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Review of Matthew D. Adler's *Risk, Death, and Well-Being: The Ethical Foundations of Fatality Risk Regulation*. Oxford University Press, 2025, 324 pp.

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Policymaking is a complex endeavour: it requires decisions about how to allocate limited resources under uncertainty and about what to prioritise in interventions that may impact on several dimensions and affect various stakeholders differently. Consequently, there is a rich literature proposing instruments that can support policymaking by grounding it on well-justified models and principles. Matthew Adler's latest book is a fundamental contribution to this literature. In it, he develops in full detail a social welfare function (SWF) framework to evaluate policies aimed at the reduction of fatality risk, bridging welfarist economics and philosophical theory to construct a concrete and potentially actionable tool to address public policy.

Adler begins the book by setting the ethical foundations for his enterprise in welfarism: the evaluation of policies should be based on their consequences, and more specifically on the consequences they have on well-being. The book remains agnostic with respect to what well-being is, that is whether it should be interpreted in hedonistic terms or based on preferences or objective goods. Policies are taken to be probability distributions across outcomes, which are represented as sets of bundles of welfare-relevant attributes, one per individual. These are ranked according to the level of lifetime welfare they contain. As long as some axioms are satisfied, there exists a measure (unique up to positive affine transformation) representing this ranking by assigning a real number to each bundle, so that outcomes are mapped onto a vector of well-being numbers. Then, policies are evaluated in terms of expected well-being, that is by aggregating this well-being measure and the policy's probability distribution over outcomes. Adler considers two main rules to make this evaluation, selected on mostly axiomatic grounds: simple utilitarianism, which ranks policies based on the expected sum of individual well-being, and ex-post prioritarianism, which ranks them based on the expected sum of

individual well-being transformed by some function to prioritise the worse-off.

The contribution of the book is not only the construction of a formal framework that yields precise rules to rank policies, but also—and perhaps primarily—the development of a complete picture that puts these rules in their ethical context, allowing users to pick the rule that best satisfies their ethical requirements and to assess the extent to which they rest on assumptions that they may or may not share. Throughout the eight chapters of the book, readers will learn how the framework connects to welfarism and to different theories of well-being, and they will find a defence of lifetime welfarism, a discussion of the ethical significance of death, a comparison of the SWF framework with cost-benefit analysis, an evaluation of the merits of different welfarist approaches, and the exploration of ways to generalise the framework to broader cases. All this contributes to the construction of a robust frame in support of the formal structure.

This thoroughness is the most remarkable aspect of the book. Adler guides the reader step by step, with plain language explanations of the formal parts and illustrative examples to showcase the mechanisms behind the formulas. He makes his assumptions explicit and defends them one by one, providing the reader with the instruments to assess how broad the scope of the theory is. Some of these assumptions are theoretical simplifications that may be overcome with some future sophistications of the theory, such as the focus on "ordinary human people", that is human animals with a set of psychological characteristics sufficient for personhood, or the assumption that the population is finite and fixed (an assumption that may be problematic in the evaluation of impacts for future generations). Others are axioms imposed on rankings, such as completeness, separability, and risk neutrality in ranking bundle lotteries, which will be more or less contentious depending on the reader's sensibilities and on the decision at stake. But all of them are carefully identified and presented to the reader.

Given this thoroughness, it is somewhat surprising that the book contains little explicit engagement with theoretical work on risk itself. The reader will have noticed that the framework summarised above applies to all policies. In chapter 5, which is the centrepiece of the book, this is applied more specifically to policies reducing risk of death. Risk is interpreted in terms of survival probability: a policy reduces fatality risk for an individual if it increases the probability that that individual will survive

