

Responses to Lippert-Rasmussen and Ottonelli*

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I

Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen finds much of my argument from libertarian morality to substantial equality convincing, but he has a number of worries about my argument from rationality to morality. In these comments, I will attempt to assuage those worries so that he will happily be able to find my argument from rationality to morality convincing as well.

In my argument from rationality to morality, having first argued for the prima facie status of both self-interested and altruistic reasons, I then argue that to give exclusive weight to either one's self-interested or one's altruistic reasons would be question-begging and concluded that only a nonarbitrary compromise of both types of reasons here would be non-question-begging. Now Lippert-Rasmussen's first worry about my argument is that it is not true "in general that solutions that give exclusive weight to one of two conflicting standpoints begs the question," and he gives the example of conflicting racist and nonracist standpoints. But I never claimed that giving exclusive priority to one kind of reasons in a conflict is never justified. I just claimed that it is not justified with respect to conflicts between prima facie self-interested and altruistic reasons because the egoist and altruist are similarly situated in their conflict and neither can give an further argument for their reasons having exclusive priority. Clearly, this is not true with respect to racist and nonracist reasons. Racist reasons, as I indicated in my book, are based on question-begging data about human differences, whereas nonracist reasons are not. That justifies are different assessment of these conflicting reasons. So this example does not undermine my argument.

Second, Lippert-Rasmussen worries that once egoists come to see that

* Let me again thank Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen and Valeria Ottonelli for their very challenging comments to which I will now do my best to respond.

a non-question-begging approach to the conflict between egoism and morality would lead to the defeat of egoism, they could reject such an argumentative approach as itself question-begging against them. He gives an example of egalitarians initially finding certain consequences to be challenging to their view and then later judging them as insufficient grounds for non-question-beggingly rejecting their view. But that is quite different from recognizing that there is a non-question-begging argument against one's view and then later rejecting that same argument as question-begging simply because it is a non-question-begging argument against one's view. To make Lippert-Rasmussen's example strictly analogous, egalitarians would have to initially find certain consequences as sufficient to defeat their view and then later find them as insufficient to defeat their view simply because they were sufficient to defeat their view! I don't think Lippert-Rasmussen really wants to defend reasoning of this sort.

Third, Lippert-Rasmussen wonders whether the egoist could just assume that altruistic reasons have *prima facie* status for the sake of argument "knowing" that she thereby will be able to defeat the moralist. But that cannot be what the egoist is doing because the egoist does not actually get what she "knew" or expected she would get. Rather, the egoist should be envisioned as taking a non-question-begging approach in order to determine whether her view has a non-question-begging defense. Unfortunately for the egoist, she discovers that the approach cannot provide such a defense, only morality can be so defended.

Fourth, Lippert-Rasmussen worries that my view cannot adequately deal with other kinds of reasons, such as reasons of etiquette or aesthetic reasons, or one might add, religious reasons. Now my argument from rationality to morality belongs to a long tradition of attempts to answer the why-be-moral or why-be-just question, first discussed by Plato in *The Republic*, then made central in the moral writings of Immanuel Kant, and in more recently taken up in the work of Kurt Baier, Alan Gewirth, Thomas Nagel, Christina Korsgaard and others. Especially in more recent treatments of the why-be-moral question, we find the defender of morality opposed to the defender of egoism where the sought-after goal is to show that reasons of morality trump the reasons of self-interest that conflict with them. Throughout this discussion, the question of the relation of morality to religion is taken to be a separate question. Plato, for example, gave it separate treatment in the *Euthyphro*. So, in response to a concern about the relation of moral reasons to religious reasons, I would also want to treat this issue separately from the why-be-moral question.

In fact, I have, taken the question up elsewhere in my *Introducing Ethics for Here and Now*, Chapter 1, where I have argued that reasons of morality have priority over reasons of religion, or as Plato would put it, that God commands things because they are right.

