

# Sterba on Amoralism and Begging the Question

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*Abstract:* While sympathetic to Sterba's equalitarian convictions, Lippert-Rasmussen attacks that Sterba's rationality-to-morality argument. He presents six objections to show that Sterba's main argument grounded on the principle of non-question-beggingness fails to defeat amoralism. He also argues that another argument offered by Sterba to defeat amoralism fails to distinguish between motivating and justifying reasons. None of this shows that we should accept amoralism, but it discloses serious problems with the rationality-to-morality sub-argument. Fortunately, this sub-argument is, so I argue, independent of Sterba's liberty-to-equality sub-argument.

## 1. Introduction

By today's standards James Sterba's *From Rationality to Equality* is an unusually ambitious piece of philosophical work: "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 a peaceful implementation of its egalitarian conclusions, thereby making philosophy and philosophers look a little better in the process" (219).<sup>1</sup> The book's overall argument – the rationality-to-equality argument (137) – divides into two sub-arguments: a rationality-to-morality argument for the claim that if an action is morally required, it is also rationally required; and a liberty-to-equality argument that right-libertarianism, despite the self-understanding of its proponents, entails commitment to a substantial form of equality encompassing future generations as well as non-human animals.

Both sub-arguments make heavy use of a principle enjoining those engaged in argument to avoid begging the question against their oppo-

<sup>1</sup> All references to page numbers alone refer to James P. Sterba, *From Rationality to Equality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

nents. Offhand, one would expect this principle – being a principle of informal logic regulating arguments designed to epistemically justify claims to one another (and to oneself) – to leave several issues wide open: what agents have reason to do; whether they have reason to act morally; and, if they do, what they ought to do, morally speaking.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Sterba’s argument is extremely interesting, because it promises to establish the highly controversial moral conclusion that substantial equality is morally required on the basis of a principle that is neither obviously a moral principle (more on this later) nor something many philosophers would deny. Perhaps if the principle of non-question-beggingness could be employed in the way Sterba believes it can, we would indeed find ourselves in a position to resolve “the fundamental conflicts between opposing moral and political ideals of our times”. However, I doubt the principle can be so used. In arguing this in the pages that follow I fear that I shall not make philosophy, or for that matter myself, look any better.

I am quite sympathetic to Sterba’s commitment to substantive equality, and I also find much of the discussion of libertarianism he presents in connection with the liberty-to-equality argument convincing. In particular, I agree that when poor people with unmet basic needs are prevented from appropriating resources of rich people that would otherwise be used in luxury goods, the negative liberty of poor people is being restricted, and I think this is an important insight. I also find much of Sterba’s critique of some alternative egalitarian views helpful. For example, his observation that, for the same reason that there is no unqualified right to freedom, there is no unqualified right to equality, and his inference that an important part of Dworkin’s case against libertarianism collapses, strikes me as compelling (190-192).<sup>3</sup> However, I am quite skepti-

<sup>2</sup> Sterba’s liberty-to-equality argument also appeals to a moralized version of the principle that “Ought” implies “Can”, i.e., “[p]eople are not morally required to do either what they lack the power to do or what would involve so great a sacrifice or restriction that it would be unreasonable to require them to perform such an action” (108). Unlike the principle of non-question-beggingness, this is a second-order moral principle, i.e. one delimiting the field of valid moral principles. Accordingly, it would be much less surprising if this principle were to imply a moral requirement for some substantive form of equality of the sort favored by Sterba than it would be if the principle of non-question-beggingness were to do so.

<sup>3</sup> I was less convinced by his criticism that G.A. Cohen’s position is “insufficiently inequalitarian” because: (1) it does not defend “equality for equality’s sake” (207); (2) “it fails to enforce an ethos of concern for the least advantaged when that is required to prevent others from being badly off” (210); and (3) “it does not suitably restrict satisfying nonbasic needs of existing people in order to satisfy the basic needs of future generations” (210). On (1): this objection is

cal about the rationality-to-morality argument. Admittedly, it would be marvelous if an appeal to the principle of non-question-beggingness could solve the perennial philosophical problem of amoralism – a problem which has haunted philosophy (at least) ever since the story of the ring of Gyges in Plato’s *Republic*, but, for reasons I will expound below, I do not think it can.<sup>4</sup> Section 2 sets out the core of argumentation deployed in first of two versions of Sterba’s rationality-to-morality argument. Then, in Section 3, I raise six objections, which I take to show that the principle of non-question-beggingness fails to defeat amoralism. Section 4 briefly assesses the second version of the rationality-to-morality argument. While Sterba does little more than sketch this version of the ar-

