

Unseen Face of Justice

By Naofumi KANEKO

As “Justice with Michael Sandel” was introduced to Japan last year, the Harvard University professor’s lecture – dubbed a “white-hot lecture” here – commanded no less popularity than in the United States. As he visited Japan to give a special lecture at the University of Tokyo in August 2010, it was widely covered by Japanese media, including Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK), which broadcast a digest version of the lecture. It was NHK, in fact, that triggered the fervor, putting on the air Sandel’s Harvard University lectures on political philosophy under the title of “Harvard White-hot Classroom” and steadily raising its popularity. “Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?” – a book compiled from his lectures – is a philosophical one never meant for popular reading but nonetheless registered an unusually good sales record in Japan. What does it all mean?

The way Sandel lectures before rows and rows of students is unique. He takes up some principles of political philosophy concerning “justice” and transforms them into pretty much ordinary, somewhat familiar questions, asking students in a dialogue style what they think about them. So, many refer to the freshness of the dialogue-style lecture – which is not common in the Japanese classroom – as the reason for its popularity in Japan. But does it fully explain the phenomenon? To me, it rather seems to imply that the young generation today, when it is difficult to find clear guiding principles to depend on, is craving for an answer to the question of what “justice” is.

For example, one of Sandel’s often asked, famous questions is as follows. A crew of four people escapes from a shipwreck and drifts on a boat, eventually running out of water and food. Three men get together to kill and feed on the fourth, weakest one, and survive until being rescued. It is a true story which took place in 19th-century Britain. Needless to say, the three men were put on trial. The thing is that if the three had not done what they did, all four would most likely have perished.

According to Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism advocating the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, the act of the three men could well be condoned. Can we say, for argument’s sake, that if human life is so precious, as it is often said, killing one as opposed to four getting killed is higher in terms of value? We will probably stop there to think twice about it. Then again, why do we do so? Modern society was born by breaking free from the confines of its respective religion. Be it Christianity, Buddhism or Islam, citing a religion of our choice as the reason for not condoning such an act may not be much different from citing our individual hobbies or preferences. If that is the case, where in modern society can we find “moral reasoning” going beyond a religion of our choice?

In his book, Sandel quotes theories at will from the works of thinkers, including Aristotle and Kant in old days, discussing justice in modern days. His argument

largely focuses on the thought of communitarianism placing importance on the public value of human beings tied to a continuous tide of history, opposing the trend of modern society toward excessive liberalism and individualism. What is it that humans are tied to history, however?

What Sandel cited as an example in his special lecture at the University of Tokyo was the question of whether moral responsibility for injustice committed by the past generation is handed down to the present generation. The specific question he asked then was if it is justifiable that the present generation should bear responsibility and apologize for the past wrongdoings committed by Japan to East Asia and, by the same token, responsibility for the dropping of atomic bombs by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Among a spectrum of opinions opposing it, the leading view was a liberal, individualistic one holding that humans are independent beings only responsible for what they have done at their own will. Some members of the Tokyo audience expressed the view that their existence is based on the experiences of past generations, that they were born in the same community and that the past problems are connected to the present. That is exactly what the communitarian viewpoint, which Sandel develops in his book, is all about. The argument is built around the recognition that there must be “the common good” or moral principle that goes beyond the level of individuals.

In his special lecture, Sandel refrained from emphasizing his own viewpoint, saying to the effect that we live in a world of different values. He concluded his lecture by saying there are many different points of view which may appear to be unsolvable, but in the life of our modern-day community it would be valuable to continue to debate. His very remarks may be an explanation in itself of why his “justice” theory is drawing attention not only in the United States but also in Japan. As globalization continues, the sense of value becomes fluid, making it hard to see what justice really is. There may be growing inclinations among youths across borders to find themselves tied to an unbroken flow of history, hoping to find their standpoint and place to fit in. **JS**



Harvard University Prof. Michael Sandel lectures on bioethics and income gaps before about 1,000 students at the University of Tokyo on Aug. 25, 2010.

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