But what about reasons of etiquette? How is morality related to them? I think the answer to this question is the same as the answer to the question of how moral reasons relate to legal reasons. Both of these questions are separate questions from the why-be-moral question, but the answer to them is fairly straightforward. The common consensus is that sometimes morality supports reasons of etiquette and the law and that sometimes it conflicts with them, and that when it conflicts with them reasons of morality trump reasons of etiquette or the law. And I think that there are good, i.e., non-question-begging, arguments for recognizing this priority, somewhat analogous to the argument for recognizing the priority of morality over religion.

Lippert-Rasmussen is also concerned about aesthetic reasons. He seems not to have noticed that I discuss them in on p.41 where I maintain that aesthetic reasons are, for all practical purposes, grounded in what is good for human perceivers, and so in what is in our self-interest broadly speaking.

Lippert-Rasmussen speculates how I might try to avoid the objection he has just raised to my argument. He claims that a defender of reasons of etiquette would only accept the premise that self-interested and altruistic reasons have prima facie status if she already accepted the conclusion that morality is rationally required over reasons of etiquette. But then, he claims, she may have good reasons that she is not taking into account for accepting that premise and so be rationally justified in accepting its conclusion. Lippert-Rasmussen says such an argument is “reasonably questioning-begging” because the person actually has good reasons that she is just not adequately taking into account to accept the premise of my argument independently of accepting its conclusion. Lippert-Rasmussen also thinks that while this way of preceding may dispose of the objection from reasons of etiquette, in the end I will need to show that the egoist (the altruist) has no reasons for accepting the altruist’s (the egoist’s) premises and this I have not done.

Now I see the argumentative situation differently. Once I have disposed of the challenge from reasons of etiquette in the way I have (something presumably both the egoist and the altruist would also be happy to do) this makes it possible for the egoist and the altruist to pursue a non-question-begging resolution of their conflict by first granting prima facie

status to both self-interested and altruistic reasons and then following the argument out to see what its non-question-begging result will be.

As for Lippert-Rasmussen's claim that in order for my argument to work I would need to show that the egoist (the altruist) has no reason to accept the altruist's (the egoist's) premises, I do claim in my first argument against egoism that neither the egoist nor the altruist initially has reason to accept the other's reasons, and that the only reason they have to subsequently accept such reasons as having *prima facie* status is that they want to try to provide a non-question-begging defense of their views. My defense of this argumentative strategy is that it is defensible all around, egoists, altruists and moralists, would all find it non-question-begging. Of course, my second argument against egoism shows that the stance taken by egoists, altruists and moralists in the first argument is not quite the full story. In particular, I show that the egoist really does have grounds for accepting the *prima facie* status of both instrumental and ultimate altruistic reasons independent of any concern to pursue a non-question-begging argument with the altruist. But then I argue that the egoist will need to introduce still another premise that question-beggingly weighs such reasons to maintain the egoist's goals while the moralist needs to make no comparable question-begging move. Thus, the egoist fails while the moralist succeeds in providing a non-question-begging defense of her view.

Fifth, Lippert-Rasmussen objects that I do not take into account that people could be normative pluralists in the sense that they do think that other people's interests generate reasons, but the reasons they generate are incommensurable in the sense their cannot be compared in terms of strength. Lippert-Rasmussen rightly recognizes that the disputants in this conflict, egoists, altruists and moralists, are not denying that self-interested and altruistic reasons are commensurable. Rather, each is hoping to show that a non-question-begging weighing of such reasons would favor her particular perspective. While granting this, Lippert-Rasmussen notes that it is somewhat unusually to introduce the (pure) altruist into the debate between moralist and the egoist.

Now I grant that it is unusually to introduce the (pure) altruist into the debate between moralist and the egoist. This is because in the long debate over the justification of morality from Plato, the disputants have been just the egoist and the moralist. However, I argue in the book that this traditional way of framing the debate is covertly biased in favor of the egoist and that this is the main reason why the debate has not produced a defensible resolution. To show this, I focus on Henry Sidgwick's

problem at the end of *Methods of Ethics* where he cannot find a way to resolve the conflict between utilitarian morality and egoism. I argue that this is because Sidgwick failed to recognize that utilitarian morality already represented a compromise between self and others (egoism and altruism). Consequently, any further compromise with egoism would involve a double-counting of self-interested reasons and that would be objectionable. Only by backing up and taking self-interested and altruistic reasons to be fundamental can we reach, I claim, a non-question-begging resolution.