based on Sterba’s reading of the first chapter of Cohen’s *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. This chapter contains material from Cohen’s 1991 *Tanner Lectures* and some footnotes in which Cohen describes the evolution of his views since then. One footnote, apparently unnoticed by Sterba, reads: “In the [relevant reprinted part of Cohen’s *Tanner Lectures*] I am insufficiently exercised by the distinction between justice and optimal policy. Under the influence of that distinction, I would now say that distributive justice *is* (some kind of) equality, but that the Pareto principle, and also that constrained Pareto principle that is the difference principle, often trump justice”, Cohen 2008: 30, n. 7. Presumably, if Cohen thinks justice *is* equality, he is also intrinsically concerned about equality. On (2): as I read Cohen’s (*Tanner Lectures*), he argues that the realization of a just distribution requires not just appropriately devised policies through which the state seeks to implement the difference principle, but that people in their everyday lives act in keeping with an egalitarian ethos. He nowhere commits himself to the view that the untalented, badly off have no “enforceable right” to have their basic needs met if the talented people are not motivated by an egalitarian ethos (although he acknowledges that implementing distributive justice might conflict with other values, e.g. privacy). Nor does Sterba seem to offer any textual evidence for his ascription of this view to Cohen (and of course the attribution must in any case be rethought in the light of the footnote from Cohen just quoted). On (3): this (mild) criticism is warranted to the extent that Cohen does not address the issue of equality across generations. However, accounts of equality, Sterba’s included, rarely address *all* questions about the scope of equality. Thus, unproblematically, given his focus, Sterba does not discuss whether the equality extends beyond whole lives to the equality of corresponding segments of life (see Temkin 1993: 232-244). However, the stronger criticism – that Cohen’s view is incompatible with this extension of the scope of equality – is unwarranted; nor does Sterba press such a criticism.

<sup>4</sup> Parfit distinguishes between what an agent has reason to do and what it is rational for the agent to do. The former depends on facts about matters other than the agent’s beliefs; the latter depends only on those beliefs; see Parfit 2011: 36. When we press this distinction into service the problem of amoralism becomes the problem of whether, if an action is morally required, it is also one that the agent has an all-things-considered reason to do – and not, as Sterba frames the issue, whether morally required actions are rationally required. It could be true that an agent, misinformed about the facts, displays no irrationality in being amoral even if he has reason to act morally. This terminological difference between Parfit and Sterba does not appear to reflect a substantive disagreement, and accordingly throughout this article I will simply employ Sterba’s formulation of the problem.

gument, thereby making it hard to assess with much confidence, there is good reason to believe that it fails to defeat amoralism too. Section 5 argues that the liberty-to-equality argument is independent of the rationality-to-equality argument, and that my critique of the latter does not undermine the former. Section 6 iterates my conclusions.

Because this contribution to the symposium on Sterba's book focuses on what I see as problems with his way of trying to defeat amoralism, I should like to repeat that I find myself in agreement with much of his insightful discussion of libertarianism and his notion of substantive equality. Moreover, even if amoralism is not defeated by it, Sterba's book certainly advances our understanding of the issues involved.

## *2. Sterba's rationality-to-morality argument: First version*

I turn, then, to the first version of Sterba's argument for the claim that if an action is morally required, it is rationally required (23). In a nutshell, this argument requires us to imagine a dialectical situation involving an egoist and an altruist who both want to defend a conclusion about what one should do, rationally speaking, by good arguments. It is crucial that the arguments offered respect the "principle of non-question-beggingness" (211).<sup>5</sup> This principle:

requires that we not argue in such a way that *only* someone who already knew or believed the conclusion of our argument would accept its premises, or put more succinctly, that we not assume what we are trying to prove or justify (33).

If, in defending his view, the egoist assumes that only reasons of self-interest bear on the matter, he will beg the question against the altruist. Similarly, the altruist will beg the question against the egoist if she bases her argument on the premise that self-interested reasons are irrelevant to what one is rationally required to do. Sterba infers:

Consequently, in order not to beg the question, we have no alternative but to

<sup>5</sup> Sterba also assumes that both the egoist and the altruist are "capable of entertaining and acting upon both self-interested and moral or altruistic considerations, and that the question we are seeking to answer is what considerations it would be rational for us to accept as reasons for action" (32). While this assumption does no harm, we do not need to assume that the relevant parties have this capacity. It suffices that the subject of their discussion is the justifiability of morality for individuals who have this capacity, whether or not they – the parties to the discussion – themselves have it.

grant the status of prima facie reasons for action to relevant self-interested and moral or altruistic considerations and then try to determine which of these reasons for action we would be rationally required to act upon, all things considered (34).<sup>6</sup>

