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The discovery of an all-encompassing theory of ethics has long been the goal of philosophers over the centuries. However as time has passed, all the contenders for this goal seem to have fallen on the wayside, as each contender gets knocked down by various counter examples. It has thus meant that increased specialization in the field of ethics has sprung up; with the methodologies and ethical theories, which are applied in one specific domain, not applying to others. The quest for this unifying ethical theory, whether it exists or not, is however making a comeback. Due to many ethical dilemmas currently being unsolvable given any of the currently available frameworks, this growing disenchantment with the current ethical theories of the day is the motivating factor for all of this. This to, has been the motivating factor for Warwick Fox in his book “A Theory of General Ethics”.

Fox’s aim has been to outline a theory of ethics that he refers to as the theory of “Responsive Cohesion”, an ethical theory he claims, that encompasses the domains of the ethics of the natural environment, interhuman ethics, and the ethics of the built environment. To Fox this last domain has been entirely ignored by all other ethicists, who by focusing purely on the other 2 domains, cannot even claim to be representative of a comprehensive theory of ethics. Fox argues that the relational value of Responsive Cohesion is itself the most fundamental value that exists, and thus is the starting point from which his argument proceeds. By outlining 18 problems that any complete ethical theory must be able to answers, Fox also shows how his theory successfully answers
them, attempting to show why his ethical theory is the only ethical theory that has an answer to all these problems.

The book itself is split into 4 sections: the first dealing with the idea of a general theory of ethics and the problems it must be able to solve; the second with explaining his concept of Responsive Cohesion and why it is the most foundational value; the third with the importance of differentiating between, and more importantly how to differentiate between mindsharers and iso-experients, as well as the importance of contexts when looking at the concept of cohesion itself; and the fourth which then shows how the theory of Responsive Cohesion successfully solves the 18 problems in part 1.

Part 1 opens with an introduction into the concept of a General Ethics, before outlining 18 central problems that any General ethics must be able to solve. To Fox, “even [finding] an ethical theory that is capable of (directly) addressing all these questions in the first place, regardless of its success in doing so – is a Big Ask.” (p.4). To Fox, the ethical realm consists of three sectors, interhuman ethics, the ethics of the natural environment, and the ethics of the built environment. The irony to Fox here, is the narrowness with which ethics is currently taught. The broadest topic of “Ethics” as it is taught to most undergraduates consists primarily of “interhuman ethics”, whereas ironically “narrower” specializations of ethics such as Environmental Ethics, are in themselves “broader” than this since they encompass both the interhuman ethical realm and the realm of ethics of the natural environment.

Fox writes that, “In order to do a course that embraces the newer and larger domains of ethics that I have referred to, you generally need to enroll in a course that sounds more restricted than the above courses but is not, such as “environmental ethics”.” (p.8). The realm that all ethical theories miss out on addressing however, is the realm of the built environment, which to Fox is where his theory of Responsive Cohesion is complete, and other ethical theories are not, as “the human-constructed environment has represented just as much of a “blind spot” for so-called environmental ethics to date as the nonhuman natural world has been, and remains, for the older, anthropocentric approaches to ethics.” (p.13). Fox then proceeds to outline an example of an ethical dilemma that cannot even be addressed by referring to just the interhuman and natural environmental realm; whereby two buildings with identical environmental and interhuman impact are to be decided between for construction, the only difference being that one is “ugly” and the other is not. He uses this to show that that what we truly care about is that the building is ugly in a contextually ugly way, and that this concept can only be addressed by referring to the realm of the built environment itself, and arguing that his ethical theory, which can deal with this issue is itself more complete than any other ethical theory.
The second half of part 1, consists of Fox outlining 18 problems, central to any General Ethics, these problems range from questions of abortion and euthanasia, to questions of our obligations to other people, to the predation problem, the problem of indigenous VS introduced species, the why is life valuable problem, and many others. To Fox, any viable ethical theory must be able to not just address these issues, but also solve them.

In part two, Fox begins to outline his theory of Responsive Cohesion. He first starts by arguing that any General Ethics must have at its basis a foundational source of value, without which there is no way to resolve ethical conflicts. Furthermore there can only be one source of value if a General Ethics is to exist, otherwise conflicts between values would be irresolvable. To Fox, this fundamental value must be a relational quality, because otherwise what is valued will only be valuable because it is valued by someone, which leads to the conclusion that what is actually of value are the recognizers of value themselves. To Fox, “if our ethical focus is entirely upon the recognizers of value (because they are the only things or beings in the world that are intrinsically valuable), then this essentially permits these recognizers of value to value whatever they wish to, in whatever ways they wish to, subject to respect for other recognizers of value to do the same.” (p.63). Thus from this Fox hopes to show that this “relational quality” is “Responsive Cohesion” itself.

