

Introduction

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James Sterba's *From Rationality to Equality* is a contribution to moral and political philosophy which can be aptly characterized as the attempt to complete the Hobbesian and Kantian project. In his work, Sterba has always emphasized the point of convergence between Hobbesian and Kantian traditions, insofar as they attempt to found moral obligations as a rational requirements. Neither of these traditions succeeded in their project, and this is because, according to Sterba's diagnosis, both beg the question from the start. Hobbesians assume that reason is self-interested while Kantians assume that reason already commits to morality, at least in a minimal sense of a fundamental disposition to reason with others. Sterba's goal in this book is to complete the project of the rational foundation of morality without begging the question. The upshot of his argument is not only that morality is a requirement of reason, but also that it turns out to have heavy equalitarian commitments. Sterba thus engages in two independent but importantly related debates, one is foundational and concerns the possibility of grounding moral obligations on reason, and the other is more substantive and concerns the implications for equality and liberty.

Correspondingly, the first part of the book deals with the issue why be moral and refocus the debates on the possibility of a complete amorality by revisiting the requirements of reason. A crucial point in this dispute is to consider carefully how Kantian and Hobbesian arguments fail to offer a definitive answer to skeptical challenge about the rational compellingness of moral obligations. An apparent merit of Sterba's critical account of this failure is that the requirements of reason cannot be reduced to logical consistency. To be sure, this is a problem of which contemporary Kantian philosophers are vividly aware. The outstanding issue is how to bridge the gap between requirements of mere structural or constitutive rationality and equalitarian and substantive moral rationality. Sterba argues that the gap cannot be bridged simply by moralizing reason, as

Kantians aim to do. A related issue is whether Kantians are indeed committed to rule out the mere possibility of prudentially rational beings, insensitive to morality. At least some Kantians do not seem so inclined and admit the possibility of rational beings for whom morality is not the condition of integrity or unity in their practical self-conception.¹ These agents are merely “conceivable”, though. That is, they are merely thinkable without contradiction. This shows that the issue of immoralism cannot be ruled out on the basis of sheer logic, since it is indeed conceivable without contradiction.

Sterba’s argument in the first part of the book importantly contributes to this debate about the relation between practical reason and morality. In contrast to mainstream Kantians, he shows that it is not incoherent to be immoral. Sterba’s argument is that the principle of general egoism is universal in the same sense in which the moral law is universal. The key point here is how to frame the relation between morality and self-interest. Sterba argues that it is possible to reason with the egoist on his own grounds, that is, merely on the basis of self-interest. This is the only way to avoid begging the question about morality. This also implicates that rationalism in ethics should be reformulated.

At this point, it might seem that such a reformulation invites to modesty, but Sterba’s second part of the project is even more ambitious. His goal is to avoid the moralization of reason while drawing more substantive, and distinctively equalitarian conclusions from the rational foundation of morality. This is the main focus of the critiques provided by Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen and Valeria Ottonelli.

References

Engstrom, Stephen, 2009, *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA).

¹ Engstrom 2009: 243, see also III. 7.