

“Sterba’s Argument From Non-Question-Beggingness For the Rationality of Morality”

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I Introduction

James Sterba thinks the problem of whether it is rationally obligatory to behave morally is not whether it is rational to act on moral reasons rather than egoistic reasons, but whether rational agents should act exclusively on egoistic reasons, exclusively on altruistic reasons, or on some balance between them. For morality, he thinks, precisely is some balance between egoistic and altruistic requirements on agents. And Sterba argues that agents must accept some balance of such reasons on pain of begging the question. In this paper I detail and assess Sterba’s argument, ultimately coming down against it. I find fascinating what is promising about the argument, however, and what its failure (as I see it), shows us about morality, and about the nature of possible good arguments for the rationality of morality.

II Sterba’s Argument

Sterba gives the following argument for morality being rationally required, that is, for rational agents always having decisive reason to act morally.¹ First we imagine a conflict between egoistic reasons and altruistic reasons. Which, if either, should be decisive? He suggests it would be question-begging to say that only egoistic reasons are relevant, and equally question-begging to say that only altruistic reasons should be relevant. Therefore, the only non-question-begging view is that both are at least prima facie relevant to what we have decisive reason to do on a given occasion. Therefore, on pain of begging the question, we are rationally obliged to hold that view.

The argument occurs just that quickly. I quote (pp. 33-34):

Now the question...is what reasons each of us should take as supreme, and this question would be begged against egoism if we proposed to answer it simply by assuming from the start that moral [altruistic] considerations are the reasons for action that each of us should take as supreme. But the question would be begged against morality [altruistic considerations] as well if we proposed to answer the question simply by assuming...that self-interested [egoistic] considerations are the [supreme] reasons for action....Consequently, in order not to beg the question, we have no alternative but to grant the status of prima facie reasons for action to [both] relevant self-interested and moral or altruistic considerations...[I]t is necessary to back off both from the general principle of egoism and from the general principle of altruism, thus granting the prima facie status to both relevant self-interested and moral or altruistic reasons for action.

This is the only way one can argue here such that we do not already assume what we are trying to prove.

Sterba then discusses again cases where there is a conflict between egoistic and altruistic considerations (pp. 41-42):

Now when we rationally assess the relevant reasons in conflict cases, it is best to cast the conflict as [being]... between self-interested reasons and altruistic reasons....

Viewed in this way, three solutions are possible. First, we could say that self-interested reasons always have priority over conflicting altruistic reasons. Second...altruistic reasons always have priority.... Third...some kind of compromise is rationally required[:]... sometimes self-interested reasons have priority...and sometimes altruistic reasons have priority....

Once the conflict is described in this manner, the third solution can be seen to be ...rationally required. This is because the first and second... 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....

Next, Sterba suggests that egoistic reasons can be ranked in their own terms by strength, as can altruistic reasons. And he thinks that the only non-arbitrary way to respect the fact that each sort of reason is prima facie relevant is by having it that highly ranking altruistic reasons should trump low-ranking egoistic reasons, and that highly ranking egoistic reasons should trump low-ranking altruistic reasons. To propose any other criterion of how to balance egoistic and altruistic reasons would be to fail to recognize each of egoistic and altruistic reasons in their own terms, since in their own terms, each sort of reason is internally ranked; and so any other criterion would, again, beg the question against one side or the other, this time, by way of each failing to respect the internal rankings of the other. Therefore we are rationally obliged to have high-ranking egoistic considerations trump low-ranking altruistic considerations, and to have high-ranking altruistic considerations trump low-ranking egoistic reasons. The following might illustrate the sort of balance envisaged: I should save your life if I can do so at little cost to myself, but I should (or may) indulge myself if that can be done at little cost to you. These arguments are supposed to establish morality as that behaviour which is required by some balance between egoistic and altruistic reasons, and to establish that we have decisive reason to be moral, the alternatives being question-begging and arbitrary. Therefore morality is rationally required – required on pain of irrationality in informal logic, that is, on pain of fallacious arguing.

