

Episode 247: The moral limits of markets / The problem with meritocracy (Michael Sandel)

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense.

I'm your host, Julia Galef, and today's episode is with Professor Michael Sandel. He is a political philosopher at Harvard. And like my last episode, this one has roughly two halves. The first half is about one of Michael's books from 2012, titled: *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. And the second half is about his most recent book, from this year, titled: *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become Of The Common Good?*

So starting with *What Money Can't Buy* -- one of the main arguments that he makes in that book is that there are some things that maybe we shouldn't allow people to buy and sell. For example, should we allow people to sell their blood or their kidneys? Should we allow companies to pay for advertising space in public schools or pay individuals to tattoo advertisements on their body?

And his main argument is that allowing these kinds of things to be bought and sold can have a harmful, corrupting effect on norms in society. That, for example, paying people to donate blood might undermine our collective sense of blood donation as this noble, altruistic act, and that can actually reduce people's willingness to give blood.

And then also more broadly, that allowing markets in goods like the ones I mentioned can degrade these general norms in society, like our sense of civic duty or the sacredness of education. And that such markets can even degrade human dignity.

And as you'll hear in the upcoming conversation, I'm particularly interested in this idea of human dignity as a thing that we need to protect -- because I've seen Michael Sandel and other philosophers talk about it before, and it's always been a very alien concept to me. So part of my goal in this interview was to understand what he means by that and why I should value it.

So that's what we talk about in the first half of the episode, and stay tuned for the second half in which we talk about *The Tyranny of Merit* and Michael's argument in that book for why the United States' belief in meritocracy is harmful and also a major cause of the populist backlash that we've seen in the last few years in the U.S. and also in Britain.

So here is my conversation with Michael Sandel.

[musical interlude]

Julia Galef: My biggest question about the corruption objection was whether your concerns about corruption of values are ultimately consequentialist or not.

That is, if we allow people to sell things like their own kidneys, or advertising rights on their bodies or on their homes, or if we allow people to place bets on tragic events... do you object to these things because they are *inherently* bad or immoral? Or because you are making the empirical prediction that they will erode norms, and thereby, harm society -- an empirical prediction that could turn out to be wrong, but it's your prediction?

Michael Sandel: Right. Well, both truly. It could be both. And here, consequentialism is a broad blanket category, maybe too broad, because it could be interpreted in two ways.

Julia Galef: Okay.

Michael Sandel: Take the blood example. Suppose allowing a market in blood donation does lead fewer people to donate blood in the long-term, this would be a consequentialist argument against it, strictly from the standpoint of maximizing the supply of safe blood over time. So you could say there's a consequentialist argument, and it would be empirical whether this crowding out effect does take place.

Julia Galef: Right.

Michael Sandel: But there is a further objection, which is eroding the impulse in society, the norms about altruism, about gift-giving, about regarding the body or health as sacred goods. This change in norms might also result and be undesirable.

Now, you could, I suppose, call that a consequentialist effect, but it's not consequentialist in the first way. It's not simply that you could measure empirically whether or not, over time, the supply of blood increases or decreases. The consequence here in the second case has to do with a shift in the way we regard one another, and in the way we regard health, and in the way we treat one another and regard health as a good.

So it's, I suppose you could say, an *intrinsically normative* consideration that you could call an adverse consequence, but it's important to distinguish it from the purely empirical question of whether the supply of blood goes up or down. Do you see the distinction I'm trying to make?

Julia Galef: I do, and it's an important distinction. But I'm still wondering whether the change in norms is an empirical prediction you're making, or whether it's almost *by definition*, to you, that this change happens.

So for example, in your book you talk about allowing advertising in schools and you talk about how this degrades our sense of school as this important and, in a sense, sacred place. And how it has this importance to civic society.

So to me, that's a very plausible hypothesis that allowing advertising in schools could have that effect on norms -- but it's still an empirical hypothesis.

And so what I'm wondering is: If you suppose that we did a bunch of polls, and after advertising in schools became widespread, we measure people's attitudes about education and civic responsibility, and all these other things that we care about. All these other values. And they remain unchanged. Or maybe they even go up; people report even more respect for school and education, and their performance in school is even better than it was before.

Would you then look at those results and say, "Okay, I guess the norms didn't erode"? Or do you consider just the act of having advertising in schools to be itself, a bad thing, an example of norms eroding?

Michael Sandel:

I think it would be worth asking what is the long-term effect on norms, and conducting a poll might be one way of trying to get at that. But that might not be the decisive way. There might be less quantifiable effects.

