

Précis From Rationality to Equality

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Abstract: James Sterba's *From Rationality to Equality* provides an argument from rationality to equality, which is meant to "help to resolve the fundamental conflicts between opposing moral and political ideals of our times and thus prepare the way for a peaceful implementation of its egalitarian conclusions, thereby making philosophy and philosophers look a little better in the process" (p. 219). This task is achieved in two steps. First, Sterba argues for the claim that an action is morally required insofar as it is also rationally required. Second, he argues for the claim that liberty entails commitment to a substantial form of equality, which extends to future generations and non-human animals.

I want to begin by thanking Carla Bagnoli for organizing this Author Meets Critics Session, and Kasper Lipert-Rasmussen and Valeria Ottonelli for providing me with very challenging comments. Let me try to briefly summarize the argument of my book on which Kasper Lipert-Rasmussen and Valeria Ottonelli will be commenting.

It is generally recognized that in today's society academic philosophers have very little impact on moral and political decision-making. For example, in contrast to members of other disciplines and professions, philosophers have very rarely in our times been called upon to serve as advisors to governors, labor leaders, presidents, prime ministers, or even dictators. To some extent, this is because philosophers have not, until recently, directed their attention at the practical issues that daily concern our moral and political leaders. But just as importantly it is because philosophers have done so little to resolve the fundamental conflicts between opposing moral and political ideals of our times. In my book, I will try to improve the status of our profession just a bit by offering a justification of morality and further by showing how morality so justified leads to a demand for substantial equality.

Most contemporary moral philosophers would like to have an argument showing that morality is rationally required, but given the history

of past failures to provide a convincing argument of this sort, most contemporary moral philosophers have simply given up any hope of defending morality in this way. Thus, I belong to a relatively small group of contemporary moral philosophers who think that it is possible to provide such an argument for morality. I also argue that the conception of morality so justified can be shown to lead to a demand for substantial equality, thereby linking myself to a much larger group of moral and political philosophers who think that a commitment to morality leads to broadly egalitarian requirements, although the view I defend is more egalitarian than the views defended by most of these other philosophers.

1. *From Rationality to Morality*

Now my justification of morality is based on the claim that the principle of non-question-beggingness favors morality over egoism, where morality is understood to be a nonarbitrary compromise between self-interested and altruistic reasons. A crucial step in this argument for morality is to cast the basic conflict with egoism not as a conflict between morality and self-interest, but rather as a conflict between altruism and self-interest. I argue that while previous defenders of morality understood correctly that moral reasons could not be compromised with self-interested reasons, they failed to recognize that this is because moral reasons are already the result of a purportedly nonarbitrary compromise between self-interested and altruistic reasons. To ask that moral reasons be weighed against self-interested reasons is, in effect, to count self-interested reasons twice – once in the compromise between egoism and altruism that constitutes a conception of morality, and then again, assuming moral reasons are weighed against self-interested reasons, and this double-counting of self-interested reasons would be clearly objectionable from a non-question-begging standpoint. Thus, while previous defenders of morality intuitively knew that moral reasons could not be compromised with self-interested reasons, they were unable to conceptually backup and see how morality itself can be represented as a compromise between altruism and self-interest, and, for that reason, they failed to recognize my approach to defending morality.

2. *From Liberty to Equality*

However, the conception of morality that I non-question-beggingly defend against egoism is, at this stage of my argument, anything but complete. Its requirements seem to be open to a libertarian, or a welfare liberal, or even a socialist interpretation. While I argue that this conception of morality is quite useful because it succeeds in showing the superiority of morality over egoism, the conception still needs to be completed in order to determine when its requirements are enforceable. I do this in Chapter 6. Here, I claim, it behooves us to start with the assumptions that are acceptable from a libertarian perspective, the view that appears to endorse the least enforcement of morality, given that I propose to show that this view requires a right to welfare, and that further, this right to welfare, which is also endorsed by a welfare liberal perspective, leads to the substantial equality of a socialist perspective. My strategy is to find conflicts of (negative) liberty within the libertarian perspective, and then argue that when these conflicts are appropriately resolved, they favor an allocation of liberty that supports a right to welfare. Since fundamental rights are universal rights for libertarians, I then argue that extending this right to welfare to distant peoples, and, particularly, to future generations leads to the egalitarian requirement that we use up no more resources than are necessary for meeting our own basic needs, thus, securing for ourselves a decent life but no more. For us to use up more resources than this, I argue, without a technological fix on hand, we would be guilty of depriving at least some future generations of the resources they would require to meet their own basic needs, thereby violating their libertarian-based right to welfare. In effect, recognizing a right to welfare, applicable to all existing and future people, leads to an equal utilization of resources over place and time.

While the egalitarian conclusion of my argument does depend on extending a right to welfare to future generations, I also argue that roughly the same conclusion can be derived in yet another way by taking into account the moral status of all living beings. In this inclusive morality, I maintain, principles of conflict resolution, specifically, Principles of Human Preservation, Disproportionality, Human Defense, and Restitution, would provide a non-question-begging resolution of conflicts between human and nonhuman living beings, and, in so doing, they would also restrict us to simply acquiring the goods and resources we need for a decent life, but no more.

So surprisingly, or not so surprisingly, by taking into account the

moral status of all living beings, and not just that of humans, I claim that we end up endorsing roughly the same substantial equality with regard to the use of resources that results from extending a libertarian right to welfare to future generations. Overall, this should make the requirement of substantial equality doubly justified.

3. Conclusion

Moral and political philosophy has always been a collective endeavor. It is something we work out together in an ongoing discussion. Although some of us are more engaged in that discussion than others, we are all engaged in it because its two central questions, Why be moral? and What does morality require? are inescapable. Even the moral skeptic or the egoist, or the moral skeptic or the egoist in each one of us, has to engage these questions, if only to try to show that we are not really required to be moral because morality is not really rationally binding on us. Accordingly, my own work on these questions in this book is itself a product of a long historical discussion that goes back at least to Plato and to discussions that I myself have had over the years with other philosophers, students, and people from all walks of life. Those discussions are especially evident in my responses to recent critics in this book.

Yet discussions in moral and political philosophy ideally should lead somewhere. Hence, the goal of this book has been to provide an argument from rationality to equality that will help to resolve the fundamental conflicts between opposing moral and political ideals of our times and thus prepare the way for the peaceful implementation of its egalitarian conclusions, thereby making philosophy and philosophers look a little better in the process.