a certain period, that is if it assigns a higher probability to bundles with longer longevity. On the possible limitations of this notion of risk, I refer readers to the literature in risk science (such as Aven, Renn & Rosa 2011). But whether it is appropriate to define risk in these terms or not, increase in survival probability is still a well-defined and significant feature of policies, so it remains interesting to see how this impacts on their evaluation. What is more relevant is that in the application to fatality risk regulation the general framework, which included all the impacts a policy has on individual well-being, is reduced to the evaluation of this specific aspect. For each individual, a policy amounts to a lottery among bundles that, in this case, only differ in terms of longevity. That is, the apparatus allows the evaluation of policies in terms of the impact they have on individual survival probability. To be clear, this is a crucial contribution. However, the evaluation of policies dealing with fatality risk cannot be based entirely on that single impact: even within a welfarist perspective, they may have impacts on individual well-being going beyond fatality risk reduction. An open discussion of this simplification and of its implications would have helped to fully assess the import of the book for its main target.

This connects to a second point concerning the content of the evaluation. Pareto Indifference and Strong Pareto, the axioms that Adler uses to characterise a ranking as welfarist, jointly imply that all that matters for policy ranking is individual well-being. However, this does not mean that this ranking is all that matters for policy evaluation. One can plausibly understand welfarism in two ways. On a strong reading, welfarism claims that policy decisions should be fully determined by impacts on individual well-being, which means that the policy that should be implemented is straightforwardly the one that wins the SWF ranking. On a weak reading, welfarism merely (and possibly trivially) states that policy decisions should be linked to individual well-being, meaning that our decision should be influenced by the SWF ranking, but possibly alongside other considerations. Both readings undermine to some degree the extent to which the framework proposed by Adler can guide decision-making. Under strong welfarism, all things that matter for policy decisions should be represented as well-being impacts, including things like costs, fairness, environmental impacts, or cultural value. If this is so, then the hard question in policy evaluation is not (only) how to rank policies on the basis of the welfare numbers assigned to their outcomes, but rather how to obtain welfare numbers that accurately reflect all that matters. On the other

hand, under weak welfarism the hard question is (also) how to aggregate a ranking that includes all that matters with respect to well-being with non-welfarist considerations to reach an overall, all-things-considered judgement.

A further interpretative question arises with respect to uncertainty. In Adler's framework, uncertainty is included exclusively as uncertainty over policy outcomes (although he discusses the possibility of including stochastic attributes to account for uncertainty over bundles), and this uncertainty is taken to be representable with probabilities. Reliance on probabilities is defended on normative grounds: according to Adler, rational decision-making strives to assign precise probabilities to outcomes, which means that normative decision theory does not need to concern itself with the possibility of absence of well-defined probability, as a descriptive approach would have to do. However, whether rationality requires the identification of a unique probability distribution over a set of well-identified outcomes is highly debated. Literature on decision-making under severe uncertainty suggests not only that people often fail to satisfy the axioms that would permit to represent their beliefs probabilistically, but also that there may be normative reasons to do so (Ellsberg 1961; Bradley 2017; Hill 2018). But let us accept that a normative approach may require precise probabilities: one can still wonder whether such an approach would be the most interesting for the framework developed by Adler. The framework strives to provide the links between high ethical principles and the practice of policymaking. This seems to call not for a normative approach describing an ideal evaluation, but rather for a prescriptive approach that provides actionable recommendations, guiding policymakers in making the best available decision. From a prescriptivist perspective, the fact that the application of the framework requires well-defined probabilities (as well as clearly identified outcomes, policy alternatives, and bundles of attributes, along with reliable data to populate the formulas) is a significant limitation of scope.

However, this is only a further testament to the precision of this book in identifying the elements on which it rests. Adler provides the reader with all the elements necessary to assess the scope of his proposal and the assumptions required to support the framework. Many of these are defended convincingly; others are weakened whenever possible; possible generalisations are explored to show that the specific focus adopted has not distorted the overall analysis; in some cases it is shown how alternatives can still be accommodated. In the end, the reader has not only a

solid and straightforward SWF framework to evaluate fatality risk reduction policies, but also all the ingredients to trace it back to its theoretical foundations and methodological choices. In doing that, the book sets a luminous example for similar enterprises and provides a language that others can use to complete the work, criticise it, or propose alternatives.

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