For example, the main worry with commercial advertising in schools is it reinforces the tendency, already pretty powerful, for students to grow up drenched in consumerism. And to lack any critical distance from consumer orientations -- to the society around them, but also to the activity of learning. Why are you in school? Well, to get a better job, to equip myself to make more money.

And ideally, the schools should be places of refuge from the consumerism that engulfs us in most of our lives, in young people especially. So that students can learn to reason critically about consumerist values. And this is an important part of their civic education, this distance from consumerism.

So if over time there were no such adverse effects in the moral and civic education of young people, if they were utterly indifferent and unaffected by ads for Nike and Pepsi on the walls of their schools, then I think one could say their civic education had not been diminished.

But I'm not sure a poll would capture this. We would have to look at the long-term orientations of students toward learning, toward consumerism and the like.

Julia Galef:

Yeah, okay. That's very helpful. And my example of a poll, I was just meaning to gesture at the broad category of ways we could try to measure the values that we care about. You're right that a poll alone would be simplistic.

But that is really helpful to know, that it is at least in theory an empirically falsifiable claim to say that "such and such market erodes norms." Because I wasn't sure if that was your view.

Michael Sandel: Yeah. Empirically, I would say it's a matter.... but the relevant test here, the relevant measure, would be partly empirical, but partly normative. Because determining whether a generation of young people has become more attuned to consumerist values, or more inclined to a critical distance from consumerism when they think about politics and the world in which they live -- whether that has happened or not is an interpretive matter.

And so when we assess the effects, the consequences broadly conceived, it's not a purely empirical test, it's a matter of interpretation about whether certain norms have changed over time. And there may be empirical indicators that we could look to, but it involves an element of interpretation that resists too sharp a distinction, between what's empirical on the one hand, and what's normative on the other.

Julia Galef: Yes. That is a good distinction too.

One thing that made me a little hesitant in reading the book is that you'll often make statements like, "Such and such degrades a norm," or "Such and such degrades a person." An example -- people selling rights to advertising on their homes or cars, or even on their person, to companies, *degrades* them.

And it sounded, at least on my reading, that you were speaking as if this was a self-evident fact that everyone agrees on. And in the case of people selling advertising on their bodies, I *kind of* share your intuition... but in general, when people say that something degrades another person, they're often speaking for that person in a way that that person themselves wouldn't agree with.

Like, people have said that it degrades someone when they strip for money. Or it degrades someone when they have sex before marriage. Or when they masturbate. And in many cases, I just feel like: "Who are you to speak for me about what degrades me?"

And so I was just wondering if you felt that your observations, or your intuitions about what is degrading -- do you see those as your own personal intuitions that you understand other people might disagree with? Or do you think you're observing a thing that everyone else should also agree with?

Michael Sandel: Well, I don't think it's simply a matter of reporting one's personal intuitions. I think these judgements can be contestable, but if you believe at all that there is such a thing as human dignity, then you must also think there are certain choices or acts that are contrary to human dignity -- even though we consent to them, even though we may impose them on ourselves.

Now, it can be contestable and open to argument. Take some of the examples you gave. Take the example of sex work. The debate about sex

work is typically a debate about whether selling one's body for sex is or isn't a violation of human dignity.

The tattoo advertising, if I sell space on my forehead to a casino, which is one of the cases that I report in the book, and install a tattoo on my head for the casino in exchange for money -- some would say, and I would be inclined to agree, that that's a violation of human dignity, that use of oneself as a walking billboard for a casino. There are others who might disagree.

So there can be disagreements about what counts as a violation of human dignity, and we can reason about this. These are competing moral conceptions, competing conceptions about what it is to be a person, what respect for our own humanity consists in.

And they may involve competing intuitions, but I think they are open to argument and debate. Just like debates about justice generally, or the common good are open to reason, to argument and debate.

Julia Galef: Well, at least in arguments about justice, you can appeal to thought experiments like the veil of ignorance: "What rules would you want if you didn't know your place in society ahead of time?" Or golden rule-type arguments.

But in the discussions of what counts as "degrading" or what counts as a "violation of human dignity," I've never seen any arguments that appeal to shared principles or premises. It always seems like people are just sharing their own aesthetic reactions, or their own moral intuitions, and there's no way to appeal to principles that other people don't already share.

What's your vision of how we should adjudicate these disagreements about what counts as a violation of human dignity?

Michael Sandel: Now Julia, if you don't think moral argument and moral persuasion are ever possible about anything-

Julia Galef: Oh no, I do.

Michael Sandel: Okay.

Julia Galef: I was trying to make the distinction between cases where I think it is possible, where we can agree on shared premises, and cases where it doesn't --

Michael Sandel: I don't think that distinction holds up, for the following reason.

