual gets you information that helps you save the lives of many individuals, then it is just. So even though it causes pain and represents inhumanity to an individual, it's a utilitarian trade-off between the life of this one individual and the lives of many more individuals. This is simplistic but he's saying

*Well, the history of philosophy includes a 2500-year debate on utility, and lo and behold, we're still debating that very question in the debate on torture.*

**Newman:** That's not the debate on torture in the real world. The debate on torture in the "real" world is other than anything Sandel even considered worthwhile mentioning in his hour-long interview.

**Salit:** And that is?

**Newman:** It turns on power. The serious debate on torture turns on power.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** As we saw, the United States of America was torturing prisoners at Guantánamo under George Bush.

**Salit:** Right.

**Newman:** And as soon as Barack Obama took over the power, it stopped. It's an issue of power. But that's not a factor for Sandel. Because he's concerned with – I don't know – higher, more abstract things, which have little to do with the actual issue of torture, because they have little to do with the actual issue of power.

**Salit:** I'll ask you one more of this genre of question.

**Newman:** Feel free.

**Salit:** He talks about Aristotle and the philosophical questions of virtue and the common good. A question that Aristotle raised is how should a society distribute recognition and honor. Sandel says the debate on same-sex marriage is the Aristotelian debate on how the society distributes recognition and honor, because the state's recognition of gay marriage is a form of distributing recognition and honor. Those who want gay marriage legalized are saying *That is a fair and just distribution of recognition and honor, and that's what we want.* And so Sandel says, look deeply into this debate on same-sex marriage and it's the old Aristotelian debate.

**Newman:** And I say, don't look more deeply into it. Look at the actual history and it's a debate on political power. I think Aristotle was a very bright fellow. And, I think in the context of the structure of the society that both he and Plato operated in, philosophy had a different relevance, because it was structured that way by the forces that were operative in ancient Greece. That has very little to do with the forces that determine and develop the conditions under which these concepts function within modern America.

**Salit:** True enough.

**Newman:** I like Sandel. He seems a bright enough fellow.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** If I had the chance to interview him after this Charlie Rose interview, I would ask him one question and that would be *How do you grade?*

**Salit:** How do you grade your students at the end of the term?

**Newman:** Yes.

**Salit:** And why would you ask him that?

**Newman:** Because I want to know whether what he's doing in his limited context bears any relationship to what he's talking about. I wouldn't ask him that in order to be provocative. I just want to know that. Leave out America as a whole for a moment. Let's just talk about Harvard. How does this work there? I don't know. Maybe it's a pass or fail course, I don't know, but I would like to know. That's an exercise of power question, how you grade the students in your course.

**Salit:** So, he argues that one of the things that he's doing is teaching his students, not ordinary people because Harvard is elite, but he is teaching students to philosophize. Actually, the interview closes with him talking about class stratification at the country's leading universities, how of the 145 top colleges and universities in the country, only 3% of the students are from the bottom 25% income bracket. But, that aside for the moment, he says 'What I'm trying to do here is teach the students to do philosophy. I'm trying to teach them to use philosophy and to ask the big questions about ordinary life, to train them to do that.' You believe in teaching people to philosophize, to practice doing philosophy in ordinary life, but you're raising your eyebrows at my saying that so maybe you don't quite agree with my characterization of what you've said. But, even if I'm correctly characterizing words that you've said, I know that you mean something different by that than what Sandel means. What does that mean to you?

**Newman:** Well, the difference in what we are saying is roughly the difference between Sandel at Harvard and me teaching philosophy with people who have created a different environment.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** People often take this to be a trivial distinction, but it isn't. Let's talk about social therapy for a minute. People in social therapy come in to a group saying they want a cure. But the group responds: we're not going to give you the cure.

**Salit:** Alright.

**Newman:** We're seeking to create an environment in which one, which might be you since you're one of the ones, could be cured, because that's what we can do. At most.

Sandel, in part because he's at Harvard, has to come up with the cures. Do those cures have a relationship to what's going on? In a way they do. Of course they do. Cambridge is in the world.

**Salit:** Right.

**Newman:** But the environment in which you create is an enormous influence on what it is that you are creating.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** And that ultimately, in my opinion, comes back to a power question. You have to satisfy certain conditions and do certain things to make it possible for you to do other things in a way that you, roughly speaking, would like to see them done. Sandel seems like a well-intentioned guy, a well-intentioned liberal, humanitarian, and I'm sure he thinks that he's doing the best he can at Harvard. I'm sure he wouldn't be adverse to hearing criticisms of Harvard. I'm sure he would say, privately if not publicly, *I'm doing what can be done at Harvard.*

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** But does that activity have anything to do with the things that he's talking about, namely changing society and the world? No.

