

Everyone's Business: What Companies Owe Society

Amit Ron & Abraham A. Singer. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2024. 248 pp. \$35.00.

In this book, which is written to be accessible to a non-specialist audience, Ron & Singer make the case that normative business ethicists have thus far failed to reflect sufficiently on the ways in which democratic values generate distinctive obligations that apply to businesses (and thereby to individuals when and insofar as they are acting as occupants of roles within businesses). Their central claim is that proper respect for legitimate democratic principles and procedures requires that businesses avoid corrupting or unduly influencing the democratic process (e.g. 4, 50). These obligations constrain what it is permissible for businesses and their individual members to do in a range of domains of business practice, including lobbying (Chapter 4), marketing (Chapter 5), responding to consumer boycotts and employee labor actions (Chapter 6), and investment decisions (Chapter 8).

Ron & Singer employ the concept of a “social subcontract” in order to explain the normative grounds of businesses’ democratic obligations (50-51). The idea is that within democratic societies, there are reasons for the democratic public, via its legal apparatus, to create market conditions and empower firms to engage in competition because this is the best way to ensure that economic resources are deployed efficiently. In effect, firms should be thought of as subcontractors that are charged by the public with contributing to social welfare by engaging in economic competition, and like other subcontractors, are provided with a great deal of discretion regarding precisely how they will carry out their assigned tasks. Ethically speaking, however, their discretion cannot be unlimited, and also cannot be limited only by the legal requirements to which they are subjected by the state (52-3). Instead, the same democratic values that explain why businesses’ discretion in the pursuit of their economic goals is best understood in terms of a

subcontracting arrangement also generate independent moral constraints on business activities. Most importantly, because only appropriate democratic procedures can make the subcontracting arrangement legitimate, firms (the subcontractors) must respect the spirit, and not merely the letter, of those procedures.

Importantly, the spirit of democratic procedures, according to Ron & Singer, is fundamentally a matter of equalizing power among citizens, and so requires, among other things, that agents in a position to exercise disproportionate power to advance their interests refrain from doing so (56), at least when this would frustrate rather than promote either the values that motivated the public to empower those agents, or democratic values more broadly. This is, to my mind, a plausible conception of what democracy, at the most fundamental level, is about, and it has quite radical implications regarding the democratic obligations of firms (and other powerful actors).

The book makes a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions in normative business ethics by directing our attention to largely neglected but important issues at the intersection of democratic theory and business ethics. Ron & Singer are right that business ethicists ought to think more carefully about the ways in which democratic values should be thought to ground important obligations of firms. I found myself not entirely convinced by some of their specific claims about the content of those obligations – for example, I am inclined to think that firms would be justified in violating deeply unjust laws more often than Ron & Singer seem to think they would (195). These, however, are issues that ought to be discussed in greater detail by business ethicists going forward, and this book should serve as a helpful catalyst for those discussions.

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