Take a debate about human dignity that is also a debate about justice: the debate about whether torture is ever justified. Now, one of the most powerful moral arguments against the permissibility of torture is, even if it would elicit information that would serve the common good, is that it's

a violation of human dignity that is categorically wrong. This would be a Kantian argument that a torture violates human dignity.

So there is a conception of human dignity at stake here. And the debate is whether torture in all circumstances is categorically wrong because it violates human dignity.

So I don't think that there's a clear distinction between moral arguments about justice and moral arguments about human dignity, simply because the alleged violation of human dignity involves the way we treat ourselves rather than the way we treat others. I don't think it makes it less susceptible of argument than debates about justice, where we do appeal to norms.

We don't know whether there's a shared premise or not, until we carry on the argument, until we give it a try. This is true generally of moral argument. It's not that we say, "All right, let's first agree on first principles, and then we'll know whether or not we can persuade one another." We may not know that until the activity of persuasion and reasoning takes place.

Julia Galef: The example of torture seems like a poor example to reason about, just because it's so bad without even taking into account any potential human dignity violations.

The tough cases to me seem to be cases where someone is not being coerced. Someone doesn't believe themselves to be harmed. And yet some other people say "No, but your human dignity is being violated, by that act you are choosing to engage in it and claim to want to do."

Michael Sandel: Right. Well, take the example, Julia of the book... An example I gave in, it's in an earlier book, my book on Justice. It's a true case. In Germany there was someone who placed an ad online inviting someone who would be willing to engage in consensual --

Julia Galef: Cannibalism?

Michael Sandel: You probably read about that.

Julia Galef: I was just guessing where you were going with that.

Michael Sandel: Okay. And a number of people applied and discussed with the person who had placed the ad over the phone, what was involved. Some dropped out; a few remained. And in the end, there was someone who was prepared to be cannibalized, to be killed and eaten. Not for money. This had nothing to do with markets.

And sure enough, they came together. The consent was fully informed. In fact, I think the deliberation and even the act was videotaped and the act of killing and voluntary consensual cannibalism was carried out.

Eventually the police discovered it, they arrested the guy, they put him on trial.

And so here would be a test of your idea of what counts as a violation of human dignity -- that if one freely chooses it, that there's no moral argument to be had about it. What would you say about this case of consensual cannibalism? Does it violate human dignity, Julia?

Julia Galef: Well, I don't share your intuition that there is a thing that it makes sense to call human dignity. My objection --

Michael Sandel: I will put it this way, is there anything wrong with this?

Julia Galef: Yes. So what I was going to say is --

Michael Sandel: What's wrong with it?

Julia Galef: I would lean towards not allowing a case of consensual cannibalism. I have a pretty strong preference to let people do what they want if it isn't hurting other people, and if they're choosing it freely and so on, but there are exceptions to that. And I think one of the exceptions is when the thing someone claims to be choosing freely is something that you probably would only choose if you were mentally ill or otherwise impaired.

Michael Sandel: Well, I don't know whether this sudden introduction of impairment or mental illness is just another way of saying that you think that he shouldn't have chosen this, but --

Julia Galef: I'm second guessing that he *actually* wants that, and is of sound mind and body in choosing that.

Michael Sandel: But if he did. If he did.

Julia Galef: I think that if I could somehow know that he was freely choosing that, and was of completely sound mind, then I think I would want him to be able to do it.

Michael Sandel: You would?

Julia Galef: I think so, yeah. It would be hard to convince me of that, but if I could somehow be convinced, then I think I wouldn't want to ban that activity.

But if I could somehow be convinced that there would be a significant norm erosion -- like, that if other people in society knew about this happening, then that would cause society indirectly over time to have less respect for human life, then that too could be a reason why I might want to ban this activity.

Michael Sandel: Well, wait a minute though. What's the basis of that norm? Why would you... If this is simply a choice that people should be able to make freely,

provided it is free, and if more and more people read about it and get the idea and consider it and decide they want to go in for this -- well, why do you worry about that?

Julia Galef: Oh, what I was meaning to refer to when I said, "In theory there could be an erosion of respect for life," I meant just generally speaking. Not specific to consensual cannibalism, but people no longer worry too much about murder because they're like, "Well, our society has decided that killing people is fine."

Michael Sandel: I see. So you would object if it led to an increase in the murder rate, but you would not object if it led to an increase in the consensual cannibalism rate?

Julia Galef: If, again, with the proviso that I have good reason to think that all of these people who wanted to be eaten were of sound mind. It's a tall order, but in theory, yes.

Michael Sandel: So if that norm were eroded, and more and more people went in for it freely. Then you would have no objection, you would only object if it led to an increase in the murder rate?