From here, Fox begins to introduce the distinction we can make between things, based on their relational properties. Things can either “cohere” together if there is a relational quality between them, or else “discohere” if there is none. “Discohesion” is characterized by a “chaotic, anarchic, or random “structure” or process”. (p.80). Within cohesion itself there are a few distinctions The first distinction he draws is of “fixed cohesion”, where entities “cohere” together either with “no significantly mutually modifying interaction between its elements or salient features” (p.71,), “disproportionately one-way direction of elements” (p.71), or “an obvious failure to appreciate the full range of salient features that apply to the situation under discussion” (p.72). In contrast, (the second distinction) “Responsive Cohesion” exists ”whenever the elements or salient features of things can be characterized in terms of interacting (either literally or metaphorically) with each other in mutually modifying ways such that these mutual modifying interactions serve (at least functionally if not intentionally) to generate or maintain an overall cohesive order – an order that “hangs together” in one way or another.” (p.72), this to Fox, is the foundational value.

Fox writes, “In any genuinely open consideration of the matter, it is always the example that exemplifies the relational quality of Responsive Cohesion – or that most exemplifies this relational quality – that is typically judged to be the best example of its kind by informed judges, or that in any case ought to be judged to be the best example of its kind.” (p.85). Using this principle, Fox then goes on to show how “Responsive Cohesion” is the best approach to informed judgment, epistemology in science and in general, personal relationships, the sports and arts, and many other fields, in his attempt
to show the true universality and correctness of his theory of Responsive Cohesion. This he says, is due to its being the foundational value that underpins everything else.

This however is where the fatal flaw in Fox’s theory appears. Since the relational quality of “Responsive Cohesion” is as basic as it gets (it cannot be broken down into any more fundamental elements), for as Fox himself says “insofar as there is something good or best about this relational quality, we cannot explain this goodness or “bestness” in terms of anything more basic. Thus, if you ask me, “what is it that makes this abstract quality of Responsive Cohesion so good?” all I can do is point back to where we have come from – to all the evidence that points to this conclusion.” (p.110), and that “it just seems to be the case that there is something that is intrinsically better about those forms of things that can be characterized as holding together by virtue of mutual responsiveness…..” (p.110). As we will see later what this effectively means is that any viewpoint or position in regards to any ethical dilemmas, can be effectively argued as best characterizing Responsive Cohesion, and thus just because “Responsive Cohesion” can be used to justify Fox’s position in certain ethical dilemmas, does not mean that Responsive Cohesion is correct, since it could just as equally be used to justify a completely counter position.

In the last section of part 2, Fox attempts to show how the theory of Responsive Cohesion can be applied to interhuman ethics. In applying this theory, the first steps are to ask “(i) What is the domain of interest or the problem situation? (That is, how can this domain of interest or problem situation best be characterized?) (ii) What are the salient features of this domain of interest or problem situation? (iii) Which example in this domain of interest, or which possible solution to the problem situation, can best be characterized in terms of the salient features answering to (i.e., being responsive to) each other in the service of generating and maintaining cohesion overall?” (p.129). Within the field of interhuman ethics this then becomes “(i) What are the basic ways in which people can affect others? (ii) What are the basic ways in which moral agents wish to affect others? (iii) What are the basic ways in which people wish to be affected by others?” (p.130)

The key to all of this Fox believes, is by applying a “multiple perspective account of moral agency”(p.141), which necessitates taking these “first – and second person, agent relative asymmetries very seriously indeed, especially the first person asymmetries” (p.149). To apply purely a third person perspective is something which he says we just cannot do for psychological and emotional reasons, and “since it simply makes no sense to tell moral agent that they ought to do what they cannot do….it follows that people ought not to be asked what utilitarianism asks them to do because they cannot do it.” (p.150). Thus this is Fox’s justification for the multiple perspective account of moral agency. This however can easily be faulted, as there is no reason why applying a third person perspective is “impossible” or something that “we just cannot do”, and furthermore there is no compelling reason why it is something we should not do. Fox’s
argument here is purely that is something that is impossible psychologically to do which is not true.