**Salit:** If he were to make his best case for the fact that it does make a difference, he would say that his operating premise is that the biggest difference leaders can make in this society is to change the terms of political argument. That's what political leaders can do. That's what Obama is trying to do. And that's what leadership is, presumably, given the nature of the crisis that we've been living through. I presume he would argue that training young people to philosophize, to grasp more about the history of philosophical debate, is part of the process of doing that. But, leaving aside whether it is or isn't part of the process of doing that, how do you respond to his claim that that's what leadership is, that's what leadership can do, change the terms of the political argument?

**Newman:** I don't think that's ever happened.

**Salit:** Sandel would say that to bring about the kind of changes that you and I and many people who consider themselves progressives might want, we have to change the terms of political argument, that if we allow the current terms of political argument to continue, we won't be able to achieve certain kinds of progressive goals.

**Newman:** I agree. But that simply leads you to the next question.

**Salit:** Which is?

**Newman:** How do you change the terms of political argument?

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** And I think the power relationships in which he is performing his activity dictate that it is a place from which you cannot do that.

**Salit:** How would you answer the question that Charlie asked him, 'Do we have a just society?' Sandel replied that we have an imperfect just society, or a just society that hasn't fully realized its capacity to deliver justice. How would you answer that?

**Newman:** How would I answer it if I were Sandel?

**Salit:** No, if you were you.

**Newman:** We're not far enough along in the process of social revolution, social development and social transformation to even consider that question.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** Nor is he. That's how he should have answered it too. *How could I possibly know? My project at Harvard has barely begun.*

**Salit:** I wanted to ask you a question about Sandel's Trolley Car Lecture. Sandel tells this story to hundreds of students. You're driving a trolley car, going 60 miles per hour down a track. The brakes have failed but the steering works. Down at the end of the tracks, you see five workers who are on the track and you realize that the trolley car you're driving is going to plow into these five workers and kill them. But you suddenly notice there's a sidetrack that you can steer the trolley on to, at the end of which there's one worker, and so if you steer the trolley on to the other track, you'll kill only one worker rather than five. And so he asks the class to talk about what they'd do. The majority – he does a poll – the majority say that they would steer the trolley onto the sidetrack, in essence making the judgment that it's preferable to kill one person rather than five people. And I take it that this is a teaching tool to get into the utility argument, seeking the greater good for the greatest number, etc. A small minority, but nonetheless an identifiable minority, said that they wouldn't turn the trolley car. Is there a sensible argument for that?

**Newman:** Why you would choose the track that will kill five rather than one?

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** There are many. Do you want to hear some of them? Arguably, the five people who were together on the track might have been more aware of the dangers and took on the work that they do there with this risk in mind, while the one on the sidetrack might be a newly hired worker who didn't know the risks when he took the job and so

that changes the whole moral question. Circumstances continuously change the moral equation. I think he's looking for something resembling a general law. But for the most part, there aren't any.

**Salit:** There aren't any general laws.

**Newman:** No. All moral decisions, in my opinion, are situational. Suppose, for example, the one person on the sidetrack was you.

**Salit:** "You," meaning the person answering this question.

**Newman:** Yes. Then what would you do? You say, well, how can that be? Aren't there two separate people here? Well, maybe yes, maybe no. If you want to make up these things, why not make up epistemologically strange things to go along with it?

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** Suppose the one person was your mother.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** Suppose the five people working together wore swastikas on their arms?

**Salit:** How would you feel about your choice then?

**Newman:** You don't know. It's all circumstantial.

**Salit:** It appears that the motive for Sandel's enterprise here is that the religious right, as he says, grew very, very substantially and gained power in this country by asserting a set of moral principles. He faults the liberals and the left for not having done the same, for having shied away from a kind of secular moral and philosophical vision, from bringing philosophical debate about virtue and the common good and freedom and all of this into the public square. And so from the point of view of power, this seems the most explicit thing he has to say. The right did that. Now the left has to do that. His book, his course, and his lectures are all done in the hopes of facilitating that.

**Newman:** I think that's a fairly profound distortion of history.

**Salit:** How so?

**Newman:** The obvious answer to the riddle of which came first, socialism or fascism, to put it in the most black and white terms, is that socialism came first.

**Salit:** And?

**Newman:** I think the left gave answers from which the right learned to develop its answers to those questions afterwards. The left had a broad and explicit moral vision. Was it ultimately corrupted? Yes. But was there a profound moral and philosophical vision at the heart of socialism? Yes. But as things progressed, the left was told if you give those answers, you're a goner. That's the history of the situation, roughly speaking.

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** What relationship does that have to the philosophical issues? Well, that's something that needs to be addressed. It's very hard and very complex, and I think that we're addressing them to some degree. But in order to do that, you first have to create the environment where everyone can address them. It's very complicated and hard to do. In the last 40 years, we've created an environment where we can begin to do that.

**Salit:** Thanks, Fred.