**Woodard, Christopher** *Taking Utilitarianism Seriously* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019) pp. xii + 217.

Persuading some philosophers to take utilitarianism seriously is not easy. When I introduce the topic to students, the first thing I usually discuss is the strange mixture of love and hatred that the theory usually attracts. Even when I was reading this book, some non-utilitarian friends saw the title and joked about how good the book would have to be to actually make the theory viable for serious consideration. The task, then, is an ambitious one. But despite the difficulty of the challenge, Woodard does a good job.

The book’s defence is made better by how direct it is – it’s honest about a lot of utilitarianism’s most controversial aspects and addresses them head-on. In particular Woodard lists six of what he takes to be the theory’s most powerful objections: 1) that it is committed to an implausible theory of value (whether that’s *what* is valuable, or *how* the values are ranked), 2) that it fails to prohibit terrible acts, 3) that it’s overly demanding, 4) that it fails to respect the ways in which individuals should be considered as separate entities, 5) that it cannot explain the distinctiveness of political issues as opposed to moral issues (and cannot account for important concepts like political legitimacy), and 6) that it doesn’t accurately reflect our moral psychologies and motivations.

In addition to addressing objections, the book also has an important positive project. Woodard sets out a new version of utilitarianism, one that has room not only for act-based normative reasons but pattern-based normative reasons as well. Here, Woodard finds a place in utilitarianism for actions that we think of as good because of the role they play in a larger picture of people and their behaviours: the fact that you might have a reason to have no more than two children in a reality where you’re worried about over-population, for example (p.91-92). Where an Act Utilitarian might argue that having *zero* children is the better option (if such concerns about over-population were legitimate), you might want a theory that understands the agent as not just a single person (or a single couple) making a choice for themselves, but as one or two agents in a larger pattern of people who might make similar choices. Looking at the wider picture in this way lets us see something that Woodard thinks would be special about the idea of having *two* children: it’s roughly the right number of children that everyone should have if they want to keep the population stable. And why should an individual have to make more sacrifices, be more restrained, than what would be required of the average person in this pattern? This also applies to a number of other important ethical problems that require more than a single person’s intervention – it might help us to account for our reasons to recycle, reduce our carbon footprint, spend our time and resources helping those in need, etc.

Woodard sets-up and motivates the need for his defence of utilitarianism in chapters one and two, first with an introduction to set the scene and then by laying out the six objections listed above. The case for his positive account is mostly made through chapters three to five, which includes an explanation of some of the key normative concepts and a valuable discussion of how utilitarianism deals with well-being. Woodard uses four more chapters and a conclusion to bring the rest of the work together, where he shows that his preferred version of the theory can account for the existence of moral rights, then justice and equality, then legitimacy and democracy, then virtuous agents. Responses to the six objections listed earlier are peppered throughout the book, but if any readers were also particularly attached to these moral and political concepts, and if they thought utilitarianism could not account for them, then they should be reassured by what they find.

The layout of the book is in many ways a strength. It gives the reader the details and the arguments that come with putting forth a new theory, but it also manages to do much more. It gives the reader a tour of some of the most interesting areas of contemporary ethics – with stops at over-demandingness objections, the nature of well-being, and the nature of practical reasoning. These are the sorts of things that might make it a good text for a class, or a good book to read for someone who wants to refresh themselves on what the normative ethicists have been up to lately. But such a recommendation does come with some caveats. In many places, such as the discussion of the willingness requirement (mentioned below), the book is more like a continuation of an existing conversation than an introduction to one. The reader would sometimes need to go away and read other work before getting the most out of what Woodard has to say. Sometimes, perhaps, this is just the best way to write a book on a topic with plenty of history.

Of course, not everyone interested in the debate is as keen to hear why we should take utilitarianism seriously. Some of us, despite the best efforts of others, are rather more interested in why we should take some of its main objections seriously. For every attempt to adapt utilitarianism to make it more ‘palatable’, there’s a risk of conceding too much and losing something that existing fans of the theory find important and appealing. There’s a reason, after all, that utilitarianism for all its unpopularity has stuck around for so long, why opponents like Thomson famously describe it as being like ‘a weed with a long root’, that no amount of ‘mowing or tugging’ can get rid of (‘Goodness and Utilitarianism’, 1994).