Again, the argument occurs just that quickly. Here is a quote (pp. 42-43):
Notice also that this standard of non-question-beggingness will not support just any compromise between the relevant self-interested and altruistic reasons. The compromise must be a nonarbitrary one, for otherwise it would beg the question with respect to the opposing egoistic and altruistic perspectives. Such a compromise would have to respect the rankings of self-interested and altruistic reasons imposed by the egoistic and altruistic perspectives, respectively. Accordingly, any nonarbitrary compromise among such reasons in seeking not to beg the question against either egoism or altruism would have to give priority to those reasons that rank highest in each category. Failure to give

priority to the highest ranking altruistic or self-interested reasons would, other things being equal, be contrary to reason.

Later, Sterba recapitulates and clarifies the second step of his argument (pp. 46-47):

Once...both self-interested and altruistic reasons are recognized as prima facie relevant to rational choice, the second step of the argument for the compromise view offers a non-arbitrary ordering of those reasons on the basis of the rankings of self-interested and altruistic reasons imposed by the egoistic and altruistic perspectives respectively. According to that ordering, high-ranking self-interested reasons have priority over conflicting low-ranking altruistic reasons, other things being equal, and high-ranking altruistic reasons have priority over conflicting low-ranking self-interested reasons.... There is no other plausible nonarbitrary ordering of these reasons. Hence, it certainly does not beg the question against either the egoistic or altruistic perspective, once we imagine those perspectives (or, more appropriately their defenders) to be suitably reformed so that they too are committed to a standard of nonquestion-beggingness. In the end, to avoid begging the question both sides must argue from premises that do not simply entail their favored conclusion. If either side refuses to do so, then begging the question is inevitable, although the blame...rests entirely on whoever refused to argue from premises that do not simply entail her favored conclusion.

Sterba's argument is striking for the fact that it seeks to derive the rationality of morality from an aspect of rationality that has not previously, to my knowledge, been deployed in this way, namely, pure rationality or reasonableness in argument. Sterba seeks to establish that anyone who denies the rational obligation to be moral has made an elementary error in argument theory, the error of begging the question, in the following sense. Sterba: *The principle of non-question-beggingness 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... that we not assume what we are trying to prove or justify* (p. 33). And it must be admitted that Sterba's argument is tantalizing, however we come down finally on whether it works. I don't think it works. But at the same time, I'm not sure even Sterba has yet worked out the best version of his argument. So I offer the criticisms that follow not simply as attempts to refute the argument, but also to explore various possible readings of it, to try to see which readings clearly won't work, and to see if any readings remain that might be worth further exploration.

III Sterba's Argument Is Itself Both Question-Begging, and the Wrong Kind of Argument for Establishing Its Aimed-At Conclusion

At first glance, the argument appears itself to be question-begging, or at any rate, unsuccessful. To see this, consider an analogous case: suppose we are trying to decide in the absence of evidence whether it ever rains on the moon. One might argue as follows: it would be question-begging to assert that it never rains on the moon, likewise that it always rains on the moon, therefore the only non-question-begging possibility remaining is that it rains a middling amount on the moon, so we should believe that.

This argument is problematic in several ways. First, it establishes that one should believe the false. After all, it never rains on the moon. Now it might be thought that this can be forgiven, for the arguer is presumed ignorant about whether it ever rains on the

moon. But the fact that this argument style can provably be used to prove the false, itself proves something important, namely, that there is no necessary correlation between something's issuing from this argument style and the truth.