At this point, clarity requires us to distinguish between prima facie and pro tanto reasons. Following Shelly Kagan, in this paragraph I shall use “prima facie reason” as an epistemic concept and “pro tanto reason” as a non-epistemic one.<sup>7</sup> To say that something is a prima facie reason favoring a certain action, in this sense, is to say that it *appears* to favor that action, though it may turn out that *as a matter of fact* it does not – e.g. the fact that it is Anna’s bike appears to be a reason to return it to her, but it may turn out that as a matter of fact it is not, because she has promised to lend it to Bert. Prima facie reasons contrast with *actual* reasons. Saying that something is a pro tanto reason favoring a certain action is to say that it is a genuine reason favoring the action, where this leaves open, as a possibility, that there are other reasons favoring the action and other reasons favoring not performing the action. The latter may even outweigh the former: one might have a pro tanto reason to perform a certain action, although one also has an all-things-considered reason, not to perform it. For instance, the fact that it is Anna’s bike is a pro tanto reason to return it to her, but I might have an all-things-considered reason to give the bike to Claire, because she urgently needs it to get to the hospital and this is, in some sense, the weightier of the two reasons. Pro tanto reasons, then, are to be contrasted with all-things-considered reasons. These two contrasts cut across one another, yielding a matrix of four categories of reason.<sup>8</sup>

Some philosophers use “prima facie” to refer pro tanto reasons, as just characterized, as well as prima facie reasons; and in fact by “prima facie reason” Sterba means what I have identified as pro tanto reasons. For instance, he writes that “the second step” of his argument for “the compro-

<sup>6</sup> Sterba thinks that his argument is “somewhat analogous to the inference of equal probability sanctioned in decision theory when we have no evidence that one alternative is more likely than the other” (46). I believe, however, that we do have non-question-begging evidence with a bearing on the issue at hand. For instance, many people who have never reflected on this dispute would hold that, in cases where one has a weak, self-interested reason for not performing an action and a very strong, altruistic reason for performing it, one is not being irrational in acting altruistically. Obviously, this evidence is not decisive. Nevertheless, people might accept it, and its relevance, whatever their view on the egoist-altruist debate.

<sup>7</sup> Kagan 1989: 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> To wit: (1) prima facie, pro tanto; (2) prima facie, all things considered; (3) actual, pro tanto; and (4) actual, all things considered.

mise view [of morality] offers a nonarbitrary ordering of [self-interested and altruistic] reasons on the basis of the rankings of self-interested and altruistic reasons imposed by the egoistic and altruistic reasons respectively” (46). Had he used “prima facie” as an epistemic qualifier, this would not be the natural second step of his argument. That step would then be an attempt to establish which of the two reasons is actual. Similarly, Sterba writes that the egoist and the altruist “are really not contesting the existence of the reasons they oppose” (58). This would not be true if by “prima facie” he had an epistemic qualifier in mind. Conceding that a reason is a prima facie reason is consistent with contesting its existence.

Suppose we grant Sterba the claim that any non-question-begging argument that speaks to the issue at hand must allow that both self-interested and altruistic reasons are prima facie reasons in the sense expounded in the two previous paragraphs. How do we get from this claim to the conclusion? In answering this question Sterba distinguishes two cases: 1) no-conflict cases where one and the same action is required from the point of view of self-interest and the point of view of altruism, and 2) conflict cases where different, impossible actions are required from the two different standpoints. The former case – assuming that there are no other sources of reasons – is easy in the sense that, because the action morally required is required from all relevant standpoints, it is rationally required (41). The latter case is harder. Here, Sterba suggests, three solutions are possible:

First, we could say that self-interested reasons always have priority over conflicting altruistic reasons. Second, we could say just the opposite, that altruistic reasons always have priority over conflicting self-interested reasons. Third, we could say that some kind of compromise is rationally required. Once the conflict is described in this manner, the third solution can be seen to be the one that is rationally required. This is because the first and second solutions give exclusive priority to one class of relevant reasons over the other, and only a question-begging justification can be given for such an exclusive priority (42).<sup>9</sup>

While Sterba does not say so explicitly, the underlying assumption here is presumably that a non-question-begging argument can be given for the third solution. It is unclear what that non-question begging argument is,

<sup>9</sup> Sterba notes that his argument for saying that “sometimes human-centered reasons would have priority over nonhuman-centered reasons, and sometimes nonhuman centered reasons would have priority over human-centered reasons” (142) forms an “exact parallel” to the present argument.

however. Perhaps he has in mind an inference from the three claims – that (1) one solution is the right one and can be non-question-beggingly justified, (2) the three solutions exhaust the logical space, and (3) no non-question-begging argument can be given for the first two solutions – to the conclusion that the third, balanced resolution is the correct one.

Even if the argument in the previous sentence *is* Sterba's, one would like to know what the non-question-begging argument for the third solution is. (Perhaps no solution can be justified non-question-beggingly, and if this were the case the argument I have suggested Sterba might have in mind would be undermined.) It would also be helpful to have an explanation of why a solution that gives "exclusive weight" to one of the two standpoints must be question-begging. For it is not true in general that solutions giving exclusive weight to one of two conflicting standpoints beg the question. Otherwise a resolution of a debate between someone with a racist standpoint (according to which only the interests of individuals of a certain race count morally) and someone with a non-racist standpoint (according to which the interests of all individuals count equally, morally speaking, regardless of race) that gave exclusive weight to the latter standpoint would be question-begging.