Julia Galef: Or some other kind of nonconsensual harm. Yeah, I think so. It'd be a weird world, but --

Michael Sandel: So for you, you put everything on consent?

Julia Galef: Yeah, I basically do.

Michael Sandel: So you accord such enormous value to consent that that would, these other provisos in place, that for you is the fundamental moral principle.

Julia Galef: It's hard for me to agree to that in general, because I'd have to think... This is like a specific kind of moral disagreement we're talking about. There might be other moral disagreements where I'm like, "Oh no, in this case, there's another principle that we need to invoke," or something. But at least in this local discussion, the question of whether we want to stop someone from engaging in an action would depend on --

Michael Sandel: Well, hang on. Whether we want to stop them is a further question. The prior question is whether it's even possible in principle for a person to violate his or her own dignity. So, the tattoo on their forehead for the casino likewise.

Julia Galef: I mean, I agree it's tacky! And I would want-

Michael Sandel: But tacky, even that's judgmental, that's being judgmental.

Julia Galef: Oh, yeah. No, it's-

Michael Sandel: But it's not a moral judgment, you think it's an aesthetic judgment? That [something] is tacky, is not a moral judgment?

Julia Galef: Basically. I don't know, when I see people wearing T-shirts with the gangster versions of Tweety Bird on them, I think that's super tacky. But I don't want to prohibit people from doing that, if that's what they want to do.

Michael Sandel: Remember prohibiting it as a legal matter, we're talking here about the moral judgment.

Julia Galef: You're right, yeah. I don't think... So I'm basically saying that if someone wants to get a corporation logo tattooed on their forehead, I have a similar cringe reaction to that.

And I have some worries about whether they're being coerced. Or whether as a society, people are in such desperate straits that they have to do this kind of thing.

But then my reaction would be to say, "Let's change society so that no one is ever desperate enough to have to do something like this if they don't want to." But my reaction would *not* be to say -- even my intuitive reaction is not to say --that they've violated some concept of human dignity. I don't feel like I intuitively know what that means.

And I get nervous about... I know you're saying it's not a legal question, but there have been attempts to ban people --

Michael Sandel: We're discussing human dignity. So human dignity, this is a moral question. It may have implications for what should and should not be permitted, you're right about that. But it's a moral question in the first instance.

Julia Galef: Well, yeah, if something called human dignity is part of your sense of morality then it is a moral question. I just --

Michael Sandel: But even you acknowledged Julia, that you cringe, but the-

Julia Galef: Yeah, no, I also cringe at the gangster Tweety Bird shirt, is what I'm trying to say. And I don't think my cringe reactions should be a determinant of moral judgments. At least not without vetting them carefully and trying to see if there's some principle underneath the cringe.

Michael Sandel: Right. Not without vetting them carefully, but the question is whether the cringe points to a moral judgment that needs at least some investigation and consideration, or whether you can account for the cringe in some other way. Or maybe ideally disabuse yourself of the tendency to cringe in the face of the tattoo advertising.

Julia Galef: Yeah, I think there's some cases when I have a cringe reaction and I investigate it and I realize, like, "Oh, I think what I'm reacting to here is: The thing that the person is doing is *a sign that* they don't value other people's lives. But the thing they're doing is not *itself* harmful. So I guess I don't object to the thing itself, I just don't like that person."

Anyway, I'm trying to give a sense of what happens in different cases when I investigate my cringe reaction. But my worry is that when people appeal to human dignity, they're not fully investigating the cringe reaction. They're just reifying it. And saying, "Well, I've cringed and that means there's something immoral going on here."

And that's what makes me wary.

Michael Sandel: Right. But one could be wary of consequentialist arguments on exactly the same grounds -- that when people invoke the language of consequences or utility, they're just slapping a label on something that they haven't fully investigated or elaborated or defended.

So that's true of concepts generally, it's not a unique feature of arguments about dignity. It equally applies to other moral concepts, including utility and consequences.

Julia Galef: Well, with the dignity arguments, I was just trying to say that it didn't seem to me that the dignity argument *was* appealing to any kind of underlying logic or principle. It was just a name we give to the cringe reaction.

Whereas at least consequentialism has a logic to it. And you might... We could argue about when it's appropriate and when it's not, or if the logic leads to terrible conclusions that invalidate utilitarianism. We could have those arguments. But it doesn't seem to me that there is a logic to the appeals to human dignity.

Michael Sandel: Yeah, I don't see that asymmetry, Julia. Though I know that many utilitarians, especially Benthamite utilitarians adhere to it. But I don't see that distinction.

