

Mulgan, Tim, *Future People: A Moderate Consequentialist Account of our Obligations to Future Generations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, pp. 384, US\$80 (hardback)

In his recent book, Tim Mulgan explores the implications of Rule-Consequentialism ('Rule-C') for the ethics of reproduction. 'The ethics of reproduction' involves questions such as: how many children should I have? what population size is optimal for the earth? should I feel free to have children, when I could instead feed the hungry? The book's temperament is conservative; like Sidgwick, Mulgan aims to reconcile consequentialism with liberal common sense, which he assumes to be correct, rather than faulting the received wisdom à la Peter Singer for its biases and lack of compassion. In various chapters, Mulgan compares Rule-C favorably to Simple-C (the usual parody of act-utilitarianism), to Samuel Scheffler's hybrid view (which combines Simple-C with agent-centered prerogatives), and to the contract theory. However, in the end, Mulgan finds Rule-C too demanding and sketches out his own view—a view he developed more fully in *The Demands of Consequentialism* (2001).

The elephant in the book is the oft-made assumption that if a moral theory is 'too demanding,' then it is flawed. Most of the theories Mulgan critiques—for example, Rule-C, Simple-C, and Scheffler's view—ultimately run afoul of the 'demandingness objection.' But those of us more impressed by the horrors of starvation than by our desire 'to do our own thing' will reject this assumption.

The author does argue, briefly, for the assumption. In one place, he says that too many demands leave 'the agent too little room (time, resources, energy) for her own projects or interests.' [18] But on its own, this

observation is thin—why *should* the agent be allowed such room, when there is so much preventable starvation in the world? Later Mulgan puts forward the Rule-C response that ‘Things go better overall if agents give priority to their own interests, goals, and perspectives.’ [144] There must be truth in that, but don’t things go better overall if rich people give up their wealth so that poor people can have food, inoculations and education? All this is standard fare. Mulgan also says things like this: ‘our ideal code [i.e., the rules endorsed by Rule-C] must be successfully inculcated in the majority of the next generation. People will be psychologically resistant to any code incorporating very strong obligations to assist strangers.’ [160] But those sympathetic to Peter Singer’s views will reply: ‘why not teach more demanding rules anyway? Rules in the code might be understood as *ideals*. People might behave better if they’re taught to work towards an ambitious humanitarian goal, rather than being commended for achieving something much more modest.’ Mulgan does not consider this kind of reply, so the issue is never fully joined.

If, as Mulgan believes, morality should not demand much of us, then most of his main arguments go through. At times, however, the victories feel hollow—the arguments seem trivial, given the conservative assumption about demandingness. This almost follows from the nature of Mulgan’s project. Most of the book is devoted to working out the implications of Rule-C. However, as Mulgan says, he remains as neutral as possible on value theory, or on what is good or bad. [56, 142, 207] If one takes no stand on the good, but talks for hundreds of pages about what rules would best promote it, then one will inevitably engage in a lot of platitudes that are neutral among many reasonable views. Rule Consequentialists, Mulgan says, ‘typically argue that the ideal code includes many of the standard rules of

commonsense morality.’ [331] Only Henry Sidgwick could proceed in this way for hundreds of pages and produce a truly great book.

Future People would have been sharper had Mulgan fully realized that Rule-C is an *intuitive-level* theory, to use R. M. Hare’s terminology, not a *critical-level* theory. When we operate on the intuitive level, we act according to ‘prima facie’ moral rules, fitted to the hurly-burly circumstances of everyday life; when we operate on the critical level, we formulate those prima facie rules and decide what to do when they conflict. Rule-C is the practical guide to consequentialism; the ‘ideal code’ of Rule-C contains the ‘prima facie principles’ of which Hare spoke. Three observations: (1) A recurrent foil in the book is Simple Consequentialism (or Simple-C, as I’ve been calling it), which says that ‘the right action in any situation is the one that, of all the actions available to the agent at that time, produces the best possible outcome.’ [17] This view is made to look silly, because Mulgan always treats Simple-C as an intuitive-level theory. However, utilitarians have always adopted something like Simple-C on the *critical* level. (2) Mulgan discusses Derek Parfit’s ‘repugnant conclusion’ and ‘non-identity problem’ in several places. Parfit’s puzzles are critical-level concerns; they arise in *Reasons and Persons* to test various ground-level moral principles. But Mulgan discusses them in the context of exploring the intuitive-level theory, Rule-C. (3) Recognizing the distinction between levels might also cast light on the demandingness objection. If a given version of Rule-C is too demanding, it is important to ask whether its base theory, Simple-C, is too demanding, or whether Simple-C does not in fact entail such a demanding code.

Future People would also have benefited from a more thorough characterization of Rule-C. Mulgan defines Rule-C as the view that ‘an act is

morally right if and only if it is called for by a set of rules whose acceptance by everyone would result in at least as good consequences judged impartially as any other.’ [130] A key question, never addressed by Mulgan, is what can count as a ‘consequence.’ Narrowly, the word might be used only to refer to changes in conscious states. But presumably, Mulgan doesn’t do this, given his repeated praise of autonomy as a value. Alternatively, ‘consequence’ might refer widely to any effect or upshot. On this reading, any action we endorse can correctly be said to have the best consequences—for example, a retributivist can endorse torturing someone who deserves it on the grounds that such an action would produce the most justice. Presumably, this isn’t Mulgan’s understanding either, since it would make Rule-C trivial (almost all intuitive-level theories would have a Rule-C formulation), and since ‘backward-looking’ values such as retributive justice seem contrary to the spirit of consequentialism. Hence, Mulgan’s understanding of ‘consequence’ must lie between these extremes. But where? In general, it is not easy to characterize consequentialism, as Frances Howard-Snyder’s work has shown us (see her essay, ‘The Heart of Consequentialism’). Mulgan might have said more about this.

A final observation. The book’s bibliography spans fifteen pages, so it would be odd to lament that it wasn’t longer. But I found some omissions to be unfortunate. Sidgwick is not discussed, even though *The Methods of Ethics* contains the best essays ever written on intuitive-level moral principles, which is Mulgan’s main topic. Richard Brandt’s best book (*A Theory of the Good and the Right*), as well as his last book (*Facts, Values, and Morality*), are never mentioned, even though Brandt is history’s greatest rule-utilitarian. Hare’s name never comes up. (Subtext: let’s learn all we can from these old guys rather than start over with each generation!) In his

detailed critique of Gauthier's theory, Mulgan never cites Parfit's devastating attack (see Parfit's, 'Bombs and Coconuts, or Rational Irrationality'). In criticizing *Political Liberalism*, Michael Huemer's decisive critique never comes up (see Huemer's 'Rawls's Problem of Stability'). In discussing the ethics of creation, Mulgan doesn't cite most of the best work on this topic. Finally, Mulgan needlessly renames things I named first: his 'Compulsory Reproduction Objection' [17] is my 'No-Obligation Argument' (in my essay, 'Is it Good to Make Happy People?') and his 'Repugnant Obligation Conclusion' [61] is one of my 'actions-involving RCs' (in my 'Repugnance or Intransitivity' paper). However, I should not single out *Future People* for such criticism, since it is better researched than many philosophy books. I do think our discipline would progress better if we took more time to work on our material. The philosophy we produce would be better, and since there would be less of it, fewer great books and great essays would get overlooked.

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