Setting aside the reservation expressed in the previous paragraph, if we assume that morality is a compromise between egoist and altruist reasons; and if we suppose, further, that this compromise also gives us what we have reason to do, all things considered, because the only two sources of reasons that exist are our own interests and the interests of others; it will follow that, if an action is morally required, it is rationally required – in which case amoralism is defeated. This concludes my presentation of Sterba's core argument.

### 3. *Some worries*

I have several worries about Sterba's argument, understood in the way I have suggested. First, I am unconvinced that his response to the relevant worry about not begging the question solves the problem of amoralism in the most relevant dialogical contexts. Surely, there could be egoists of whom it is true that they would only accept the premise that altruist reasons for action are *prima facie* reasons for action if they accepted that, if an action is morally required, it is rationally required – e.g. the only support that they would see as favoring Sterba's claim about *prima facie* reasons would be an *a priori* argument of some sort in favor of the con-

clusion. For these amoralists, Sterba's argument would beg the question, and there is a similar problem for a relevantly similar kind of altruist.

Moreover, even if, presently, there are no such amoralists, there are bound to exist some in the future, assuming that Sterba's argument becomes widely known and accepted. In that case, a new breed of amoralist is likely to appear, one who readily acknowledges that it follows quite straightforwardly from amorality that, at least when it is applied to the issue of practical reasons, the principle of non-question-beggingness must be rejected and, accordingly, would only accept the principle so applied had he already rejected amorality. For this kind of amoralist, appealing to the principle of non-question-beggingness to defeat amorality would be question-begging.

The leveling down objection to telic egalitarianism offers an instructive parallel here. Telic egalitarianism is the view that inequality per se is bad provided that those who are worse off are so through no choice or fault of their own. Some years ago Parfit pointed out that it follows from this view that a situation in which everyone is equally badly off is in one way better than one in which everyone is much better off but unequally so.<sup>10</sup> Because many telic egalitarians found this (at the time) unacknowledged implication of their view counterintuitive, the leveling down objection did not beg the question against them. However, today the objection is widely known, and many telic egalitarians might correctly say that the objection begs the question against them. They can correctly say that they would only accept that leveling down is not better in any respect if they already accepted that telic egalitarianism is false. In saying this I am not denying that Parfit's leveling down objection enhanced our understanding of the value of equality. I am using the example to suggest that the achievement that consists in showing that the argument in favor of a certain view is question-begging is unstable. Specifically, it may result in changes in the way the recipients see the epistemic relations between their different views with the result that what was previously a non-question-begging objection becomes question-begging.

Second, there is a difference between accepting a premise and actually believing it.<sup>11</sup> Suppose a friend of mine believes that the Apollo landings really took place in a Hollywood studio. I believe otherwise and want to convince him that he is mistaken. I might try the following: "Assume for the sake of argument that the Apollo landings really took place in a Hol-

<sup>10</sup> Parfit 1991-2000: 98.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen 1995: 1-39.

lywood studio. In that case, a very large number of people – people who made the fake films, working in NASA, and so on – would have known that the US never put a man on the moon. So it is unlikely that this could have been kept a secret. Hence, the Apollo landings probably did not take place in a Hollywood studio”. Here I initially accept a premise which I do not believe in order to offer an argument to my interlocutor that does not beg the question against him. If anyone else were to use this premise to argue against my view, they might well beg the question against me, even though I have accepted the premise for the sake of argument. While I am willing to grant it for the sake of constructing an argument, I believe it is false. It might even be true that I would accept it only if I already accepted the claim that the moon-landing never took place. Similarly, an egoist might be willing to *accept* for the sake of argument that altruistic reasons are *prima facie* reasons for action. But it would not follow that he *believes* that they are. Accordingly, employing the premise the reasons of a kind that the philosophical altruist affirms are *prima facie* reasons for action to show that morally required actions are rationally required begs the question against the egoist, in which case Sterba’s argument against amoralism fails.

Third, the employment of Sterba’s argumentative strategy would force us to accept too many types of reason. Suppose someone believes that *all* reasons are reasons of etiquette. This is an absurd view, no doubt.<sup>12</sup> However, an argumentative strategy similar to Sterba’s, in a discussion between the egoist, the altruist, and my etiquette fetishist, would ensure that, to avoid begging the question against any of the three interlocutors, we must allow that reasons of etiquette are *prima facie* reasons. Moreover, when it is applied to the present case Sterba’s view regarding a non-question-begging resolution of conflicts between different sorts of reason implies that where the conflict is between very weak egoist and very weak altruist reasons, on the one hand, and very strong reasons of etiquette, on the other, we are rationally required to act in the way favored by reasons of etiquette.