Julia Galef: Could you... What might help me is if you happen to have an example of a case where two people had different intuitions about whether something violated human dignity, and one managed to convince the other, through reason.

Michael Sandel: Well, it happens all the time. Take debates about human rights, take debates about what should be the rights contained in the bill of rights. What should be the declaration of human rights?

And insofar as people make those arguments, whether for freedom of speech or the right to a trial or the right not to be tortured, insofar as

people debate those questions by offering competing accounts of human dignity, they sometimes persuade one another and sometimes don't.

But my point is that the same question needs to be asked if a thoroughgoing utilitarian says, "Well, I'm for these human rights, not those, because of the long-term consequences of upholding these rights versus those." And there can be a debate where people, some agree, some disagree with that claim about what really does promote utility in the long run.

But debates about utility are no more determinate, agreement is no more guaranteed, the logic is no more decisive, than debates about how to apply Kantian principles, or Aristotelian principles. I think it's a mistake to point to the contestability of how to apply a principle in practice, whether that principle is "maximize utility" or whether that principle is "respect human dignity."

Julia Galef: But with the consequentialist arguments, you can at least say, "Well, okay, we're talking about fulfillment of preferences. And so we can look at what do people actually prefer," and that's the outcome.

Or we can say, "Well, we're talking about happiness." Then we can have some ways of measuring happiness.

But with human dignity, there's not even any agreement on what is the thing that we care about here. And different people have different senses of like, "Well, this is human dignity, or that is human dignity."

Michael Sandel: There may not be agreement, but out of the desirability of maximizing preferences without regard to their content and worth, there may be disagreement about what counts as satisfying preferences. Certainly --

Julia Galef: But at least we know what a preference is!

Michael Sandel: Do we?

Julia Galef: To a greater extent than we know what human dignity is.

Michael Sandel: I'm not so sure about that. That's where I don't see what basis you have for asserting that. That seems to me a highly contestable assertion.

Julia Galef: But at least we're caring about what people want, even if we can't always fully define exactly what counts as a want. Whereas with human dignity, someone can say they want something and someone else can say, "You shouldn't get it because it violates your dignity." And there's no way to appeal that.

I don't know, maybe I should leave this for now.

Michael Sandel: One way you can think about this after we have this conversation, one question you might put to yourself, Julia, is whether it's self-evident that it's a good thing to maximize the satisfaction of wants. And if so, why?

Julia Galef: ... At the end of the day, all else equal, I want people to have more of what they want, and less of what they don't want. There can be exceptions to that, like when people want something that harms them, or when people want something that harms other people.

But all I can say is, that's the thing I care about. I don't think I can make a principled argument, from first principles, that *you* should care about what other people want.

So yeah, I guess if you care about something that you call human dignity, I can't tell you that you *shouldn't* care about it... I'm just confused about what it is and *why* you care about it.

Whereas I think it's sort of more intuitively obvious to almost all humans that caring about people getting what they want is an understandable thing to care about.

Anyway... I definitely don't think we're going to resolve this and I don't want to miss out on my other questions. So my bid would be to set this aside for now, unless you have another point you really wanted to make.

Michael Sandel: No, but I think this is the question. This question, about why, morally speaking, catering to people's wants matters. I think that's the question we're thinking about.

Julia Galef: It is. It's very worth thinking about, yeah. But at this point, let's move on to talking about your most recent book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*

I guess I should try to summarize your thesis in that too. And you can feel free to correct me or add to it.

So I would say your point in *The Tyranny of Merit* is that having a meritocracy -- i.e. a system that aims to reward people with success based on their merits, like their skills and accomplishments and hard work and so on -- that such a system has a serious downside. Which is that it encourages people who are successful to be arrogant and think that their success is wholly the result of their own merit. That they completely deserve it. Rather than their success being about luck, including the luck of having been born with those particular talents or raised by particularly good parents or whatever.

And similarly, it encourages successful people to think that unsuccessful people in the meritocracy deserve their lack of success.

Michael Sandel: Right.

Julia Galef: So these are harmful attitudes that meritocracy, and a belief in the value of meritocracy, encourage in people.

Michael Sandel: Yes.

Julia Galef: So yeah, one thing I wanted to ask you about is: If meritocracy has this effect, then wouldn't that suggest that if we looked back at the time before meritocracy became a widespread way to organize societies -- I don't know, look at the 1500s or something.

Does it seem like the successful people in the 1500s were more likely to view their station in life with humility and a recognition that, "Well, I'm just lucky and I don't deserve my wealth and power"? Because that seems unlikely to me.

Michael Sandel: Well, that's a fair question. Meritocracy often defends itself by comparison with aristocracy, with the idea that our lot in life is simply determined by the accident of birth and our fate is determined by that extant of birth.