Relatedly, Sterba seems to be trying to establish it as an a priori truth that one should always behave morally – after all, he is trying to establish that the alternative necessarily commits a fallacy. This means that the argument form used to establish that one should always behave morally should be incapable of yielding a conclusion provably false a posteriori. And yet as we've just seen, because it is so indiscriminately sweeping, it is able to yield such a conclusion. So it must be the wrong kind of argument form to use to prove that, rationally, one should always behave morally. This is especially evident when we consider that, since Kant, our moral duties have been thought to be categorical, that is, to hold of us no matter what. And this means that any successful argument for the rationality of morality would necessarily have to yield the obligation to be moral as a necessary truth. For were the truth contingent on anything, then our moral duties too would be contingent on that thing; but they're not, they're categorical, they hold no matter what, they are contingent on nothing – they're necessary truths. So any good argument form for them must necessarily yield necessary truths. But Sterba's argument form does not necessarily yield necessary truths.

A third, but closely related way in which the argument is problematic is that, were the argument's form a good form, it could be used to establish that it is rationally obligatory to believe anything whatever, depending on which arbitrary starting places are selected. This is a reductio of the goodness of the argument. For if an argument form could be used to prove anything whatever, then, really, it proves nothing. For it doesn't rule anything out. (Not even contradictions -- it could be used to prove P and also not P.) All you would have to do to "prove" the rational obligatoriness of believing something is to take the thing, B, the reasonableness of belief in which is to be proved, invent some spectrum on which B is a position intermediate between two extremes, belief in A and belief in C, and then claim it would be question-begging to believe A and question-begging to believe C, therefore B is the only remaining, non-question-begging thing to believe, so it's rationally obligatory to believe B. And it will always be logically possible to do this for any two extremes, provided they are not logically exhaustive of the possibilities.

To see all of this, return to our rain on the moon example, and consider that there are any number of positions one could take about rain on the moon. Three of these positions we have already seen: it always rains on the moon, it never rains on the moon, it rains a middling amount on the moon. But now imagine two new people debating about whether it rains on the moon. One thinks it rains a middling amount, the other, that it rains only a little. A third person points out that it would be question begging to assert that it rains a middling amount, question begging to assert that it rains only a little, so the only reasonable position remaining is that it rains more than a little but less than a middling amount. And now we have our original argument that it rains a middling amount on the moon, and this new argument that it rains somewhat less than a middling amount.

Something seems to have gone seriously wrong. The truth is that all of the views we've just surveyed are such that, if there is no independent reason to believe them, then it would be no less question-begging to hold the middle-situated beliefs than it would be

to hold the beliefs occupying the extreme positions. Further, not only is the starting point arbitrary, but so is the position that the starting points are used to argue for. In other words, the position for which any argument of this form is used to argue is itself a position the holding of which, other things equal, begs the question. Put yet another way, just because the extremes are question-begging doesn't mean the intermediates are not. True, if all but one position on some issue begs the question, then the remaining position that does not beg the question is the position that should be held. For by the very definition of question-beggingness, something's uniquely not having that property is the same as that something's being warranted, that is, as there being independent evidence of its truth and therefore of its being at least somewhat belief-worthy. But a position is not made warranted, belief-worthy, or non-question-begging merely by being an intermediate position. If you hold one unwarranted extreme view and I another, neither of us can make it rationally obligatory for the other to change her mind entirely or even somewhat merely by proposing something in between. (More on a different aspect of this, below.) For the fact that something is in between is not the same as its being well-evidenced.

Next, it is worth pointing out that it is inappropriate to speak in the way Sterba sometimes does of the question-beggingness of positions. For question-beggingness is not a property of positions. Nor, in spite of how Sterba sometimes talks, is it a property of views, beliefs or assumptions. It is a property of arguments. It is that property that an argument has when its being valid owes only to the argument's conclusion appearing in the argument's premises. And when the egoist believes she should always advance her own projects and never those of others except so far as this is a means of advancing her own, and when the altruist believes everyone should always advance the projects of others and never their own except so far as this is a means to advancing those of others, neither person is thereby begging the question. Each would beg the question only if she said these things should be done because these things should be done. And I doubt that either egoism or altruism can be defined as an argument to the effect that someone should do X because someone should do X.

