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This is quite a formidable book. Although there is little unclarity at the micro-level, although it is replete with ingenious and thought-provoking arguments and shows an extraordinary grasp of a wide and very complex literature, I was sometimes hard put to say how the various elements of the discussion were meant to fit together. H&M are writing for fellow professionals. If you are not already familiar with such phrases as ‘exceptional scope’, ‘phi-features of pronouns’, ‘singleton quantifier’, you will need to interrupt your reading (as I did) to acquire some background. You will also need somehow to deal with 549 footnotes over 248 pages. But there is a great deal to be learned from this book.

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From Rationality to Equality

By James P. Sterba

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James Sterba argues for two main theses. The first is that ‘morality is grounded in rationality’ or, more specifically, in what he calls ‘the principle of non-question-beggingness’. The second is that morality requires each of us to consume only enough to satisfy our ‘basic needs’ and, therefore, requires ‘substantial equality’.

Start with Sterba’s ‘defence of morality’. His first premise is that people can act from self-interested motives and from altruistic motives. His second is that arguments should not beg the question: that is, we should ‘not argue in such a way that only someone who already knew or believed the conclusion of our argument would accept its premises’ (33). According to Sterba, these two apparently insubstantial premises suffice to refute egoism and prove that we should act morally. How?

Sterba asks us to consider situations in which self-interested motives and altruistic motives would cause different actions. How should we decide what to do in such situations? According to Sterba, there are three possibilities. We might be egoists and consider only our own interests. We might be altruists and consider only the interests of others. Or we might consider both our own and others’ interests.

Then Sterba claims that

‘... the third solution can be seen to be the only 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. Only by employing the third solution, and sometimes giving priority to self-interested reasons and sometimes giving priority to altruistic reasons, can we avoid a question-begging resolution.’ (42)

He concludes that we are rationally required to compromise between self-interested and altruistic motives and that this is moral: that is, he derives a thesis he calls ‘Morality as Compromise’ (47).

Sterba is confused. The egoist and altruist ‘solutions’ do not beg the question. When someone says you should consider only your own welfare, he is not making an argument for egoism; he is asserting egoism. So he cannot be begging the question. Begging the question is a defect of arguments, not of assertions.

‘What can we all agree on?’ asks Sterba, in a spirit of non-question-beggingness. To which he answers, ‘that we *can* act from both selfish motives and from altruistic motives’. From here he concludes that anyone who says we *should* act from just one of these kinds of motives is begging the question. But this does not follow. We cannot tell if an egoist or altruist is begging the question until we see his argument for drawing his conclusion. But Sterba does not consider any arguments for the egoist or altruist positions.

Nor does Sterba’s misunderstanding of begging the question end there. He argues as though the conclusion of an argument that begs the question must be false. How else could he think his argument refutes egoism and altruism? Yet the conclusion of an argument that begs the question may well be true. Any argument of the form ‘p, therefore p’ is question begging. But if its premise is true, its conclusion is too. And the fact that it is begs the question does not show its premise to be false.

Nor does Sterba’s argument entail his ‘Morality as Compromise’ thesis. Sterba draws this conclusion by arbitrarily restricting the ‘solutions’ he considers. *Benefit yourself* and *benefit others* are not the only principles that might guide decisions. Many people follow authority, for example, by doing what Jesus would do. Others are patriots, doing what is good for their country. Yet others are aesthetes, aiming to do what makes the world more beautiful. Perhaps Sterba thinks that, like egoism and altruism, these ‘solutions’ would beg the question. Still, why split the difference between egoism and

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altruism and not between two of the countless other question-begging principles that might guide our actions?

Now for Sterba's argument that morality requires substantial equality. It proceeds in two steps. First Sterba argues in favour of a universal right to welfare. Then he argues that, combined with facts about the scarcity of resources, this right would require us to reduce our consumption to the minimum required to meet our basic needs. If we do not, distant and future people will be denied the welfare they are entitled to. With everyone consuming only the required minimum, we arrive at substantial equality.

Sterba's argument in favour of a universal right to welfare starts from the premise is that the poor are at liberty 'not to be interfered with in taking from the surplus possessions of the rich what is necessary to satisfy their basic needs' (106). This is a strange starting point, for two reasons.

First, it is obviously false. In the United States, where Sterba lives, no such liberty exists. If an American steals the 'surplus possessions' of a rich man, he will still be convicted for theft even if he wanted those possessions to satisfy his 'basic needs'. Nor do I know of any other country where the poor enjoy Sterba's alleged liberty.

I think Sterba means to say that the poor *should* enjoy this liberty. But that would hardly improve matters because this is supposed to be the conclusion of his argument. To claim that people should have a right to welfare is the same as saying that they should be allowed to take the possessions of those who can supply that welfare (even if the mechanism operates via the state). For a philosopher who puts such store by avoiding question-begging arguments, this is a peculiar argumentative strategy.

But, as it turns out, the real work in Sterba's argument is done not by this premise but by another principle. Sterba acknowledges that the (supposed) liberty of the poor to take the possessions of the rich conflicts with the liberty of the rich to keep their possessions. According to Sterba we can settle this conflict by appealing to the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. For, although the rich can refrain from holding onto their possessions, the poor cannot refrain from taking them. So the poor have no duty to refrain, and their liberty to take trumps the rich's liberty to keep.

This is an apparently bizarre position. The poor can easily refrain from stealing from the rich. But by 'can' Sterba does not mean can; he means can reasonably be required to (108). The poor cannot reasonably be required to refrain from stealing from the rich. Why not?

Not because refraining would entail great losses for the poor. According to Sterba, even sacrificing your life can sometimes be

reasonably required: for example, when it could be avoided only by taking innocent lives. No, it is unreasonable because when the poor steal from the rich, the loss to the rich is smaller than the gain to the poor. The former merely lose some luxury, while the latter satisfy their basic needs (113–4).