Sixth, Lippert-Rasmussen notes that among fellow egoists themselves always giving self-interested reasons priority would not be question-begging. But, course, egoists are not trying to justify egoism to their fellow egoists but rather to their opponents, the moralists. Lippert-Rasmussen also questions whether the principle of non-question-beggingness really appears as a premise in my argument against egoism or whether it is just a requirement imposed on the premises of that argument. Well, I start off my first argument against egoism by claiming:

“In trying to determine how we should act, let us assume that we would like to be able to construct a good argument favoring morality over egoism, and given that good arguments are non-question-begging, we accordingly would like to construct an argument that does not beg the question.”

Now I think this fairly clearly shows that the principle of non-question-beggingness is embedded in the first premise of my argument. By contrast, my second argument against egoism does not start off by endorsing the principle of non-question-beggingness. Nevertheless, it concludes that the egoist can only support her view by begging the question-against the moralist.

Lippert-Rasmussen discusses my example of someone who put her hand into a fire on a whim, suffering a third degree burn as a result, who sincerely claims that she did not harm herself in the least. I claim that it is not possible to pursue a non-question-begging argument with such a person because there is not enough common ground between ourselves and this person to which we can appeal to reach agreement. Lippert-Rasmussen wonders what is the common ground to which I am appealing. With respect to this example, that common ground clearly includes the knowledge of what is truly in one's self-interest. I think that it also extends to include knowledge of what is truly in the interest of others. Clearly, even egoists need that knowledge in order to best manipulate other people. But my argument also presupposes additional common

ground. For example, it presupposes that psychological egoism is false or an empty thesis, a presupposition that I defend in my book. I also presuppose that my argument is addressed to people who can act both morally and self-interestedly. These two presuppositions are necessary because the normative conclusion I want to endorse, that people are rationally required to be moral, presupposes that it is addressed to people who have the capacity to be moral, or in other words, my conclusion presupposes that “ought” implies “can.” So that too must be in the premises.

Lastly, Lippert-Rasmussen thinks he can undercut my second argument against egoism by simply appealing to the difference between motivating and justifying reasons for action. He recognizes that this argument appeals to the fact that sometimes having the ultimate interest of others as our ultimate reason for acting best maximizes our overall self-interest. In a footnote, Lippert-Rasmussen notes that consequentialists have also argued that it is sometimes best if individuals do not act in order to bring about the best outcome, but instead, for example, follow some appropriate rule. But surely the fact that these individuals are following the appropriate rule would be a justification of their actions, as well as what motivates them to act. Similarly, for the egoist in the case we are considering, taking the interest of others as one’s ultimate reason for action must justify the egoist’s action as well as motivate it. In this context, there is no other reason for action one could, in fact, act upon that would serve to justify one’s action. Accordingly, acting on this ultimate reason must both justify as well as motivate one’s action.

At the end of his paper, Lippert-Rasmussen questions whether my argument from rationality to morality, even if correct, would lead to my argument from (libertarian) morality to equality. He claims that in order for the arguments to be logically connected, it would have to be the case that there is a view that ascribes the least weight to altruistic reasons compatible with morality being a non-question-begging compromise between egoistic and altruistic reasons and that libertarianism is that view.

To show that the second condition is not met, Lippert-Rasmussen distinguishes two libertarian views, standard libertarianism and quasi-libertarian which disagree about what the least weight to altruistic reasons should be, quasi-libertarian giving less weight than standard libertarianism. Lippert-Rasmussen allows that my argument works against standard libertarianism, but he thinks it does not work against quasi-libertarianism, even though both views are possible outcomes of Morality as Compromise. According to Lippert-Rasmussen, this shows that I really don’t have an argument from rationality to equality, even if both parts of my

argument were successful because my first argument would only get us to Morality as Compromise while my second argument only gets us from standard libertarianism to equality not from his quasi-libertarianism to equality.