That makes meritocracy seem far better. At least, even if our life prospects are shaped by unequal life circumstances and opportunities, at least we're not consigned to the class and status of our birth.

It's no doubt the case that in aristocratic times, people who landed on top, who were born into favorable circumstances, imagined some account of why they deserved it. I would never underestimate the ability of the successful to rationalize their success. But a meritocratic society is built on such a rationalization from the start. It's built in.

In fact, it's interesting to remember that the term meritocracy is a relatively recent term. It was coined in the late fifties, by Michael Young, in a book called, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. He was a British sociologist affiliated with the Labour Party. He saw the class system in Britain breaking down after the war, and that was a good thing. More people from working class backgrounds were able to get an education and to rise.

But, he saw a meritocracy not as an ideal of a just society. He saw it as a dystopian scenario. He predicted that as opportunities became more equal -- and that was a good thing, and as it was possible for people in the working class who were talented and gifted to rise -- though that in itself would represent an improvement, there would be a greater and greater tendency of those who landed on top to believe that they had earned it. And that they therefore deserved the material rewards and the social recognition that came with landing on top.

And, that those who struggled, those who didn't flourish, would come to believe the demoralizing thought that they had no one to blame but themselves for their failure to rise.

He predicted that these attitudes towards success and failure would lead to resentment by those at the bottom against those on the top, and would fuel a populous backlash against meritocratic elites that would overthrow the meritocracy in the year 2034. That was his prediction.

Julia Galef: Sorry, just to clarify --

Michael Sandel: Yeah?

Julia Galef: Why did he think that, if the unsuccessful in a meritocracy believed they deserved their lack of success, why did he think that would foster resentment of the upper classes?

Michael Sandel: Because not only would they suffer the lack of material advantage and social prestige, they would have the deeply demoralizing thought that their diminished condition and life prospects was due to their own inadequacies, their own failures. So a sense of humiliation would compound the suffering that went with being at the bottom economically and culturally.

He predicted the populous backlash against elites. It just came 18 years early, in 2016. The argument I make in the book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, is that the populist backlash against elites that we've seen, not only in the US with Trump in 2016, also in the vote in Britain for Brexit, and in the fueling of anger and resentment that led to populist movements, authoritarian populous movements in many European countries...

I argue that this does have a lot to do with the sense among a great many working people, that meritocratic elites, governing elites, looked down on them. It isn't only that working people have experienced stagnant wages and job losses during the recent decades of globalization, it's also they sense that the work they do is not respected and valued by the society. That credentialed elites look down on them.

I think this is a potent source of the populist backlash against elites. And until we come to grips with it, I think the mainstream parties of the center-left and center-right will have a hard time addressing these resentments and a hard time healing the polarization that we see in our societies today.

Julia Galef: Yeah... So you observe in the book that the belief in a meritocratic society -- specifically the belief that the United States is meritocratic, and that it's equitable, it's fair, individuals are personally responsible for their position in society -- that those views are actually endorsed more by supporters of Trump than they are by non-supporters.

Does this not seem in tension with the idea that support for Trump was part of this reaction against the meritocratic system?

Michael Sandel: Yes, it is in tension. In fact, I would say it's a paradoxical feature of our attitudes, our complex attitudes toward meritocracy.

Many of the working class supporters of Trump ... It's important to distinguish here. There are two different sources of support for Trump. There are traditional affluent well-off Republicans who endorsed Trump, not for reasons of a populist backlash, but for traditional Republican reasons. They liked the tax cuts and they liked the idea of getting rid of the Affordable Care Act. That kind of thing.

Julia Galef: Right.

Michael Sandel: Then there's the other segment of support. The blue collar working class support for Trump. That I think, does reflect the sense of grievance against elites. A grievance that can be all the more galling if you buy into the notion that where you've landed is a verdict on you.

So there's a sense... one could react by simply saying, "Well, the system is rigged. It's not fair. That others are flourishing while I'm struggling. It's not fair that most of the gains of globalization have gone to the top 20% and the bottom half, of which I'm one, have seen wages stagnate."

That's a straight sense of injustice. The system is unfair, the system is rigged. But that grievance, that legitimate grievance is compounded if the society is constantly sending the message that it's your own fault, it's your own fault that you're down there. It's your own fault that you haven't flourished. What you earn will depend on what you learn. And if you haven't gone to college and if you're struggling in the new economy, you have no one but yourself to blame.

This added layer of cultural disdain, being looked down upon and wondering whether maybe there's something to it, I think adds to the toxic, angry brew of resentment that animated some of the populism and antipathy to elites that enabled Trump to win in 2016.