Fox tries to give other support for his argument of multiple perspectives by saying that we know our “nearest and dearest” better, and thus how best to help them. However as Singer in his seminal paper “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (Singer, Peter. 200. “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” In Hugh LaFollette, ed., Ethics in Practice: An Anthology, 2nd ed. Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 572-581.) (which Fox never mentions as a viable criticism), alludes to, we can quite easily know that someone will benefit from my blood donation, or that someone at a Malaria clinic will benefit from anti-malarial drugs, even if I’ve never met them. Whether the person at the Malaria clinic is a relative of mine, or a stranger, I can still be sure that anti-malarial drugs would be good for them. Thus it seems here that Fox’s Multiple perspective account it just an arbitrary account, since it is not always the case that we know our “nearest and dearest” the best, since we know a starving or drowning child will need food or rescuing, regardless of how near or dear they are to us - a starving child is a starving child full stop.

From here Fox also adds in an “onerousness factor” and “beneficiaries desires factor” showing the increasing onerousness of moving along the spectrum of not harming, to helping someone; as well as the desire of people to first and foremost not be harmed, then to be offered saving help, and then to be offered ongoing supportive help, and then finally to be offered bonus help, and not the other way around. Considering these three key features, Fox believes belies responsible cohesion, and its approach to interhuman ethics. For it is only be considering these three features that he believes a situation best characterizes Responsive Cohesion.

Part 3 of the book begins with defining a distinction between internal and contextual forms of Responsive Cohesion. Internal Responsive Cohesion refers to the “degree of Responsive Cohesion that any item of interest can be said to have within whatever the boundaries are that define that item of interest as an item of interest” (p.168), whereas “contextual Responsive Cohesion refers to the degree of Responsive Cohesion that an item of interest has with respect to its intermediate and wider contexts.” (p.168). Fox proceeds to give an example of this, “you might find a table or chair that would be “just perfect” for the room you have in mind but then find, to your considerable disappointment, that it is not very well made, that for example, the parts that make it up don’t join together very well.” (p.168). Fox claims this example shows the item to have a lot of contextual Responsive Cohesion, but lacking in internal Responsive Cohesion.

However it can be argued that perhaps this chair has very poor contextual Responsive Cohesion, since it is not fit for its intended purpose (that is being strong enough to be sat on in the lounge room). If the context was difference (that of being a beautiful chair, that fits the decor of the lounge room, and is purely for decoration), then the chair
would have contextual Responsive Cohesion. Thus it seems that the difference between contextual and internal cohesion can be very vague, as whether something is contextually responsively cohesive or not, depends entirely on our focal point. This can result in extreme subjectivity and arbitrariness, when deciding on a moral course of action, a large fault for a theory. Fox himself later admits this problem of focus points, but doest seem worried about it as a criticism of his theory, he more just mentions it in passing as a description of his theory.

Fox claims that contextual Responsive Cohesion must be given priority to internal Responsive Cohesion, saying that when one entity is introduced to a preexisting situation, we should either modify the newly added item, or remove it, to make it fit with the preexisting situation and not the other way around. He argues that to modify the preexisting situation to fit the new entity is like modifying a whole symphony to make a few extra notes fit. In short, “responsiveness to the largest responsively cohesive context should have priority over responsiveness to its responsively cohesive subcontexts.” (p.174).

The major focus of part 3 however deals with the distinction between mindsharers, mind readers, and iso-experients. Carrying on from this “theory of contexts” we can see that the biophysical realm (the universe) supervenes on the mindsharing realm (those with cognitive abilities), which itself supervenes on the compound material realm (things those with cognitive abilities build), much like subsets of each other, since the theory of contexts prescribes the larger context supervening on the smaller. Fox here beings by defining mindreading as “pre – or nonlinguistically framed awareness that at least some other beings posses their own internal mental states, together with some degree of awareness as to the likely contents of these mental states of these other beings…..”(p.211). He then defines implicit mindsharing as “the purely pre- or nonlinguistically framed means by which implicit mindreaders might build on their implicit mindreading abilities in order to share various contents of their inner mental states with each other” (p.211), explicit mindsharing as “linguistically framed forms of sharing the contents of one’s mental states with others, and vice versa”. (p.211), and iso-experients as an isolated island of experience with no awareness that other minds exist.

Using these definitions, Fox then gives various examples to show that chimpanzees themselves are not implicit mindsharers, and thus from this (since they are commonly thought of as the most highly intelligent animals) that neither are other animals (except possible dolphins he admits). Thus from this Fox concludes that for all intents and purposes no animals at all posses mind sharing abilities (except maybe dolphins). He also goes on to show with various examples how language acquisition (which these iso-experients lack) is a necessary condition for conceptions of time and self-history. Fox argues that since these iso-experients lack the awareness of other minds, they thus “have no idea of either the general or particular nature of the cognitive world that has
been lost” (p.263) when someone dies. This has immense moral implications for Fox’s justification in our treatment of other animals.

