Summary

Harming Others. Universal Subjectivism and the Expanding Moral Circle

Harming Others expounds the theory of what the author calls universal subjectivism, which is a cosmopolitan political philosophical theory that copes with global justice, non-human animals and future generations. Although its main structure is political philosophy, it has wide applications to contemporary moral issues; environmental problems and animal welfare taking a prominent role. The book combines Peter Singer’s applied philosophy with John Rawls’ social contract theory. The objective of the theory of universal subjectivism is to help to make the world a better place. The Enlightenment project has set this goal. The procedural ethical theory of universal subjectivism can be a tool for improving how to live our lives and how to organize society and the global community for now and in the future. Central is an accessible thought experiment, which can expand the moral circle by being a torchlight in search of moral blind spots. The theory is easy to apply, but difficult to implement. The theory expands upon Rawls, by using Peter Singer’s theory. Peter Singer does not seem to have a political theory – this theory could be that theory. This one theory can solve moral problems ranging from abortion, gay rights, to animal welfare and environmental degradation. Because it is a procedural theory, readers are invited to do their own thinking, and, ‘miraculously’ attain a large degree of consensus.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Universal Subjectivism

This introductory chapter sets out the problem: most people harm others, but don’t realize they do. If we do not want to harm others, then we have to change our life styles, our societies and our economical system. As a solution the political and ethical theory of what is called universal subjectivism is suggested. This theory is an expansion of the political philosophy of Rawls combined with the ethical theory of Peter Singer. The book stands in the tradition of the Enlightenment tradition: trying to make the world a better place by applying reason.

This is the first paragraph of the book:

We harm others. With the possible exception of a vegan living a frugal life trying hard to reduce his or her harmful impact on others and the environment, we all harm others. Harm is institutionalized in our society. Our way of life - consumerism and an economic system dependent on growth and depletion of non-renewable natural resources – is based on harming and exploiting others. We harm people in developing countries, we harm animals, we harm future generations and we harm ourselves. We are usually not aware of this. When we look with blinkers, our liberal open welfare society, which respects human rights, seems to be a morally justifiable society. But when one pulls away the blinkers, the gruesome picture of the inconvenient truth appears. A moral lesson taught by many parents to their children is ‘Don’t harm others’. That is a decent moral lesson – but who are others? Those same parents, for example, usually cook food for their children that contains animal products, for which animals have been harmed tremendously. And they probably own and drive a CO2 emitting car, and fly in airplanes. The western throwaway consumerist,
greenhouse gas emitting life style, which uses non-renewable scarce natural resources, now endangers all of us, including many animals and animal species. Destroying the planet is written into our system. We are rapidly on our way to destroy ourselves. Is it possible to live a life without harming and destroying others? Even if it were impossible, doesn’t it seem a worthwhile ideal to strive towards a life style that harms as little as possible? Our life style and our institutions are a long way from that ‘no harm utopia’. ‘Can we live a life without harming others?’ That is the question.

Chapter 2: Preliminaries to Universal Subjectivism
This chapter outlines the basic concepts of the theory of universal subjectivism: naturalism, constructivism, universalism and subjectivism. Also it explains how Rawls and Singer can be combined and why.

Chapter 3: Universal Subjectivism and the Expanding Moral Circle
This chapter is the core of the book. It explains the hypothetical social contract theory of universal subjectivism by trying out various worst-off positions, including non-human animals and future generations. The aim of universal subjectivism is to find moral blind spots and trying to expand the moral circle at much as possible. Many authors have been skeptical about the idea of expanding Rawlsian social contract theory to include animals. These arguments will be considered, as well as suggestions by authors who also have proposed to expand social contract theory to include non-human animals.

Chapter 4: Applications of Universal Subjectivism
This chapter focuses on how this theory can be applied. There are two main applications. First, as a political theory, in order to morally evaluate societies and in order to morally improve societies by pointing out blind spots (like how farm animals and future generations are harmed). Second, the theory can be applied as an ethical theory about how we are to live.

Chapter 5: Problems of and Obstacles to Universal Subjectivism
Some philosophers are skeptical about the endeavor of the Enlightenment project. This chapter analyzes that critique, taking as examples John Gray and Roger Scruton. Then some hard cases for universal subjectivism are considered: abortion, pedophilia, and walking on the grass.

Chapter 6: Clarifications of Universal Subjectivism
This chapter explains how universal subjectivism relates to a host of others, competing, moral and political theories. For example, it explains why the notion of human dignity is redundant.

Chapter 7: Conclusion
This is the concluding chapter. It states that if we do not want to harm others we have to acknowledge that we should live within limits. The liberal maxim of maximal individual liberty still stands, but when the harm concept is extended towards all
sentient beings and future generations, the scope of individual liberty is much smaller than it is generally considered. The biggest problem is that we humans are rapidly nearing the point of overshooting the carrying capacity of the earth. If we do not take drastic measures we will collapse.

Chapter 8: Mediagraphy
This chapter lists not only books and papers, but also newspaper articles, websites and many documentaries.