True, if someone who already accepted that egoistic reasons are always decisive proposed to defend a choice by citing a given egoistic reason, then someone who had not accepted that egoist reasons in general are always decisive reasons could attack the defense by pointing out that it involves recourse to a claim whose truth has not been demonstrated, namely, the claim that egoistic reasons are decisive. She can say: this egoistic reason is decisive only if, in general, egoistic reasons can be decisive; and I haven't granted the general premise. And vice versa for someone who believes altruistic reasons are always decisive, an altruistic reason applies to the present case, so the altruistic reason decides the present case. But of course, each could also make this charge against someone inclined to defend a choice on the basis that the choice is demanded by considerations intermediate between egoism and altruism, and who gives no independent grounds for this. The middle position is such that, if it is appealed to without independent grounds in argument against an egoist or an altruist, it is appealed to question-beggingly.

But perhaps I'm misreading Sterba. When he initially says "question-begging" maybe he doesn't mean, "uses the conclusion in the premises on pain of invalidity of argument". Maybe instead he means "arbitrary" or "baseless", or "something for which there has been given no independent reason". But this will be no help. For imagine three positions, A, B, and C. And suppose A and C are both either arbitrary, baseless, or

something for which there has been given no independent reason. The fact that B is a position intermediate between A and C is not itself any reason to think that B is any less arbitrary, baseless or something for which there has been given no independent reason.

IV The Analogy Sterba Claims Between His Argument and What he Claims is an Axiom of Decision Theory

So I think Sterba's argument doesn't work. And yet it has some appeal. What could explain this? Sterba himself suggests that there is an analogy between his argument and what he takes to be an axiom of decision-theory; and maybe his argument is inheriting the air of plausibility from that supposed axiom. Sterba says (pp. 45-46):

The logical inference here 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 another. Here we have no non-question-begging justification for excluding either self-interested or altruistic reasons as relevant to rational choice, so we accept both...as prima facie relevant.... The conclusion of this first step of the argument for the compromise view does not beg the question against either egoism or altruism because if defenders of either view had any hope of providing a good, that is, a non-question-begging argument for their view, they too would have to grant this very conclusion as the only option open to them.

A couple of points about this. First, to my knowledge there is no such axiom in decision theory. Decision theorists distinguish between a) choice under certainty, where you know what will happen if you do any of the actions open to you, b) choice under risk, where you know only that, for each action you do, there is a certain non-zero probability, known to you, that a given outcome will result, and c) choice under uncertainty, where you don't know what will happen given what you do, only what might happen, and don't know the odds of any of these things happening given what you do. (Sometimes the latter two conditions of choice are both classed as choice under uncertainty, or both classed as choice under risk; but there are these finer distinctions to be drawn nonetheless. There are also some niceties about subjective and objective probabilities, but we can set these aside here.)

In choice under certainty, the action you should do is the one you know will bring about what you most prefer.

In choice under risk, the action you should do is whatever action makes as high as possible the sum of the products of the probability of each outcome that might result from what you do and the preferability to you of each possible outcome. That is, you should maximize your individual expected utility.

In choice under uncertainty, since you don't know the odds of outcomes obtaining given actions, you can't maximize – you don't have enough information to do the calculation. And so instead you should do what decision theorists call the most strongly dominant action available, that is, the action which is such that i) the best thing that can happen if you do it is better than the best thing that can happen if you do anything else, and such that ii) the worst thing that can happen if you do it is better than the worst thing that can happen if you do anything else. (Think of how decision theorists recommend agents to choose in one-shot Prisoner's Dilemmas: they should make the choice which is such that the best and worst that can happen to them given this choice is best no matter