Yet what Lippert-Rasmussen fails to recognize here is that I take libertarianism to incorporate both his standard and quasi-libertarian views as well as any other form of libertarianism that purports to require the appropriate weighing of (negative) liberties, independently of what particular conclusions these views endorse for how that weighing should go. I am just concerned with how that weighing should appropriately go for any libertarian view that claims to endorse the least enforcement of morality, something all forms of libertarianism, including Lippert-Rasmussen's standard libertarians and quasi-libertarians claim to be correctly doing. Thus, by understanding libertarianism in this more inclusive way, I am able to use the view to successfully complete my argument from rationality to equality.

II

Critics of my book *From Rationality to Equality* do not usually begin by assuming that my argument from rationality to morality and my argument from libertarian morality to substantial equality are both correct and still purport to offer a serious challenge to my view. Yet that is just what Valeria Ottonelli does. She assumes that the argument of my book can succeed in establishing its two main conclusions and then claims that it fails to provide a public justification for political institutions. To provide such a justification, Ottonelli claims, my argument would have to be "addressed to the reason of all citizens and be capable of eliciting their consensus via rational argumentation." As evidence that I too want to provide such a public justification, Ottonelli quotes me as saying:

Political philosophy presupposes the accessibility of ... [the] justification of morality. This is because political philosophers recognize that if the imposition of the will of the majority on the minority is to be morally justified, there must be sufficient reasons accessible to the minority, that justify coercively requiring the minority to accept that imposition (Sterba 2013: 52).

However, what Ottonelli fails to note here is that I hold that those seeking a public justification also need to make use of my argument from rationality to morality in order to fully provide such a justification. It

would not be enough, I claim, to just assume that everyone is committed to morality and then go on to provide a public justification only to those who are so committed.

Nevertheless, Ottonelli wants to do just that. She wants to evaluate the argument of my book in terms of whether it provides a public justification for its conclusions to people, like ourselves, who are committed to morality but hold diverse moral perspectives.

According to Ottonelli, there are two ways that this can be done. The first is to show that diverse moral perspectives “converge” on particular practical moral requirements. The second is to show that people, in fact, share a consensus on common moral principles from which they then can derive practical moral requirements. Of course, someone who endorses a convergence strategy might also endorse a consensus strategy as well if it turns out that diverse moral perspectives can be shown to give rise to common moral principles from which then practical moral requirements can be derived. Likewise, just the opposite might be true if those who endorse a consensus strategy come to recognize that the common moral principles they endorse are rooted in diverse moral perspectives. In any case, Ottonelli maintains that my view fails to secure either a convergence or a consensus justification for its egalitarian requirements.

Convergence

Now Ottonelli recognizes that I have advanced a full-scale attempt to provide a convergence of the practical requirements I defend in my earlier book, *How to Make People Just*.¹ Naturally, in *From Rationality to Equality*, I did not reproduce all of the argument of my earlier book. Rather, I focused on the most contentious parts of that argument – my argument from rationality to morality and my argument from libertarian morality to substantial equality. Ottonelli focuses her attention on my argument from libertarian morality to substantial equality.

At various points in *From Rationality to Equality*, I note the relevance of my argument to a convergence strategy. For example, on p. 100, which Ottonelli cites, I note that once I get a right to welfare from liber-

¹ In an earlier version of her paper, Ottonelli made no reference to my book, *How to Make People Just*, where I attempt to employ a convergence strategy. But when I drew her attention to this omission, she generously agreed to take the argument of that book into account, given its relevance to the critique she is offering of *From Rationality to Equality*.

tarian premises, my argument can join forces with a welfare liberal view which also endorses a right to welfare, to bring both views to substantial equality, which is explicitly defended by a socialist perspective. Surely, this is an argument for convergence. Later, comparing a libertarian perspective with a welfare liberal and socialist perspective (on pp. 135ff), I claim that the derivation of substantial equality from the libertarian perspective can only be attained by a more circuitous route than the derivation of those same requirements from a welfare liberal or socialist perspective. Still, this is a way of supporting convergence.