In response to this objection, Sterba might say that his aim is simply to offer a “non-question-begging argument” to the effect “that morality is rationally preferable to egoism” (80), and that the present objection does not show that this is not what he has offered.

This reply is correct, but it does not show that there is no problem with Sterba’s argument. If our justification of morality has certain counterintuitive implications, we might reject the argument even if it gives us

<sup>12</sup> There are other, and more plausible, candidates, e.g. aesthetic reasons.

the desired conclusion regarding the justification of morality over egoism, and I believe that an argument that commits one to the view that strong reasons of etiquette trump weak reasons of prudence and altruism is counterintuitive.

Fourth, the previous point could be resisted on the following grounds: true, any argument which, in the relevant dialectical setting, does not start from the premise that reasons of etiquette are *prima facie* reasons would beg the question against the etiquette fetishist. However, this is not a problem. For even if it is true that the etiquette fetishist would only accept the premise that egoist and altruist reasons for actions are *prima facie* reasons for action only if he already accepted that morally required actions are rationally required, it will also be true that he has good reasons, independently of the argument presented, to accept this premise – reasons to which he is unresponsive in a way that amounts to a form of theoretical irrationality.

The general form of this response is perfectly acceptable. Begging the question, as Sterba has defined it, simply involves a contingent psychological state of the recipient of the question-begging argument, namely that he would only believe the premise if he already believed the conclusion. However, this psychological state could reflect irrationality on his part, for it may be that he has good reasons, independently of the argument being offered, for accepting the premises. In such cases, a question-begging argument might be a reasonable argument.<sup>13</sup>

This response to the challenge from the etiquette fetishist, while it may be effective, is not without its difficulties for Sterba. This is because once it is conceded that question-begging arguments can be reasonable – as I think they can – it becomes unclear whether the principle of non-question-beggingness can play the central role it does in Sterba's argument. If question-begging arguments can be reasonable, why not allow them in cases where they *are* so?

One reaction here, and perhaps the most obvious one, would be to revise Sterba's definition of question-begging arguments such that it:

requires that we not argue in such a way that only someone who already *had good reason* to believe the conclusion of our argument would *have good reason* to believe its premises.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Rasmussen 2001.

<sup>14</sup> I omit Sterba's remark about "knowing" the conclusion. If I know something, I also believe it. Hence, cases of knowing will also be covered by my (simpler) formulation.

Unlike Sterba's definition the definition I offer here does not refer simply to empirical facts about the recipient's relevant dispositions to believe. Rather, it concerns a normative relation between the recipient's beliefs and his reasons for believing. Moreover, it does seem that on this definition any question-begging argument would be unreasonable in the sense that it would never give the recipient any reason for accepting the conclusion. Accordingly, on this definition, the relevantly modified version of Sterba's principle of non-question-beggingness does appear to play a crucial role in any argumentative setting. However, to employ this principle we would need to show that the egoist (the altruist) has no reasons to accept the altruist's (egoist's) premises, and this Sterba has not shown. Indeed, not only does this seem to be at the core of the debate between the egoist and the altruist, but it is precisely to bypass this discussion that Sterba appeals to the need to avoid question-begging arguments. I conclude that a suitably revised definition of begging the question, while it is preferable on other grounds, does not on its own salvage Sterba's argument from my fourth objection.

Fifth, even if we grant Sterba the first step in his defense of morality, the second – i.e. the step that concerns a non-question-begging resolution of conflicting egoist and altruist reasons – is far from trouble-free. For one thing, this step ignores normative pluralists. That is, it neglects people who think a person's self-interest, as well as other people's interests, both generate reasons, but that these reasons are incommensurable in the sense that they do not permit comparison in terms of some overarching value such as overall strength. Accordingly, for normative pluralists, while we can compare egoistic reasons in terms of strength, and compare altruistic reasons in terms of strength, we can never, in terms of strength, compare the former with the latter. They therefore think that there is a fourth resolution to conflict cases: they believe that it is never true, of the two conflicting reasons, either that one is stronger than the other or that they are equally strong. For such pluralists, then, a denial that stronger egoist (altruist) reasons trump weaker altruist (egoist) reasons does not beg the question – which in turn means that Sterba's argument is ineffective against them (whether or not it is effective against normative monists).