Though Sterba does not seem to notice it, this principle directly delivers his ultimate egalitarian thesis. Because money has diminishing marginal value, transferring a dollar from a richer man to a poorer man will cost the former less than it benefits the latter (all else being equal). This is true no matter how rich the poorer man already is. On Sterba's principle, it would be unreasonable to require George Soros not to steal from Warren Buffett, at least until they are equally wealthy. Since the same goes for everyone else, it will be unreasonable to prohibit theft until everyone is equally wealthy. We have arrived at Sterba's conclusion that morality demands substantial equality.

The problem, of course, is that prohibiting theft is reasonable even when the thief gains more than his victim loses. Here is but one reason. Licensing theft would create incentives which would soon make not only the thief but the thieves worse off: specifically, both would have less reason to be productive. The thieves would be stealing from a dwindling stock of wealth.

And, again, Sterba's argument belies his supposed refusal to beg the question. Would anyone who did not already believe that morality requires substantial equality be inclined to believe that it is unreasonable to prohibit those with less from stealing from those with more?

Sterba's right to welfare is universal, enjoyed by all humans, including distant and future humans and, in an attenuated form, by animals and plants, who we may use to satisfy our basic needs but not our 'luxury needs' (147). *Interflora* is thus an evil conspiracy against the rights of flowers.

Along the way to arriving at this conclusion, Sterba claims that 'we would expect animals and plants to fight us however they can to prevent being used [for our welfare]' (145). This is a strange expectation. If I met a flower arranger who expected resistance from the orchids or a farmer who feared unruly carrots, I would advise him to seek psychiatric help.

Because everyone on Earth, and all the cats and dogs and orchids and carrots, not only now but until there are no more living things, possess a right to welfare, Sterba thinks we must reduce our consumption to the minimum required to satisfy our basic needs. If we do not, we will be denying others, and especially future people, the welfare they are entitled to. Why?

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In 1798 Thomas Malthus published his *Essay on the Principle of Population*. He argued that humans are inclined to reproduce beyond their capacity to produce enough (principally food) to support a decent life for everyone. With population growth then accelerating, Malthus predicted trouble. He was wrong. In the following two centuries, the world's population grew to a level Malthus could hardly have imagined (from 1 billion in 1800 to 7 billion today) and living standards improved massively, with global *per capita* annual GDP rising from \$700 in 1800 to \$7,000 today (both in today's dollars).

Despite this striking disconfirmation, Sterba seems to take Malthusian economics for granted. He devotes less than a page to making the Malthusian case, and does so merely by pointing to the scarcity of various resources. He does not even mention, let alone address, the now-familiar argument against the Malthusian thesis. Here is how the economist Julian Simon put it:

'More people, and increased income, cause resources to become more scarce in the short run. Heightened scarcity causes prices to rise. The higher prices present opportunity, and prompt inventors and entrepreneurs to search for solutions. Many fail in the search, at cost to themselves. But in a free society, solutions are eventually found. And in the long run the new developments leave us better off than if the problems had not arisen.'

Economic theory and simple induction give us reasons to believe that future generations will be better off than we are, even if we continue consuming as we do. Sterba needs to explain where this thinking goes wrong. Alas, he does not even acknowledge that such thinking exists.

Sterba also fails to explain what he means by the 'basic needs' whose satisfaction should provide the legal limit of our consumption. He says only that 'unlike many present day welfare minimums, it is virtually guaranteed to be a very generous minimum, given that it is just what everyone gets and no more'. Sterba is overly optimistic.

In Sterba's new world, no one could profit or earn higher pay than anyone else, since either would allow them to consume more than others. But without profits and variable pay, we cannot have markets for capital or for labour, which would instead need to be directed by central command. Nor would people have any material incentive to work except Sterba's rule that honest endeavour is a condition of their welfare entitlement (136). Even the Soviet Union gave its citizens more opportunities for material gain. Sterba's regime would cause an economic calamity of North Korean proportions.

Sterba is untroubled by economic reality. This is partly because he does not believe in it. For example, among the other economic inanities that litter the book, he claims that producers will ‘respond to the appropriation or threat of appropriation by producing more’ (115). More importantly, Sterba gives such worldly concerns little weight next to the moral imperatives conjured up by his non-sequiturs. He brushes away the fact he would ‘impose a significant sacrifice on existing generations’ by observing that, ‘nevertheless, these demands do follow from the libertarian-based right to welfare’ (130).

Sterba begins *From Rationality to Equality* by lamenting the fact that ‘in today’s society academic philosophers have very little impact on moral and political decision making’ (1). Over the following 200 pages he gives us reason to celebrate this fact.

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Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False

By Thomas Nagel

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The American philosopher Thomas Nagel is like the child with the emperor’s new clothes – except that he keeps pointing to something he insists is there and that the others don’t see. For the last 60 years, virtually all philosophers of mind have trumpeted a solution to the mind/body problem – physicalism, the claim that mental states (thoughts, feelings, sensations) are nothing but brain activities, and that the so-called ‘mental’ thus reduces to the physical, and ultimately to scientific explanation. For the last 40 years, Nagel has been pointing out that you can’t solve a problem if you leave out precisely what needs to be solved – in this case, mind’s key feature, consciousness. ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ famously asked his paper of that title in 1974. Science, which aims to grasp everything as it really is – in itself, irrespective of how it *appears* – can ever more fully acquaint us with bats’ sonar perceptual equipment; but not with how perceiving with it feels. How can the uncentred objective ‘view from nowhere’ accommodate the perspectival ‘view from here’ (bat’s or human’s)? Certainly my body and brain processes are items in the scientific inventory, but not the fact that this body, among all the