Book Reviews

***Business Ethics for a Material World: An Ecological Approach to Object Stewardship*, by Ryan Burg. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 379 pp.**

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In this book, Ryan Burg develops an "object-focused" business ethics—that is, a view about the obligations of businesses and the individuals who occupy roles within them on which the material objects with which they engage, including various kinds of products and the networks involved in their sourcing, manufacturing, distribution, and disposal or reuse, play the central theoretical role. Burg argues that his object-focused account represents an alternative, grounded in a pragmatist methodology, to more traditional theoretical approaches in business ethics, such as stakeholder theory and Joseph Heath's market-failures approach, both of which focus on people and their interests rather than the "material world."

The book is engaging and very ambitious, demonstrating a wide scope of erudition. The view that Burg puts forward is bold and original, and he takes up an extraordinary range of issues, from forest management (30–40, 52–53, 198) to toy safety (40–46) to climate change (131–39, 236–38) to global finance (139–58, 238–40). Philosophically-minded readers are, however, likely to be somewhat disappointed by the lack of a sustained and linear argument in defense of the object-focused view. In the end, it is difficult to see exactly why Burg thinks that his view is superior to existing alternatives.

Burg claims that a view on which material objects "function as a sort of moral scaffolding" (2) is necessary in order to make sense of our ethical obligations in today's complex global economy. He describes his approach as pragmatist (16), and describes pragmatists as holding that "workability is a higher aim than rational consistency or conceptual clarity" (16). We worry about this characterization of pragmatism—for how "workable" can a view be if it is not particularly rationally consistent or conceptually clear? Moreover, if this view were correct, then the main burden of a pragmatist argument for a normative view would be to show that its acceptance would tend to lead people to behave in ways that we have reason to endorse.[1] Burg recognizes this, and states the book's central thesis in a way that reflects it:

> The best reason to care for things is that the human relationship with the natural environment will never be sustainable and the global commercial system will never be

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> responsible unless we do so. The principle that people have a special moral priority is perfectly clear in conceptual terms, but absolutely toxic in practice (16; see also 21).

This is a bold claim, but it is not entirely clear why Burg believes it, and it is not defended at any length. The idea seems to be that if businesspeople were to develop a disposition to care deeply about the material objects with which they engage—that is, if they were to develop a disposition to be "object stewards" in their business activities—then they would tend to make decisions that would be much better in terms of environmental sustainability and other important values than the decisions that they currently make (64). This may very well be true, but what Burg needs to argue is not merely that the adoption of his object-focused view by businesspeople would lead to better business practices than currently prevail, but that it would lead to better practices than would be observed if businesspeople developed the dispositions that are supported by alternative views in business ethics, such as a disposition to care deeply about the interests of all stakeholders, or a disposition to refrain from exploiting market failures. Burg does not, however, make this comparative argument in any detail.

Burg suggests that the adoption of an object-focused view requires that we become disposed to "singularize" all objects (chapter 1). Individuals who incorporate this singularization of objects into their moral reasoning will, Burg says, attend not only to the physical features of the objects with which they engage in their economic activities, but also to the histories of individual objects, which they will take to have morally relevant dimensions (50). For example, people will, as consumers, invoke moral reasons not to purchase objects that were produced in ways that harmed people (23–24), and, as producers, they will invoke moral reasons not to use materials in ways that will potentially cause harm, and therefore taint the objects produced (41–42). This singularization, Burg claims, allows us to reconceive of our moral obligations in object-focused terms, which in turn is supposed to help us to think more clearly about key moral ideas: "Once we organize morality through objects, we can calculate harm and beneficence, justice, fairness, and numerous other moral considerations at an object level" (48).

Again, however, exactly how this is supposed to work, and the reasons for thinking that the resulting view is preferable to existing alternatives, is not made especially clear. Burg claims that his approach "promises to locate responsibilities more reliably among the people who can act on them, and . . . to mitigate the risk that important social and ecological values will not be allocated to anyone" (55). The idea here seems to be that if everyone acts as a steward, in Burg's sense, of the objects with which they interact in their business activities, the result would be that the social and ecological values that we have reason to care about would all be sufficiently promoted and respected.