In *How to Make People Just*, I set out five conceptions of justice drawn from libertarianism, welfare liberalism, socialism, feminism and communitarianism, and then argue that, when correctly interpreted, each of these five conceptions supports the same practical requirements.

However, Ottonelli argues, that while my derivations of the same practical requirements from each of these alternative perspectives are “sound and ingenious,” they fail because they are “untrue to the actual worldview held by the proponents” of these perspectives. Ottonetti indicates what she has in mind here by citing the critique Iris Young raises for my view as one of nine critics of *How To Make People Just* in a special symposium that was devoted to the book. Young claims that the way that I have of characterizing the five conceptions of justice in *How to Make People Just* is tied to a distributional rather than a relational way of conceiving justice. Young’s critique is that my approach is inherently limiting because it allows for the distribution of nonrelational goods, like welfare, but ignores relational goods, like power, that are determined by the design of institutional structures. My response to this critique, included in the same symposium of papers, is that I don’t see why we cannot, and should not, consider the distribution of relational goods, like power, liberty, or opportunity, as well as the distribution of nonrelational goods, like welfare. (Isn’t the debate with libertarians all about what should be the proper distribution of liberty in society?) Of course, in considering the distribution of liberty, power and opportunity, we surely have to take into account the design of institutional structures since these goods can only be distributed through institutional structures. Yet this seems to also hold true with respect to the distribution of nonrelational goods, like welfare, for they too require institutional structures to secure their distribution. So if talk of distribution is appropriate at all, as it clearly seems to be, then it is appropriate for all these social goods.

Neither Young nor Ottonelli responded to my defense of the general usefulness of the distributive approach to justice. However, in her earlier

book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Young further argues that focusing justice on the distribution of social goods at least obscures the institutional structures required to secure relational social goods. But it is hard to see why even this objection would hold given that all social goods require appropriate institutional structures to guarantee their distribution.

Ottonelli does provide a different argument in support of Young's critique. She claims that if we are concerned with constructing and maintaining just institutions we cannot be focusing on the equal satisfaction of basic needs. But why is that the case? If the proper institutional structures are such that people are guaranteed the goods and resources (both relational and nonrelational) that provide for the equal satisfaction of their basic needs, why can't we call for justice in those very terms?

It is true, as Ottonelli points out, that most defenders of relational approaches to justice have not endorsed institutions that impose requirements on us as demanding as those that would be imposed by my view. However, I argue in my book that this is because these approaches have not realized how demanding the requirements of their own conceptions of justice, properly interpreted, really are. This is because they have failed to take into account the demands that flow from recognizing the moral relevance of distant peoples and future generation to the proper distribution of goods and resources. Accordingly, the difference between my defense of substantial equality and the requirements defended by others has nothing to do the difference between relational and nonrelational goods. Rather, it has everything to do with the failure of defenders of alternative views to recognize how demanding the requirements of morality really are.

Consensus

Next, Ottonelli considers whether my argument for substantial equality could be interpreted as using a consensus strategy. This would be the case if the substantial equality I endorse could be derived quite straightforwardly from common moral principles that people actually accept. In fact, as I indicated above, I have no objection to interpreting my argument for substantial equality as derivable from a consensus on common moral principles provided that does not preclude claiming that those common moral principles can also result from a convergence of diverse moral perspectives.

Now the common moral principle to which Ottonelli thinks I could

be appealing in defense of my egalitarian conclusion is something of this sort:

CMP-1 If it turns out that the moral view that is the least morally demanding requires my very demanding conclusion, then, a fortiori, all other moral perspectives should endorse that conclusion as well.

But this does not get what could be the common moral principle that is compatible with my view quite right. A better formulation would be:

CMP-2 If it turns out that the moral view that purports to be the least morally demanding can be shown to support a right to welfare and that further when this right is extended to distant peoples and future generations, it can be shown to lead to my conclusion of substantial equality then all other moral views in virtue of endorsing a right to welfare should be similarly committed to substantial equality.