Fox assumes that because an iso-experient cannot actually understand the concept of death and that the termination of their conscious experience at some point is not a concern for themselves, that killing an iso-experient can not do any harm. However the flaw here, is that what Fox fails to take into account is that even though an iso-experient may not have any concept of death, they will still feel immense suffering. Imagine a mother whose son is killed in front of her (whatever the type of animal they are), the mother will still feel immense pain at this, even if she does not fully understand the concept of death or that any conscious experience is lost. Furthermore, even though an iso-experient may not have any concerns about the termination of their conscious experience at some point (since they have no conception of death), does not mean that they cannot fear death. Even though an animal may not be able to understand death, they will still fear falling off a 100m cliff, because it will hurt (a behavioral justification perhaps?). Either way, Fox is wrong here that just because an entity cannot understand or even conceive of death, does not mean that “death” can cause them no harm (even if it is painless). Thus it seems flawed here to say that killing a iso-experient (even painlessly) does not harm any other entity, as the ability to conceptualize and understand death itself does not have any bearing on this suffering that occurs.

To strengthen his position, Fox creates the distinction between incorporated and unincorporated iso-experients, where incorporated iso-experients “are those iso-experients that have been specifically and individually incorporated (by someone) into the mindsharing realm” (p.274). These incorporated iso-experients, he argues should not be killed, because of the affective harm it would cause to the entity that incorporates them. Using this, Fox justifies that all unincorporated iso-experients can be legitimately killed for food. He then goes on to qualify this by saying that most animals would experience more suffering if they were killed out in the wild (either by being eaten by a predator or starving to death) than they would by being humanely killed by a human being, and thus that it is only acceptable to kill an unincorporated iso-experient for food if we take into consideration “the degree of pain and suffering that they are likely to experience by dying or being killed in the context of nonhuman nature as opposed to being killed by mindsharers.” (p.280).

Thus from here it follows that it is permissible for mindsharers to kill (if the pain is less than the unincorporated iso-experients would experience if killed in the context of nonhuman nature), - as in the case of what Fox calls needs of the “body and soul”, where to eat meat is a need, and in other cases such as invasive species etc. However Fox is seemingly contradictory here, as he says that all life forms exemplify the foundational value of Responsive Cohesion and are thus valuable on that account, and that it is “therefore wrong to destroy life forms – and other responsively cohesive things – “just for the hell of it,” even if, where relevant, this is done relatively
painless.” (p.281). It is the case however, that eating meat, is not a “need” of the “body and soul”. In our current world we can more than get by without resorting to killing unincorporated iso-experients by eating plant based matter, without any negative health effects (some doctors would even argue a vegetarian diet is more healthy).

Thus given that we have no “need” to eat meat, to kill an unincorporated iso-experient just for our own fancy, looks just life arbitrary and willful destruction of a responsively cohesive entity. Thus Fox’s justification for eating meat, can be seen to detract from the characteristics of Responsive Cohesion, when he claims the exact opposite. This again show how any position can just as readily be justified using Responsive Cohesion as any of Fox’s.

The last part of the book (part 4) begins with a short summary of all the ideas already presented, before moving on to apply the theory of Responsive Cohesion to the 18 problems that he earlier outlined at the start of the book. He however again runs into a few problems with his arguments, particularly in regards to the addition or subtraction of ecologically benign species. He argues that the theory of Responsive Cohesion is opposed to this as “doing either of these lessens the ecosystem’s degree of Responsive Cohesion overall. Artificial subtraction of species does this because it suddenly destroys some of the mutually shaping, responsively cohesive relationships that have existed in that place” (p.313). However what Fox does not seem to notice is that the whole thought experiment deals with the addition (or subtraction) of an “ecologically benign species”, whereby if is it defined as being “ecologically benign”, then it by definition does not alter the Responsive Cohesion overall.

Thus Fox seems to be begging the question here, as the thought experiment he introduced was concerning “ecologically benign species”. If the introduction or subtraction of a species is ecologically benign, then it can have no impact upon Responsive Cohesion. The problems with this argument do not end here however, as Fox says that by introducing an ecologically benign species, what is wrong is that “this temporally based form of Responsive Cohesion is obviously lacking in those features that are just arbitrarily added to the system” (p.313). However it seems that if can be argued both ways here, as firstly, why is temporal cohesion of value (his gives no argument for this statement), and secondly temporally based Responsive Cohesion can be said to have existed because some entity consciously introduced this new species at a certain time point, and thus this introduction does and did cohere to something contextually.