what the other agent in the dilemma does; that is, they should defect, for this gives them a chance at their best possible outcome, the one where they have defected and the other agent has co-operated, and it saves them from their worst possible outcome, the one where they have co-operated and the other agent has defected.) If no action satisfies both i) and ii), but one action satisfies i), and one action satisfies ii), decision theorists disagree about what you should do; there is no consensus about whether you should take the option that leaves open the possibility of a best thing happening, or the option that prevents the worst thing from happening. (Think of the debates around whether Rawls was right that, in choosing behind a veil of ignorance where you don't know what the odds are of you turning out to be an advantaged member of a society, you should so design the society that, no matter who you turn out to be in it, you will be OK. Some philosophers think this is the right way to think about the situation, others, that it assumes an aversion to risk that has not yet been rationally justified. For why not create institutions that would greatly benefit some citizens while leaving others very poorly off, playing the odds that you'll be one of advantaged, and taking on the risk that you won't wind up being one of the advantaged?) Meanwhile, if no action satisfies i) and ii) but some action satisfies i), you should do the action associated with i). And if no action satisfies i), but some action satisfies ii), you should do the action associated with ii).

What if no action satisfies either or both of i) and ii)? Well, then you should flip a coin.

But isn't that just the sort of thing to which Sterba is appealing? No. For what justifies you in flipping a coin is not that you are entitled to assume that it is equally likely that doing a given action will get you what you want as it is that it won't. It is rather that you must decide to do something (or at least, let us assume that this is how the case is set up, as where there is an incentive for making some choice rather than none, or as where non-action counts as a choice); and there is nothing in the evidence about what will happen if you do one action rather than another that can do the deciding, so you must use some other way to make the choice, namely, a symmetry-breaking technique – like tossing a coin. And a symmetry-breaking technique is precisely a method whereby one confers choice-worthiness on a choice otherwise not specially recommend by any antecedent choice criteria – the coin comes up heads, and since you have pre-resolved to take the option the coin favours, you then take that option, even though nothing in the facts previously favoured that option. Note that the symmetry-breaking technique does not assume or result in both options having an equal likelihood of being correct. Rather, it is precisely designed to work in the absence of any such assumption or conclusion. (To be sure, sometimes we do have evidence of the equal likelihood of the truth of two claims, or of the equal attractiveness of two action options. And in these situations, again, we must use a symmetry-breaking technique in order to move forward. But again, the appropriateness of using such a technique, even in this case, neither assumes nor entails an equal likelihood of truth, or an equal attractiveness of options, respectively. For use of the technique is also appropriate when we have no evidence of the truth or attractiveness of either option.)

In fact, it would be irrational to assume here that a given action is equally likely as its alternative to get you what you want, since, it is assumed, you have no evidence that this is true. It would be arbitrary, because evidentially baseless, for you to assume

this. So you are forced to make a choice by some means other than by evidence of the likelihood of the several actions' producing various outcomes.

Allright, suppose we have no evidence that egoism is true, nor that altruism is true, and yet we must make a choice between an action of which an egoist would approve and an action of which an altruist would approve – those are the only two options available to us. It would be natural for us to flip a coin in that case. But isn't that the same as granting prima facie relevance to both egoistic and altruistic considerations? For its being appropriate for us to flip a coin between these two options is surely the same as us appropriately having ruled out neither consideration a priori. And this might seem to suggest that Sterba is right that only the middle position is non-question-begging in the debate.

However the foregoing argument is too quick. For the mere fact that an egoist would favour one of the options, an altruist, the other, does not entail that anyone who appropriately flips a coin between the two options is doing so out of respect for the prima facie relevance of both egoistic and altruistic considerations. For example, she could perfectly well be attending to other features of the two actions – maybe one action involves turning left, the other, turning right, and nothing in our person's value set favours her making one direction of turn over the other. In fact, it could equally be true that our person thinks of the actions being such that one favors her, the other, some other person – she recognizes that one action is egoist, the other, altruistic – without her undecidedness meaning that she grants that both egoistic and altruistic reasons have prima facie relevance. She might instead have utter contempt for both egoism and altruism. Indeed, perhaps this is why she is facing a dilemma: she has as information about the options only information of the sort she thinks is irrelevant to the appropriateness of one choice over the other. She herself abides by a different ethic – divine command theory, for example, which could in principle demand a choice favoring neither her nor the other person -- and is not given enough information to choose here by her ethic's criteria.

