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Review for *Phil Review*

Richard Tuck, *Free Riding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2008 viii, 223.

This is a wide-ranging, erudite discourse on the rationality of cooperation, whose main arguments are unconvincing. The book is divided into two parts. "Philosophy" aims to show that, contemporary dogma notwithstanding, it is rational, in a narrow, instrumental sense, for individuals to participate in successful collective actions. "History," recounts the largely independent histories of thought on this issue within philosophy and economics, with a view towards establishing that the position defended in "Philosophy" was widely accepted within both disciplines from the 16th Century through the 1930's. Professor Tuck takes pains to distinguish the theses defended here from others that are not: that rationality in general should be identified with rationality in the narrow, instrumental sense, that coercion is never needed to induce people to pursue collaborative action, and that instrumental rationality requires us to participate in futile attempts at collective action. Nevertheless, he suggests, even his "modest" theses could curtail some unfortunate political consequences of the contemporary dogma and undermine a central pillar of the dominant tradition of economic theory.

Tuck draws a sharp distinction between problems of cooperation appropriately modeled by prisoner's dilemma games and true "Olsonian"¹ problems, where the effect of each participant's action on the common result is negligible. We focus here on the former, which he regards as more tractable. Tuck's optimism is somewhat surprising. The proposition that the cooperation in a one shot, two-player prisoner's dilemma game is "irrational" would seem to follow immediately from now-standard definitions. In disputing the proposition while apparently accepting the definitions, Tuck would appear to be taking on a difficult fight with both hands tied behind his back. The explanation is that Tuck rejects current orthodoxy about the meaning of narrow, instrumental rationality.

Tuck has little to say about the two-person prisoner's dilemma beyond observing that, when indefinitely repeated, strategic considerations can lead the participants to cooperate. Given the familiar result that there are equilibria supporting *any* level of cooperation, including zero, there is a lot more that should be said about what constitutes rational play here. In fairness, however, the kinds of collaborative actions of primary interest here are better modeled by many-person games. Tuck does examine multi-player prisoner's dilemmas², and discusses some examples that are appropriately modeled by one-shot versions of these. The fact that his diagnosis might carry over to the two person case should give us pause. Exhibit A is voting. In

¹After Mancur Olson, who, along with James Buchanan, Edward Chamberlin, Richard Musgrave and others, is credited as being among the chief authors and advocates of the dogma under attack here.

²He commends Thomas Schelling's as the most appropriate n-player generalization, though other choices more faithful to his examples are possible. See Kuhn, Steven, "Prisoner's Dilemma", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/prisoner-dilemma/>>.

any election, with any familiar voting scheme and machinery of tabulation, it is reasonable to suppose there is some number k and some particular set S of k votes for a candidate C , such that the votes in S caused C to win. On reasonable theories of causality (though perhaps not all those currently on offer), we can say that each vote in the efficacious set, in the context of the others, caused the victory. Of course, I will very rarely know, either before or after the election, whether my vote was in this set. The margin of victory, however does give me a good estimate of the odds. Surely it is rational to suffer a little inconvenience for a reasonable chance to bring about a result of great importance to me. This outlook has some consequences that are, to varying degrees, troubling. It is irrational to vote if I am confident that my candidate will lose or if I am confident that my vote will not be in the causally efficacious set (say, because I live on the West Coast and those votes are counted last). If I am confident that every other voter will vote for my candidate in a majority election, then the rationality of voting is exactly the same as it would be in an election where I judge that my candidate has fifty-fifty chance of winning. (Either way, there are even odds that my vote will be in the efficacious set.) In a plurality election where each candidate has equal support, it is more rational to vote if there are two candidates than if there are four candidates. (The odds of my vote being in the efficacious set are about a half in the first case and a quarter in the second.) Finally, if the election is important and my candidate has a chance, I should be willing to endure considerable hardship to vote. On the last point, it is interesting to note that Tuck understands that his strong construal of individual causal powers might pose inappropriately heavy burdens of moral responsibility. He suggests that we “separate casual responsibility from its moral implications.” One wonders why he does not contemplate similarly separating causal responsibility from its implications for rationality. This is what orthodox accounts do. By cooperating in a prisoner’s dilemma, when others do as well, I cause a cooperative outcome that benefits me. But by defecting in identical circumstances wouldn’t I “cause” an outcome that benefits me even more – the election of my candidate with no personal inconvenience? It is admittedly odd to think of this as a cooperative event that the efficacious voters and I each bring about. But even if there turns out to be some principled way to demarcate the joint outcomes caused by the actions of the members of a group from those that merely result from those actions, it is not clear why “narrow instrumental” rationality should be defined in terms of former. One advantage of contemporary orthodoxy is that it can accommodate much of Tuck’s intuition. Any extra utility an outcome might afford in virtue of being genuinely caused by my action, rather than merely following from it, can simply be included in the payoffs before applying the rationality test. (There are surely limits to this effect. However great my concern for my mother’s health, I ought not perform surgery myself.) For Tuck, on the other hand, the question of whether a desired result would be caused by the actions of others without me constitutes some other, unspecified “minor consideration” in judging rationality.

The book’s second half chronicles interesting parallel histories. Often, utilitarian philosophers worried about encouraging cooperation, while economists worried about discouraging it (so that “combinations” of producers would not block more desirable distributions resulting from a competitive equilibrium). Here, too, however, conclusions that such cooperation was viewed as rational in the appropriate sense are open to doubt. The difficulty is that the distinction between individual and group rationality exhibited so starkly in the one shot prisoner’s dilemma game was not so salient for writers in previous centuries. Thus, a defender of the contemporary orthodoxy can well agree with Edgeworth that unionism is in the

interests of the laborer, without thereby understanding that my joining this union is in my interests. Similarly, a student of contemporary game theory can agree with the many passages evinced to show that long term strategic considerations may lead rational agents to cooperate when interactions are repeated. It seems no part of historical understanding or common sense, however, to think that tax law, for example, is paternalistic, preventing me from harming myself by irrationally relying on contributions of others.

Philosophical culture notwithstanding, it seems a little churlish to focus exclusively on the main arguments in reviewing a book with so many other virtues. Surprising connections among diverse topics are revealed. We are usefully reminded that “coercion,” being itself a cooperative activity, cannot obviously solve problems of cooperation. We come to better appreciate the extra layer of complexity in cases where effects of individual actions on group outcome are negligible. And we come across delightfully unexpected morsels of historical scholarship. (Who knew that sorites considerations led Hobbes to leave demarcation questions to the sovereign, including the question of whether “some strange and deformed birth...be a man or no”?) Furthermore, there is reason to think that Tuck may be correct in his unhappy assessment of practical effects of our focus on orthodox rationality. Recent studies suggest that economists are less likely than others to cooperate in prisoner’s dilemmas and other games of cooperation. Unlike Tuck, I suspect that these economists are being rational in the narrow instrumental sense. Like Tuck, however, I think that we are all worse off for their being so.

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