Julia Galef: I almost wonder whether, when people answer questions like the ones I was just referencing -- like "Do you believe that society is equitable and fair? And do you believe that opportunities for economic advancement are available to anyone who cares to look for them?" -- these statements that Trump's supporters answered with more agreement than other people did...

I wonder whether the way those questions were worded prompted them to think, not of themselves and their position in society, but of other people who they think are, I don't know, playing the victim. Or who should have been able to succeed if they had only tried harder.

And so they were focused on *those* people when they answered the questions. But if they had been prompted instead to think about themselves, and whether their current situation was the result of fairness

and meritocracy, whether they would say, "No, actually I don't think it was, I don't think the system is fair to me." Do you know what I mean?

Michael Sandel:

Well, I think there is some of that. I think that some Trump supporters insist that the existing system is meritocratic, is truly meritocratic. I think some of that response is to fend off what they take to be claims by those who want to gain so-called advantages for themselves. So, that could well be a part of it.

But we also find, looking at surveys, that the belief generally among Americans -- and this is independent of what candidate they support -- that effort and hard work determine success... Americans believe this idea to a far greater extent than people in other countries, including in other wealthy democracies in Europe.

And so, there is, independent of the phenomenon of being a Trump supporter or not, a deep American faith that the system rewards effort and hard work. And furthermore, that it's possible to make it if you try, if you work hard.

The belief in rising, in individual upward mobility, and this is despite the fact that the actual rates of intergenerational mobility, being born poor and then rising as an adult to the middle-class or to affluence, the rates of upward mobility are less in the United States than they are in many European countries and in Canada and yet we believe it more.

Julia Galef:

That's so striking, yeah. That's so interesting.

Okay. So, it sounds like what you're objecting to, or the culprit that is really to blame in your view, is not so much meritocracy, or belief that meritocracy is a good thing. But instead, a belief in a *just world*. Which -- you probably know that term, but for listeners who haven't heard it, it's the belief that basically people get what's coming to them. People who have good fortune deserved it, and people who have bad fortune deserved that.

And it doesn't seem to me that it necessarily follows that just because you believe that the world is a meritocracy, or you believe that meritocracy is a good thing, it doesn't necessarily follow that you have to believe in a just world.

You could completely believe that, "Yes, people with skill and talents and so on succeed, and that is as it should be. But whether or not you're born with talent or whether or not you grew up in a supportive environment, those are not your fault. And so, we should be redistributing wealth and we should be respecting people, even if they're not super financially successful and so on."

Isn't it possible to hold both of those views?

Michael Sandel: Well, the question is whether the problem with meritocracy is that we don't fully live up to the meritocratic ideals we profess? And we certainly don't. There are all sorts of disparities in, for example, access to higher education, depending on the class background of one's parents.

Is the problem that we don't live up to meritocratic principles fully, or is the problem also that even if we did, the meritocratic ideal would be flawed? And in the book, I argued that both are the case. We don't live up to the meritocratic principles we proclaim -- and even if we did, a meritocracy, a fully realized meritocracy, would not make for a just society.

Julia Galef: Because for example, some people are still going to be born with more skills or willpower or whatever than other people are?

Michael Sandel: That's one reason. And another related reason is that even apart from the luck involved in having various talents and endowments and gifts that are rewarded, is the morally arbitrary fact that I happen to live in a society that prizes the talents I happened to have.

Take an example from sports, take LeBron James, who's a great basketball player. Now, there's the fact that though he works hard and practices to develop his gifts, I could practice as long and hard at basketball as LeBron and never be a great basketball player, because I lack his gifts.

That's your point. That's the first point. His having those talents is not his doing, but his good luck.

But moreover, the fact that he lives in a society that loves basketball and bestows enormous rewards on great basketball players -- that too is not his doing, but his good luck. If LeBron had lived during the Renaissance, they didn't care much about basketball back then. They cared more about fresco painters.

So, these are two reasons to believe that even if we had perfect equality of opportunity, that it would be a mistake to assume that those who land on top morally deserve the rewards that go with the exercise of their talents.

Julia Galef: Right, Right. No, that's a great point. And when I read that in your book, I remember being struck by that, because I hadn't considered that kind of luck before.

My previous point was it doesn't seem like it necessarily follows that you have to believe that people *morally deserve* their success or lack of success, even if you believe that meritocracy is the best system.

But I also think that empirically, we don't necessarily see that connection between those two beliefs.

So, for example, the winners of meritocracy today in the US, the people who get into the elite colleges -- I believe, from the polls I've seen, that they are *less* likely to express attitudes like, "Poor people are poor because of lack of individual virtue." They're instead more likely to say things like, "Poor people are poor because of systemic inequality and oppression and so on."

