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BOOK REVIEW: JUSTICE, CARE, AND THE WELFARE

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In recent years, a great deal of ink has been spilled defending the methodological claim that political theorists should do more to engage with, and to provide realistic answers to, the most pressing social and political problems that we currently face. Though I have some sympathy for this kind of activism, I must confess that at times I find this literature a little dreary. Rather than dispute methodology, I'd like for these theorists to practice what they preach – to inspire others to follow in their footsteps. Daniel Engster's *Justice, Care, and the Welfare State* is important in part because it takes up this task.

The purpose of the opening chapter is to clarify and to defend the methodology that Engster then employs in later chapters. His approach is distinctive in a number of ways, but one point stands out in particular. This relates to the fact that he aims to take seriously empirical insights from social scientific studies. This is essential, he thinks, because it enables us to 'move beyond mere speculation and ideological claims about the best institutional arrangements and [to] identify the institutions and policies that actually promote justice in real-world societies' (p. 15). It is increasingly common for political philosophers to pay lip-service to this demand, but Engster goes much further than this. This gives the book a unique flavour: a blend of 'normative political philosophy and empirical policy studies' (p. 4).

In the remainder of the book, Engster discusses five areas of welfare policy. These relate to children (ch. 2), health and healthcare (ch. 3), the elderly (ch. 4), disability (ch. 5), and poverty (ch. 6). One reason for selecting these topics is that they are politically important, at least within the post-industrial democracies with which Engster is concerned.

A second reason is more philosophical. Engster believes that these are areas that liberal political philosophers such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, as well as those they inspire, tend to neglect. Moreover, this is not accidental: rather, he thinks that this reflects the fact that liberals are often ill-equipped to provide compelling analysis of these more complicated issues (p. 17). These topics therefore seem to provide fertile grounds upon which for Engster to advance his preferred position: a version of *care ethics*. Very roughly, care ethics is a kind of moral reasoning that emphasises needs, relationships, and dependency (pp. 17-24).

The focus on the alleged superiority of care ethics over liberal political philosophy is one of the things that I liked least about this book. For the most part,

this is because Engster's engagement with liberal theories of justice is often brief and, perhaps in virtue of this, sometimes uncharitable. In many cases, it was not clear to me that liberal theories lack the theoretical resources he claims or that there are not sophisticated versions of these views that are immune to the objections he presses. This book would have been improved had Engster sought either to engage constructively with liberal political philosophy or to avoid evaluating it altogether.

To illustrate this worry, we can consider the case of disability welfare policy. One liberal view, favoured by Ronald Dworkin (2000), holds that part of the appropriate response to disability is to compensate an individual in such a way that mimics the outcome that would have come about had each individual enjoyed fair access to an insurance market that allows her to insure against the risk of having a disability. Since the disadvantage suffered by people with disabilities is sometimes quite severe, we can safely assume that many individuals would insure against this, and so we ought to compensate them accordingly.

Engster rejects this proposal (solely?) on the grounds that it focusses 'exclusively on compensating disabled persons for their unequal access to resources through social insurance payments' (p. 171). This is unsatisfactory, since financial compensation is plainly inappropriate, and perhaps even disrespectful, in the case of some disabilities. Rather, in at least some cases, it would be better to change society's architecture, institutions, and attitudes so that the disadvantage suffered by those with disabilities does not arise in the first place (p. 167).

Whilst I agree that this implication of the view would be fatal, I do not see any grounds upon which to conclude that Dworkin is committed to that result. Plausibly, liberal theories of this kind employ the term 'compensation' in a very general way, perhaps as it is used by economists. On this view, the exact nature of the 'compensation' is left open: though in some cases it will be financial, in other cases it will not. In an important sense, we can view any law designed to prevent or to mitigate disadvantage as a kind of compensation. If this is the case, Dworkin's insurance model may be much more flexible than Engster supposes. After all, it may even be capable of justifying the kinds of interventions Engster champions.

To be sure, this is only a very small clarification. Clearly, it does not serve as a full defence of either Dworkin's approach or liberal theories of justice, more generally. Rather, I intend this point merely to illustrate a more general claim, namely, that Engster needs to engage more thoroughly and more charitably with liberal theories of justice if he is to convince readers like me to abandon them. In the absence of that, we may conclude that there is in principle much greater overlap between care ethics and liberal political philosophy than Engster recognises.

In proposing this kind of consensus-building, I do not mean to imply that I do not disagree with any aspect of Engster's book. This is not the case, and there remain important disagreements both about the kinds of institutions and policies that we should set up, and about the kinds of reasons that support these. The important point is that these disputes are likely to be subtle, and Engster's caricature of liberal political philosophy risks hindering our understanding of these issues.

Notwithstanding these worries, I believe that Engster's book still makes a valuable contribution, and his empirically-informed exploration of welfare policy

helpfully takes us beyond methodological disputes. I have benefited greatly from being exposed to a large number of philosophical ideas and social scientific data, and I am confident that the same will be true of other readers of this excellent book.

References

Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000).