Along lines not dissimilar to those we traced above, Sterba might say at this juncture – as he does in response to some other critiques of his position – that his argument is meant to address the dispute between the egoist and the altruist. We can safely assume that these particular disputants are normative monists, and if it resolves this dispute, the argu-

ment is valuable, even if it does not help with other disputes.<sup>15</sup>

The point is well taken. However, it introduces a new problem, for the more specific the target of Sterba's argument, the less interesting that argument is. Indeed, given the way in which Sterba interprets altruism, I think that the dispute between the egoist and the altruist with which he is engaging is a rather unusual one, and not the one people typically have in mind when discussing the problem of justifying morality. For Sterba, altruistic reasons derive, not from the interests of everyone, but from the interests of all others but oneself. This is excessively narrow because very few people have actually held the view that the interests of others give one reasons for action while one's own interests do not.<sup>16</sup>

My sixth and final worry is a more general one, and it is about Sterba's construal of question-beggingness. On most occasions he applies the label "question-begging" to arguments. However, he also describes other items as question-begging. For instance, in the second step of his defense of morality rankings of egoistic and altruistic reasons are treated as question-begging or non-question-begging.<sup>17</sup>

As I suspect Sterba would agree, it is only arguments that strictly beg the question. Confirmation of this can be found in his definition, quoted above, which implies that question-beggingness is a feature of arguments. So, on what I think I am entitled to take to be our shared view, a proposition – e.g. a proposition about the way self-interested and altruistic reasons are ranked – cannot actually be question-begging. But from this it follows that we cannot reject a proposition, such as the proposition that self-interested reason always trump altruistic reasons, *as* question-begging.

Could Sterba reply simply that a proposition can be question-begging in the following derivative sense: it can be true, in a particular argumen-

<sup>15</sup> More generally, Sterba observes, correctly as I think, that "whether a view" (or for reasons that I will come to shortly: argument) "is question-begging or not depends, in part, on the audience one is addressing" (58).

<sup>16</sup> Sterba believes that if an impartial standpoint were substituted for his altruist standpoint, and morality was seen as a compromise between egoism and impartiality, this would involve "double-counting of self-interested reasons" that would be "clearly objectionable from a non-question-begging standpoint" (3). I am not sure what this problem of counting self-interested reasons twice consists in.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, a "weighing" or "favoring of interests" is said to be question-begging (50, 48). The same applies to "a view" (58), "information" (66), the "denial or agnosticism" of the moral skeptic (67), "perspectives" (73, 141), the skeptic's doubt regarding the "existence of the external world or other minds" (74), "beliefs" (75, 79), a "standpoint" (140), "justification" (142), and "resolution" (160, 216).

tative context, that any justification of the proposition at issue that those arguing can offer will beg the question? The restriction to a particular argumentative context is important, because it would be very difficult to show that in *any possible* argumentative context (including, for example, one involving only egoists) there could be no question-begging justification for a certain claim (e.g. that self-interested reasons always trump altruistic reasons).

While Sterba describes the requirement to avoid begging the question as “a rational requirement for a good argument” (55), he also says it involves a *proto-moral* “ought”. This is important, because he wants to claim that even if one accepts that an argument to a moral “ought” can succeed only if one of the premises of the argument is a moral “ought” (56) – a principle he calls “the conservativeness-of-logic thesis” (54-59) – his argument still succeeds. It does so because the principle of non-question-beggingness is one of its premises and “[i]t is a requirement of fair argumentation... that we be fair and unbiased in our use of premises in deriving conclusions” (56).

I have no considered view on the conservativeness-of-logic thesis, and I will grant Sterba this principle for the purpose of argument.<sup>18</sup> However, my sense is that this might not advance his argumentative aims. There are three reasons why this is so. First, if the principle of question-beggingness is a proto-moral principle, and therefore in some sense a moral principle, might not the egoist reject an appeal to it as begging the question against him? True, the egoist might think he has reason to avoid unfair and biased uses of premises whenever doing so promotes his self-interest. However, he will also think he has reason to use premises in this way whenever it best promotes his self-interest to do so.

Second, I am skeptical about the idea that the norm of non-question-beggingness is really a moral norm. If your interlocutor makes blatantly biased and unfair use of premises, it is unclear to me that there is *any* moral reason why you should not do so as well (assuming no one else is affected). This notwithstanding, if, in response to blatantly question-begging argumentation by your opponent, you avail yourself of a question-begging argument, you can be criticized as having offered an argument that has no argumentative force. If my instincts here are correct, the norm of non-question-beggingness is not a moral norm.

<sup>18</sup> I am not so sure that there are *no* counterexamples to the thesis. Perhaps A.N. Prior’s “Tea-drinking is common in England. Therefore: Either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot” is one such.

