
Good applied philosophy is at its most enjoyable when it carefully picks apart the vague, sloppy, or hysterical. Bioethics is probably more prone to vagueness, sloppiness, and hysteria than any other area of applied philosophy, and Stephen Wilkinson’s book is an outstanding example of cool philosophical picking apart. In it, he discusses the sale of organs, commercial surrogacy, and patenting human DNA, and prefaces this with a detailed analysis of underlying concepts, such as coercion, harm, and exploitation.

There have been other books in the vicinity, but none of the well-known ones are as good as Wilkinson’s. Many favour what are sometimes called ‘blocked exchanges’, thinking that people should be legally or morally prohibited, or at least discouraged, from exchanging certain goods usually, although not always, for money. Unlike many other writers and the prevailing body of opinion and law in many countries, Wilkinson does not oppose commercial exchanges, at least in the areas on which he writes here, although he does tend to favour regulation. Also uncommonly, Wilkinson avoids using the top of his voice and writes with patience about arguments with which he disagrees. He is to be praised for this because some of the arguments are frustratingly opaque, or else silly and hysterical – although not, unfortunately, mere straw men. (My own first prize for the most hysterical argument cited in this book goes to the Green Party in Australia, for its claim that patenting human DNA is wrong because it amounts to slavery. See 208.)

The book is divided into a first part on concepts and a second on practices. The concepts that Wilkinson discusses are exploitation, objectification (including commodification), harm, consent, and coercion. With the exception of objectification, there is a large literature on these concepts, so the scope for original analysis in a
book on applied ethics is not great, but the discussion here is never less than clear and thorough and it has its distinctive twists. I hope that newcomers to this area, particularly those from outside philosophy, will read Wilkinson’s excellent discussion and see how difficult some of these ideas are. They might then be invoked with more caution.

Wilkinson claims that exploitation can usefully be divided into a sense of merely using, which is non-moral, and a moral sense, implying pro tanto wrongness. This moral sense itself divides into what Wilkinson calls disparity of value exploitation and wrongful use exploitation. These senses capture two different objections to, say, commercial surrogacy: that the surrogates are ripped off because they are underpaid for what they do (disparity of value) and that the surrogates are wrongfully used no matter what they are paid.

The discussion of disparity of value exploitation builds upon a fairly sizeable literature. Two of Wilkinson’s distinctive claims are that to count as exploited in this sense, there must be some defect in consent (78); and that it is at least arguable that disparity of value exploitation is always harmful (67). Of course, some disparity of value exploitation could be non-consensual and harmful – slavery would be the standard example. But these claims are about all disparity of value exploitation, and this makes them both distinctive and questionable, which is not to say wrong, because of the apparent possibility of characterizing paradigm cases of exploitation as consensual and mutually beneficial, and thereby not harmful. We are not usually at a loss to know what to think or do about obviously harmful actions, but the ethical status of mutually beneficial transactions that do not harm third parties – “Pareto superior transactions” in the jargon – is another matter. This is a tremendously interesting and intellectually difficult topic, and one of major practical significance.¹ For this reason, I shall spend some time on Wilkinson’s treatment of disparity of value exploitation.

Wilkinson’s discussion is thought-provoking and intelligent. It is also complex. The claims rest on a long chain of argument and because Wilkinson does not complete the chain, it might help if I set it out here. Consider a desperate proletarian who has a choice between working for the only firm in town or starving, and who has chosen to work; and suppose that the firm takes advantage of its monopsony position to pay below market rates, or whatever counts as less than

¹ For some consideration of this topic in one practical context, see my ‘The Ethics and Economics of the Minimum Wage’, forthcoming in Economics and Philosophy.