Ottonelli objects to CMP-1 that by my own argument, libertarianism is not really an less demanding moral view after all, and so it cannot function as such in my argument. But that objection does not hold against CMP-2 which I think is a better formulation of the moral principle that underlies this part of my argument for substantial equality.

The second objection that Ottonelli raises to CMP-1 can be directed at CMP-2 as well. It is that a moral perspective can still be very demanding while leading to unequalitarian results. Ottonelli points out that utilitarianism has been criticized for having just these implications. This is clearly a problem for my view that must be addressed. Fortunately, I have addressed it in my book, *The Triumph of Practice Over Theory in Ethics*, published a few years ago with Oxford. In this book, I add to my argument for a convergence in political philosophy developed in *How to Make People Just* a parallel argument for convergence in moral philosophy. I argue that when Utilitarian, Kantian and Aristotelian ethics are each given its most morally defensible formulation, they converge on the same practical moral requirements.

To get this result, with respect to Utilitarian ethics, I show that there are internal constraints on the most morally defensible formulation of the view, and that these constraints rule out the objectionable unequalitarian requirements that are frequently thought to be entailed by the view. Now a similar argument using the same internal constraints along with the moral relevance of distant peoples and future generations undermines Ottonelli's parallel objection to using CMP-2 to support my egalitarian conclusion. Accordingly, neither objection that Ottonelli raises

against the consensus formulation that she gives here to my argument actually works against that formulation correctly interpreted.

Ottonelli goes on to give what she regards as another consensus interpretation of my argument. According to this interpretation, “a) there is a path from libertarian premises to normative tenets that libertarians can share with non-libertarian egalitarians, and b) those tenets ground egalitarian policies and institutions.” I am not sure how distinct this interpretation of my view is from Ottonelli’s other consensus interpretation. This is because Ottonelli similarly uses it to come up with a common moral principle for my view that is supposed to be endorsed by libertarians and nonlibertarians alike. This principle, in turn, is supposed to support the practical moral requirements of my view. The only real difference I see here is that Ottonelli puts forward my “ought” implies “can” principle rather than CMP-1 as the common moral principle from which my egalitarian conclusions are supposed to follow.

Now Ottonelli’s objection to the effectiveness of my argument under this interpretation is that when we apply my “ought” implies “can” principle to the distribution of liberties understood as negative goods, we do not get the same practical outcome as when we apply it to the distribution of positive goods, like welfare and opportunities, along with negative goods. Thus, she thinks my view’s use of the “ought” implies “can” principle is underdetermined compared to nonlibertarian views that directly require the distribution of positive as well as negative goods. As she see it, these nonlibertarian views endorse a broader conception of goods that can include along with negative liberties, other Rawlsian primary social goods or utilities generally.

However, the whole point of my argument with libertarians was to show how their own view, when supplemented with some empirical premises they cannot reject, leads to the same practical requirements that should be endorsed by their nonlibertarian opponents. On pp. 134-136, I explicitly draw attention to the empirical premises that I have been using in my argument to get from libertarianism with its negative liberty or negative goods to the same practical requirements as are derivable from nonlibertarian views with their negative and positive goods combined. The full argument using these empirical premises is developed throughout Chapter 6. That is the argument that Ottonelli rightly claims is needed to keep my argument for substantial equality from being underdetermined. Fortunately, it is the argument whose empirical premises serve to enable libertarians and their opponents both to endorse the egalitarian conclusion of my argument.

In sum, Ottonelli's challenge to the argument of *From Rationality to Equality* that it needs a political justification for its conclusion is *more than* met by the argument of my book, especially when supplemented by arguments from two of my other books. Not only do I provide a convergence argument for my egalitarian conclusion and a consensus argument from common moral principles for that same conclusion, but I also provide an argument for the same conclusion that should convince even egoists who reject a moral framework altogether. Of course, my hope is that Valeria Ottonelli will also be *more than* pleased with my response.

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