Third, I no more think of the principle of non-question-beggingness as a *premise* of Sterba's argument than I think of *modus ponens* as a premise in "If it is an argument, it begs the question. It is an argument. Thus, it begs the question". Rather, the principle of non-question-beggingness imposes a condition on the epistemic relations between premises and conclusions which refers to the recipient of the argument: it says that it is not the case that the recipient will have reason to accept one or more of the premises only if he already accepts the conclusion of the argument. Hence, if the conservativeness-of-logic thesis holds, it seems that Sterba's argument, given the absence of an ought-premise, would be in trouble.<sup>19</sup>

These worries might seem to ignore Sterba's concession that it is not always a flaw in an argument that it begs the question. According to him, because the principle of non-question-beggingness "is meant to apply only in contexts where we have opposing views and there are also more ultimate premises that either are, or should be, common ground among the defenders of those views. In such contexts [and such contexts only]... supporting them non-question-beggingly is rationally required" (72).<sup>20</sup> So, for instance, if "someone who put her hand into a fire on a whim, suffering third-degree burn as a result, sincerely claims that she did not harm herself in the least" (72), it is not a flaw in an argument of ours for the claim that this person did harm herself in so doing that our argument begs the question, "because there is no common ground between ourselves and this person to which we can appeal to reach agreement" (72); accordingly, the principle of non-question-beggingness does not apply.

Given this restriction, one would like to know what the common ground is between the egoist and the altruist. What "more ultimate premises" ensure here that the principle of non-question-beggingness applies? Sterba does not explicitly say. He appears to think that the de-

<sup>19</sup> At another point Sterba is too anxious about the validity of his argument. He worries that "avoiding non-question-beggingness is too formal a reason to be moral and that we need a more substantive reason" (56). However, in my view the understanding of his argument implicit in this sentence involves a misconstrual. What gives me a reason to do what is morally required in a case where, as Hume imagines in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I could prevent the destruction of the whole world by having my finger scratched is the fact that by having my finger scratched I would confer very significant benefits on very many others and only suffer minor discomfort myself. Sterba's argument, as I understand it, does not explain why I should act morally. It "simply" shows that the fact that others will benefit from my action is a justifying reason for action.

<sup>20</sup> It is surely not a flaw in an argument that it begs the question in a context where the principle of non-question-beggingness is not "meant to apply". If it were, what would it mean to say that this principle was not "meant to apply" to the relevant context?

sire of each to justify their respective views to their interlocutor in a non-question-begging way is the relevant common ground. But even if we set aside the worries just expressed about the idea that the principle of non-question-beggingness is a premise in Sterba's argument, it will follow on this reading of Sterba that, as long as this desire is the *only* common ground, an egoist with no such desire who marshals a question-begging argument in defense of her view would not be offering an argument that infringes the principle of non-question-beggingness.

This concludes my discussion of the first version of Sterba's case against amorality. In view of the criticisms canvassed, I remain unconvinced that Sterba's argument defeats amorality.

#### 4. *Sterba's rationality-to-morality argument: Second version*

I have already mentioned that Sterba offers a second version of his case – or if you prefer, another argument for the conclusion he wishes to reach. He thinks this argument is more modest than the first in its premises. Specifically, unlike the first argument, his second does not require “the defender of egoism” to commit “herself to the principle of non-question-beggingness” (60). He sets out the new argument more briefly than the earlier one.

In a nutshell the argument is this: the egoist must accept that there are “occasions when aiming ultimately at the good of others can best serve one's own overall self-interest as well” (59). For example, if I sometimes have the interests of others as my ultimate aim they will be more inclined to benefit me, and because of this I might end up better off than I would if I always had promoting my self-interest as my ultimate aim. Hence, the egoist must allow “in altruistic reasons as *prima facie* relevant to rational choice” (60). She cannot, non-question-beggingly, introduce a principle to the effect that altruistic reasons are justified only when they serve her self-interest.

On what seems to me to be the most natural understanding of this argument, it is unpersuasive. A quite serious difficulty is that the argument ignores the distinction between motivating reasons (the considerations that move the agent to perform an action) and justifying reasons (considerations that justify the action).<sup>21</sup> As I see it, cases of the sort Sterba has in

<sup>21</sup> Olson, Svensson 2005.

mind show that these can come apart in the sense that, from an egoist point of view, an agent's being motivated by altruistic reasons is sometimes justified. However, to agree that this is so is not to concede that "altruistic reasons" are "prima facie relevant to rational choice" in the sense that they justify certain courses of action. But that, I take it, is the issue at stake.<sup>22</sup>

I am also uncertain how Sterba's second argument avoids appealing to the principle of non-question-beggingness, given his explanation that the egoist cannot simply restrict the relevance of altruistic reasons to cases where acting on an altruistic motivating reason is best from the point of view of the agent's self-interest, because this "clearly begs the question against morality and altruism" (60).<sup>23</sup> After all, if the egoist is not committed to the principle, what is to prevent him from offering a question-begging argument in defense of egoism? If I am right about this, the reservations about appealing to the principle of non-question-beggingness I presented in the previous section when discussing the first argument are relevant to Sterba's second argument as well.