And so, I don't necessarily see the empirical support for the causal arrow you're drawing, where succeeding in a meritocracy makes you more arrogant and thinking that you morally deserve your success.

Michael Sandel: Well, people answer these surveys differently, in ways that don't necessarily hang together.

Julia Galef: Oh, how so?

Michael Sandel: It's true that people, when they're asked, "Why are people poor? Is it because they don't work hard and deserve to be poor?" Most people say, "No," they disagree with that.

But then if you ask, "Why are rich people rich or successful people successful? Is it because they work hard and deserve it?" There's a greater tendency to say yes to that.

Now, philosophically from the standpoint of the logic of meritocracy, one would think that the answers to those two questions would go together. And people may not always think through the full implications of their views, which is why in the book, I use a range of interpretive readings of our public discourse, the terms of political discourse, and how it's changed with regard to what I call the "rhetoric of rising." The promise that everyone in America should be free to rise as far as his or her talents will take them. "You can make it, if you try."

I show how this way of thinking and talking about success is a relatively recent thing in our public discourse and it goes back to the 1980s. It begins with Ronald Reagan in large part, but it's picked up and given even more emphasis by Bill Clinton and then by Barack Obama.

And so, in the book, I'm critical of Democrats and Republicans alike, mainstream politicians who have dealt with the deepening inequality of the age of globalization, not by dealing with that inequality directly, but instead by offering the rhetoric of rising, by saying, "If you work hard and play by the rules, you too can flourish in the new economy. If you get a college degree, then you can rise."

But my argument is that the promise of individual upward mobility through college education, important though it is for some people, is not an adequate response to the inequality brought about by globalization in recent decades. It's not an inadequate response to the wage stagnation and the job losses brought about by the kind of neoliberal globalization

that we've had. And that this partly explains why the rhetoric of rising has lost its capacity to inspire and why the Democratic Party and Social Democratic Parties in Europe need to rethink their mission and purpose, to focus less on arming people for meritocratic competition and to focus more on the dignity of work.

We easily forget that most people haven't ... Most Americans don't have a four year college degree. Nearly two thirds don't. And the figures are similar in Britain and Europe. So, it's folly to build an economy on the premise that success depends and a dignified job depends on getting a university degree.

[musical interlude]

Julia Galef:

That was Professor Michael Sandel talking about his books, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* and *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*

I'll share a few closing thoughts. On the Tyranny of Merit, I am very on board with Michael's argument that it's a problem that people don't sufficiently recognize how much of a role luck plays in determining who becomes successful and who doesn't. That this attitude contributes to contempt and apathy towards less successful people. And that we should try to change that.

I'm just not sure that meritocracy, per se, is really the source of the problem here. It seems to me like we can and should improve the status of people who are struggling *without* getting rid of our commitment to meritocracy.

My ideal world would be one in which we reward and applaud hard work and talent and achievement and so on -- because I think rewarding those things is really important for a thriving society. But at the same time, we promote an attitude that people who are not as able to succeed in the system are no less worthy of respect, no less deserving of a good life, and so on. So, that's my take.

You can check out Michael's book for more detail, including a proposal that we didn't get around to talking about, which is his idea for making college admissions *less* meritocratic by introducing a deliberate element of randomness into the process of who gets accepted. You can read more about that in *The Tyranny of Merit: What's become of the Common Good?*

Then going back to the first half of our conversation: As you heard, we did not manage to see eye to eye on the idea of human dignity, and whether it makes sense to worry that allowing certain things to be bought or sold might degrade human dignity.

Which, in my experience, when two people with very different moral intuitions try to disagree, that is often the outcome. The conversation just kind of bottoms out in, "I don't understand why you care about that as a moral issue," or "I don't understand why you *don't* care about that." It's hard to know where to go from there, you know? It is an aspiration of mine to get better at finding ways to make progress on those moral disagreements, but I don't think I am there yet.

But that was only part of his argument. The other part was about social norms being eroded as a result of these markets. And there, I'm quite willing to believe this could happen as a result of things like allowing companies to pay for advertising in public schools or allowing people to tattoo advertisements on their bodies or sell kidneys, things like that.

Those are empirical questions. And, unfortunately, I think he's right that these are very difficult empirical questions to get conclusive evidence about – like, how much people's attitudes about civic duty or about altruism or the value of human life, how much those attitudes are affected by allowing these markets to happen. So, we're left to rely on our best guesses and intuitions, unfortunately.

That's it for this episode. I'll add links on the podcast website to Michael's books, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* and *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Thanks for listening. I hope you'll join me next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.