Any changes that take place anywhere in an ecosystem are not iso-temporal, they all taken place within the bounds of some temporal realm, and thus are temporally cohesive (be it changes due to evolution, or a mindsharer introducing another entity, or a tree falling down etc). Thus to criticize the addition of an ecologically benign species for lacking in temporal based Responsive Cohesion is just ridiculous, as doing so
suggests that the added entity has no temporal property itself, or contextual connection to its introducer, which is impossible by definition.

Another problem with Fox’s argument is in his discussion of the theory of Responsive Cohesion’s answer to the problem of abortion; he says that since a baby is inside a mother’s womb, only the mother can incorporate this potential mindsharer. Thus it is solely up to the mother if she wishes to have an abortion or not. He explicitly rejects any of the fathers wishes, since he says it is impossible for the father to incorporate this entity. However, isn’t it also possible to say that the father (which helped conceive the baby) has incorporated it into his own person realm, having an emotional connection to the life form that he has helped create? You cannot have it both ways, as it seem that the father (using Fox’s argument) can just as readily be considered as an entity which can incorporate the fetus. Thus any argument for the mothers supreme autonomy based on Fox’s reasoning can be rejected since she is not the only claimant to being able to incorporate this fetus.

The Responsive Cohesion approach to euthanasia is also slightly flawed. Fox gives an example of a patient who has not “positively and consistently expressed a wish either way in regard to any form of euthanasia and is no longer in a position to express such a wish because, for example, they are in a irreversible comatose or persistent vegetative state” (p.341). In this example Fox says, “the most responsively cohesive answer – is to “allow the patient to die” (e.g. by withdrawal of life-supporting treatment and posting “do no resuscitate orders)” (p.342). However, why is this the most responsively cohesive answer? Why is passive euthanasia more responsibly cohesive than active euthanasia, or preservation of life for that matter? Fox provides no justification for this position. Fox has no justification for his positions that that passive euthanasia is more responsively cohesive than active euthanasia, even after he has already decided that having the person dead is the most responsively cohesive option. It seems again that Fox has just used a solution to the euthanasia argument that he agree with, and then has tried to justify it by using responsibly cohesive reasoning, when the more philosophically sound method would be to use Responsive Cohesion to decide upon the best course of action. This however depends on Responsive Cohesion being able to give a definite and objective answer to the best moral action, something which is cannot. Thus explaining why Fox is able to get away with this easy victory.

All of the above criticisms seem to sum up the fatal flaw in Fox’s theory. The broadness of the ability of Responsive Cohesion to tackle all these complex ethical issues is due to its vagueness and subjectiveness. It thus seem that its benefit it has over other ethical theories in being able to address these dilemmas(due to its wide-rangingness) is also its own downfall. It seems here that Fox just comes up with a list of ethical dilemmas and his own solution to them, and then tries to justify this stance using “Responsive Cohesion”, rather than trying to look for the solutions using the theory of Responsive Cohesion. The major flaw with Responsive Cohesion is that that you can
seemingly justify any position by referring to Responsive Cohesion, you can pick any side of a certain debate and say that this side best characterizes Responsive Cohesion, you can pick any solution to an ethical dilemma and say this it is the most responsibly cohesive answer. The vagueness of Responsive Cohesion (because it is based on a subjective relational quality and subjective focal points) is what gives it the ability to address all of these ethical dilemmas, but it is also its fatal flaw. The very manner in which Responsive Cohesion is designed (to be universally applicable to everything) necessitates its own subjectivity, arbitrariness, and moral relativity.

In the concluding chapter of the book, Fox again summarizes the main argument of Responsive Cohesion, as well as outlining the future directions for this theory. Fox says that the theory of Responsive Cohesion is still in its early development, and with abit of work can be applied to other domains such as international relations, architecture, and other spheres. His hopes are that by introducing this theory, more people will begin to work on it, and expand its sphere or influence to encompass all aspects of relations between different entities.

Overall Fox has set out to achieve an immense task, creating a brand new ethical theory to encompass all possible domains. His bravery in his aims is to be applauded; however, it falls well short of its mark. As a novel idea about what a “general ethical theory” should be able to address and consist of, it is of interest, however as a well argued, sound, and cogent argument it leaves a lot lacking. Thus this monumental task that Fox sets out to accomplish remains unachieved, due to the vagueness and subjectivity of the theory allowing nearly any moral position to be justified as the most “responsively cohesive”, due the contextual responsiveness of any scenario being entirely dependent on its subjective and arbitrary focal point. As a result, the reason why Fox’s theory is able to expound his preferred solution to the 18 ethical dilemmas he presents is the largest negative detractor from his theory. The ease in which any position can be justified is both what allows his theory to answer any ethical, dilemmas, as well as what allows any of his opponents to justify their position using his theory also.