##### 5. *The relationship between the rationality-to-morality and the liberty-to-equality arguments*

The argumentation of Sterba's book takes us from rationality to equality via two sub-arguments: the rationality-to-morality and the liberty-to-equality arguments. I have questioned the soundness of the first sub-argument, and if the two sub-arguments are closely tied together this might be thought to spell problems for the second, too, much of which, as I noted in the introduction, I find insightful. Fortunately, this unwelcome knock-on effect can be arrested, however, and in this section I suggest that the two arguments really are quite separate – so much so, in fact, that Sterba's book does not contain an overall rationality-to-equality argument.

*From Rationality to Equality* gives conflicting impressions of how the two sub-arguments relate to one another. Some remarks and passages suggest that substantial equality follows from the premises of Sterba's ar-

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the fact that it is sometimes best from a consequentialist point of view if individuals do not act in order to bring about the best outcome does not show that consequentialism is false; see Railton 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Strictly speaking, one cannot beg the question against morality or altruism, though one can beg it against someone who affirms morality or altruism. I am not sure which of these two interlocutors, if not both, Sterba has in mind here.

gument for the view that morality follows from rationality. Consider, for example, the comment that “a commitment to morality leads to broadly egalitarian requirements” (1). Others, however, seem to proceed from libertarian premises; and they do so in a way that leaves it open to question how, exactly, the conclusion of the rationality-to-morality argument can be connected with libertarianism. For example, Sterba writes: “Morality as Compromise cannot be appropriately used as a general decision-procedure for turning out particular moral requirements. Nevertheless, we need to go further and address the enforcement of morality question. Here, 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... completing [the Morality as Compromise] conception of morality with respect to the enforcement question leads to substantial equality” (100).

I am skeptical of the first of these views, which ties Sterba’s two sub-arguments closely together. In my view the two parts to be can be tied together as parts of a wider argument taking us from morality to a substantial form of equality only if (1) there is available a view ascribing the lowest weight to altruistic reasons compatible with morality being a non-question-begging compromise between egoistic and altruistic reasons in the way entertained by Sterba, and (2) this view is libertarianism. If (1) and (2) are true, and if morality as a compromise can be justified, and if, moreover, libertarianism implies a commitment to substantive equality, then it seems that a non-question-begging resolution to the dispute between the egoist and the altruist commits us to a substantial form of equality.

I have doubts about the notion that it is possible to identify a unique moral theory which gives the lowest weight to altruistic reasons, but for present purposes these can be set aside, because (2) is false. As Sterba agrees, libertarianism can be quite demanding in that it requires people not to act on strong reasons of self-interest even when these are in competition with only with weak altruistic reasons. Suppose, for instance, that if I do not steal a liter of someone else’s blood my legs will be paralyzed. If I do, I will suffer no harm and the person, from whom I steal the blood and who is in any case much better off than I am, will have only to rest for a couple of days feeling mild discomfort. According to libertarianism, I have an enforceable moral duty not to steal the other person’s blood. Only if the other person volunteers the blood may I use it.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> It is compatible with libertarianism to claim (or deny) that this other person has an un-

Yet, here I have a strong egoist reason to steal the blood and only a very weak altruistic reason not to do it. Because of this it is easy to imagine a view – quasi-libertarianism – that gives less weight to altruistic reasons than libertarianism does.<sup>25</sup> Quasi-libertarianism is libertarianism plus the claim that individuals have no moral duty not to harm others mildly when the harm that they will suffer from so refraining is great. Hence, showing that libertarianism commits one to substantive equality does not show that Sterba's justification of morality implies substantive equality, because, first, it is an open question whether quasi-libertarianism implies substantive equality; and second, just like libertarianism, quasi-libertarianism can be regarded as a way of completing morality as compromise.

## 6. *Conclusion*

This article has raised some doubts about Sterba's use of the principle of non-question-beggingness. In particular, it has challenged his claim that it can be used to defeat the amoralist. While Sterba sketches an alternative argument to this effect, I have tried to show that this too is inconclusive, principally because it fails to distinguish between motivating and justifying reasons. It goes without saying that none of this shows that we should accept amoralism. The point is only that we cannot reject it for the reasons given by Sterba. Finally, I claimed that while my objections disclose, in my view, serious problems with the rationality-to-morality sub-argument, room remains in which to explore further the strengths Sterba's insightful liberty-to-equality sub-argument; and that this is because, *pace* Sterba, the starting point of the latter is not the end-point of the former.

enforceable moral duty to give me this blood. This is a further reason why libertarianism as such does not ascribe the lowest weight to altruistic reasons possible.

<sup>25</sup> I ignore here, and in the previous sentence, the fact that, in a sense, libertarianism gives no weight at all to altruistic reasons, because the only libertarian reasons are reasons deriving from property rights. I can ignore this because, if that is the relevant sense, libertarianism cannot be seen, as Sterba sees it, as a specification of morality as a compromise between egoist and altruist reasons.

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