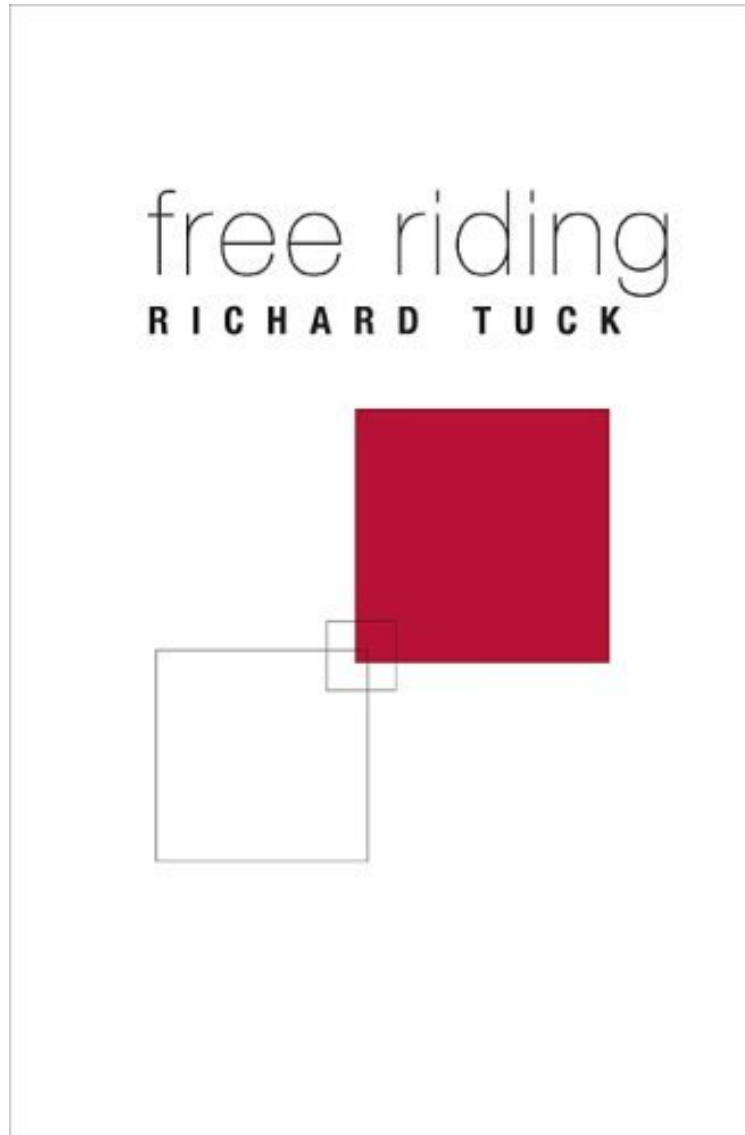


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Richard TUCK : Free Riding before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Free Riding:

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful. Good philosophy, little applicability By JJ vd Weele Mancur Olson got famous for saying roughly the following: If there are many people that contribute to a public good, and the contribution of each has a negligible effect on the final outcome, it is rational for each person not to contribute. This normative claim is the object of attack in Tuck's book. First, Tuck distinguishes the case that Olson is looking at from two others. One is the infamous Prisoners dilemma. This represents a different, and much easier problem, because in the Prisoner's dilemma each player has a clear effect on the outcome. Thus, mechanisms can be designed to discipline

people, and tit for tat strategies in repeated settings may insure compliance. The Olson case is harder, because, argues Tuck, if no-one has a perceptible influence on the outcome, there is no reason to punish anyone! A second case that is different from Olson is when there is a clear threshold, such as in voting. In voting, the good (a certain candidate elected) is provided if the majority votes for her. In this case it is a mistake, according to Tuck, to say that people are not responsible for the outcome if the difference is more than one vote. In fact, everybody who helped to reach the threshold, and was thus in the critical set of votes may be said to be responsible for the outcome. As long as the probability that you are in that critical set of votes is high enough, it is rational to vote. There are some subtleties here, for example, this definition of rationality cannot rely on a counterfactual view of causality, because if one would not have voted the result of the election would have been the same. But, says Tuck, this does not mean that your vote does not cause the candidate to be elected, and therefore does not imply that it is irrational to vote. This latter case provides the germ to a solution to the true Olsonian case. Tuck's move is to say that a true Olsonian case can also be perceived as having a threshold. He does so by looking at the history of thought the Sorites paradox (If we keep adding grains to a pile, can we pinpoint the moment when we call it a heap?). From this emerges a thoughtful, but slightly complicated argument that I will not summarize. Tuck concludes that there is no perfectly satisfactory solution to this paradox, but that we nevertheless have a rough and functional idea when something is a heap. Analogously, we roughly know in a public social dilemma how much cooperation is 'enough'. Thus, if enough other people contribute, and we are likely to be in the critical set to reach this fuzzy 'enough'-threshold, it will be rational to contribute. The second part of the book discusses the history of thought on social dilemma's and particularly Olson's problem. Tuck shows that it was not until the 1930's that people started to think about the problem of negligible contributions (in the context of perfect competition in economics). The associated idea that cooperation is not rational is therefore rather recent. Philosophers such as Hume and Mill assumed that cooperation was rational, but that shortsightedness prohibited people sometimes from pursuing their self-interest. Tuck is a specialist on social dilemmas with many interesting insights. The philosophical point about rationality is original, clever and undoubtedly important in some debates. However, I do not find it as interesting as the back-flap quotes that applaud it do. First, strictly speaking (something on which Tuck insists), truly Olsonian situations seem to be rare. Second, Tuck basically points out an ambiguity in the meaning of rationality (is it necessarily based on counterfactual causal reasoning?), and shows that in an expanded meaning it can account for contributions in the Olson case. This is ultimately a matter of definition which does not really further the understanding of compliance. For example, his argument does not give a convincing account of why people behave differently. Some people walk on the grass, others don't. Is that because they employ different conceptions of what is valid causal reasoning? I believe that people have intrinsic reasons to cooperate, that have to do with their identity (who am I?), with their desire to be part of some groups and not others and yes, with sanctions (which can be very rational if they are aimed at all free-riders at the same time). Stating these motives in terms of preferences can also incorporate contributions in a rational framework. Tuck makes little of such arguments, because he says that they do not really explain the why of contribution. This is true in some sense, but for many purposes such explanations do fine, and at least they can account for heterogeneity in behavior, which Tuck's reductionism can't. Actually, the part that I liked the most was the summary of the diverse philosophical arguments surrounding social dilemmas. This part is well-researched, and contains instructive quotes. In short, an intelligent book that is worth reading. It furthers philosophical discussions by questioning our standard conception of rationality, but I doubt that it will help us much to understand actual free riding behavior.

A proposition of contemporary economics and political science is that it would be an exercise of reason, not a failure of it, not to contribute to a collective project if the contribution is negligible, but to benefit from it nonetheless. Tuck makes careful distinctions between the prisoner's dilemma problem, threshold phenomena such as voting, and free riding. He analyzes the notion of negligibility, and shows some of the logical difficulties in the idea - and how the ancient paradox of the sorites illustrates the difficulties.

This is a hugely interesting book that will almost certainly start a controversy. It addresses some of the widest assumptions in contemporary economic and social thought and calls them into question; and it provides a very illuminating history of the appearance of those assumptions. (Philip Pettit, Princeton University) Original, full of good ideas and insights, Richard Tuck's *Free Riding* could initiate an important debate about the least human of the human sciences. (John Ferejohn, Stanford University) About the Author Richard Tuck is Frank G. Thomson Professor of Government, Harvard University.