Once again, this is a bold and interesting claim, but it is not clear that there are sufficiently good reasons to accept it. Consider, for example, the value of beneficence that Burg mentions (48). Beneficence requires that we act in ways that benefit others, and our obligations of beneficence are, plausibly, owed at least primarily to people who need it. How would a view of object-based stewardship

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generate requirements, for example, to ensure that people are lifted out of poverty? One answer might be that acting as a good object steward requires using material resources in ways that promote important values, such as poverty reduction. This might, in turn, imply that companies that employ resource intensive production processes in order to produce luxury goods should redirect their efforts toward producing goods that will benefit poor people. Burg, however, nowhere suggests that his view implies anything like this result. In addition, even if Burg accepted that his view might have implications of this kind, there seem to be at least two reasons to be concerned about its ability to capture the value of beneficence in a plausible way.

First, the view prescribes that we develop a core moral commitment to care for the objects with which we engage, and implies that this concern for objects ought to ground our commitment to acting as good stewards of those objects. In this view, whatever concern we ought to have for the effects of good stewardship, such as poverty reduction, is in an important sense derivative of the core concern for objects and for being good stewards of them. But this seems to get things exactly backward, and backward in a way that should seem problematic not just to non-pragmatists, who care that their theories explain the grounds of fundamental principles in a philosophically plausible way, but also to pragmatists who focus on determining what kinds of principles could motivate people in the real world to act in ways that we have reason to endorse. It seems to us much more psychologically and practically plausible that people can be motivated to care about being good object stewards because of a more basic concern to improve people's lives, rather than that people can be motivated to care about acting in ways that improve people's lives because doing so is a way of being a good steward of material resources or things.

Second, it would appear that on an object-focused view like Burg's, agents can avoid obligations to use material resources in ways that benefit others by simply not engaging with the relevant material resources at all. Withdrawal from the relevant economic activities would appear to be a way of avoiding any obligations of beneficence at all. To the extent that this is true, the view seems unable to capture the value of beneficence owed to people with respect to many economic activities.

There are further worries about the object-focus at the center of Burg's view. One in particular is worth briefly highlighting. As noted above, Burg includes an extensive discussion of the global financial crisis, and ethical issues in finance more generally (139–58, 238–40). Finance is clearly an area in which important and complex issues of business ethics arise, and the finance profession as a whole has, on any plausible view, experienced significant ethical failures in recent years. An object-focused view, however, does not seem particularly well-suited to explain the ethical failures of the finance profession, or to prescribe ethical conduct for that industry. The reason is fairly clear: much of the work of finance professionals, including much that raises the most important ethical issues, does not involve engaging with material objects, except incidentally (they use computers and office chairs, for example, but stewardship of those objects cannot plausibly explain their most important ethical obligations). Burg does not adequately explain how his view is supposed to capture the central ethical obligations that we might think apply to finance professionals, because these obligations are owed most directly to people rather than material objects.

Despite our concerns about the fundamental persuasiveness of Burg's view, and the arguments that he offers in its defense, there is a great deal to appreciate about the book. It provocatively suggests that a radical rethinking of mainstream business ethics may be needed in order to address the range of challenges that we face in the current global economy. For example, an object-focused view exposes extensive lines of connection via supply chains and complex networks of production and the distribution of goods and services. An object-focused analysis may better trace the broadly arrayed moral duties owed to the many people the firm touches in a manner that supplements rather than replaces other ethical theories. Burg's view offers some intriguing possibilities for further reflection on the kinds of theorizing that might be able to contribute to meeting the challenges of business ethics in today's world. His call for an object-focused perspective will help us—as business ethicists as well as policy makers—to identify new conceptions of ethical scope and new ideas for regulation, such as those for a circular economy (i.e., closed loop production and consumption). In this sense, *Business Ethics for a Material World* makes a substantial contribution to the field of business ethics that we expect will have important practical influence on business theory and practice.

NOTE

1. Notice in this connection that even on Burg's account pragmatists cannot avoid engaging at least some fundamental questions of value in a manner characteristic of non-pragmatist philosophical inquiry. We cannot determine what kinds of behavior we have reason to endorse, or, in Burg's terms, what kinds of behavior a "workable" theory would encourage, by asking which answer to that question is the most workable.