Woodard’s theory recognises and tries to hold on to some of the virtues of Act Utilitarianism more than some of its other rivals. The book makes a few of these comparisons explicitly, such as in chapter five where it contrasts Woodard’s version with idealizing Rule Consequentialism. According to Woodard, an idealizing form of Rule Consequentialism is ‘one that defines the value of a set of rules using some idealizing assumption, such as that the vast majority of people comply with the rules.’ (p.100). Woodard instead, changing his mind from previous work (and crediting Dietz’ ‘What We Together Ought To Do’ (2016) for the change), thinks that what qualifies as a pattern-based reason will depend at least on whether it follows some form of ‘willingness requirement’ – where people’s actual willingness to join in with a pattern of actions needs to be taken into account. This prevents the view from some unappetising consequences of pattern-based theories that idealise the actions of others and assume everyone will act in an optimal way. It stops people from making needless sacrifices that rely on others, for example, when those others aren’t at all likely to co-operate.

But there are other reasons why Act Utilitarians might not like the idea of idealizing theories. Think back to some of the motivating cases for pattern-based reasons: problems that would require action from multiple people such as the hypothetical concern of over-population, or perhaps more realistic examples like recycling, sparing time and resources for those more in need, making an effort to reduce one’s carbon footprint. In a lot of these cases, we might be tempted to think about pattern-based reasons as those which reduce our obligations. Perhaps I’m only required to think about recyclable materials or spend my time and resources on others to the extent that it would make sense for everyone to do the same. If we lived in a reality where over-population were a concern, perhaps I would only need to reduce my potential children to two, not zero. But we don’t live in an idealised world here, either. Not enough materials are getting recycled. Not enough people are sparing *any* time or resources to the many people who are currently in dire need.

When people aren’t willing to play their role in a pattern of action, then considering our pattern-based reasons isn’t going to save anyone from the demanding moral obligations that Act Utilitarianism gives us. When others aren’t stepping up to do their bit, the rest of us are required to do *more*. I don’t think that pattern-based reasoning will get us very far off the hook compared to Act Utilitarianism when it comes to moral over-demandingness. And I don’t think we should want it to - otherwise, the good simply won’t get done. There’s a case to be made that morality *should* be very demanding when you live in such an imperfect world.

The over-demandingness objection isn’t the only objection that Woodard might be too concerned about. As he notes himself (p.36), rival theories aren’t without their own problems. Much of this book serves as an important testament to the fact that ethics isn’t simple – and even its supposedly simplest views can have a wide range of nuances in the different ways they relate to rightness, practical reasoning, well-being, praiseworthiness, rules, motivations, and politics. There are no moral theories that come *without* important objections of some kind, or else we wouldn’t still be so interested in working out the right answers. But maybe that should mean that Act Utilitarians shouldn’t be as concerned as Woodard thinks about the fact that it has some. There are other places in the book where Act Utilitarianism might not seem to get enough credit, or even enough credit for how complex it can also be. When Woodard discusses the relationship between utilitarianism and reasons, for example, he seems to think that Act Utilitarians cannot be reasons internalists, where reasons internalists are those who think there’s a necessary connection between an agent’s normative reasons and what they might be motivated to do (p.41). He says,

…utilitarians typically claim that everyone has a normative reason to promote others’ well-being whenever they can do so. On the assumption that some people could not be motivated by the fact that something would benefit another, utilitarian theories are incompatible with these forms of internalism. (p.41)

But some Act Utilitarians *are* reasons internalists, and it’s not really clear why he thinks reasons internalism is incompatible with consequentialism, welfarism and sum-ranking (which are his three necessary features, that he lists from pages 4-6). Not all of a person’s normative reasons need to be explained in terms of overall goodness of outcomes unless you also think that all normative reasoning is necessarily ethical reasoning, for example. Perhaps I accept that the most ethically valuable thing I could do would be to go to a protest, but perhaps I also have other normative reasons to help a friend going through a tough time because in my reasoning I take the value of their well-being into account more than that of everyone else. Welfarism doesn’t necessarily imply that agents will have reasons to promote everything that’s valuable unless you’re already assuming a connection between what’s objectively valuable and what agents have reasons to do – which a reasons internalist might deny. And if you don’t rule out the possibility of Act Utilitarianism being combined with reasons internalism, perhaps you’ll find some better ways to assuage some of the problems that the theory seems to have.

As I mentioned above, the book serves as a valuable reminder that no ethical theory is really simple. Even with a theory made up of a single moral principle there are a dozen further questions about how to relate that principle to actual practice. And even though I still think that Act Utilitarianism has more room to avoid objections than Woodard seems to think, his book does contribute to clearing up some of these questions and laying out some important ground for further work in normative ethics.

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