But suppose I'm wrong about this. Suppose anyone genuinely undecided as between egoistic and altruistic actions is precisely someone torn between the two, as if she recognized that egoistic and altruistic considerations were both equally prima facie relevant. But now imagine another person faced with such a choice, and finding herself favoring one option over the other. In fact perhaps she always favours one sort of option, or the other. Well then, of course, she would not need to flip a coin. But wouldn't she be in effect begging the question about what to do? Sure. But she would be doing that no less if she flipped a coin to decide. For in the absence of evidence she has no reason to favour egoism, no reason to favour altruism, but equally, no reason to think there is a fifty percent chance that egoism is true and a fifty percent chance that altruism is true. Yet flipping a coin would give each side a fifty percent chance of ruling the day. But she has no evidence that each should be given a fifty percent chance. Therefore her flipping a coin would in effect be no less question-begging as a way to decide what to do.

A number of fallacious arguments make the mistake of inferring from lack of information about options to equal probability of the truth of the options, the mistake of which I've just accused Sterba. One such argument was offered some years ago by John Leslie²: suppose I know that humans emerged at some point in the history of the universe, and that other species died off. This leads me to worry that sooner or later the human species too will die off. In the absence of any other evidence, can I make a prediction

about how much time humans have left before dying off? Yes, says Leslie: in the absence of evidence about this, we should assume i) that the humans now alive are typical of most humans, and since ii) there are more humans in the middle rather than at the beginning or the end of the reign of humans, given that iii) we are typical of humans, iv) we are therefore probably now somewhere in the middle of the reign of humans, not closer to the beginning or the end. So if we know that humans have been around for a hundred thousand years, since we have just established that we are probably in the middle of the reign of humans, we should assume that we have about a hundred thousand years left in our reign. And this should be used as a factual assumption in choosing actions. For example, it should give us some sense of urgency about completing human-mattering projects.

But all of this is a mistake: the absence of evidence about how long we will live is not itself evidence that we will live about as long as we have lived; and nor is it any other sort of reason for thinking that that's how long we will live. In fact, Leslie makes the same mistake over and over again in his argument. Notice that no reason whatever has been given for thinking i) that humans now alive are typical of most humans – they might be much more evolved, for example. Next, no argument has been given for ii), the idea that there are more humans in the middle rather than at the beginning or the end of the reign of humans. For all we know, humans were initially populous but have been slowly dying out; or they are now unsustainably populous and will quickly die out. Next, claim iii), that we are typical of humans, is unsubstantiated, for the reasons that i) and ii) are unsubstantiated, and yet are the only offered basis for iii). Likewise, iv), the claim that we are in the middle of the reign of humans and so have about a hundred thousand years left, is completely unsubstantiated, since it relies on i) – iii), all of which are unsubstantiated.

Similar sorts of error are committed by people who think along the lines of Pascals' Wager. Suppose there is no evidence that God exists and no evidence that he doesn't. Might we then think it appropriate to believe there's a 50% chance that he exists, and a 50% chance that he doesn't? (After all, he either does or doesn't; there are only two possibilities.) And shouldn't we then make choices in light of that assumption? For example, shouldn't we get ourselves to believe in God for the 50% chance that by doing this, we'll be saving ourselves from hell and giving ourselves a chance at heaven?

No to all. We have no evidence making it 50% likely. Contrast this with a case where we have a coin that we have observed to come up heads about as often as tails: we have evidence that it's a fair coin, and that therefore the odds of its coming up heads on the next toss are 50%.

But in the absence of evidence of God's existing, we should assume that the odds of his existing are zero. (That's not the same as saying his existence is logically impossible; it's just to say that, in the absence of evidence of his existence, his existing is not in the least bit likely.) But why can't we default to 50%? After all, as we've already said, there are only two possibilities, aren't there, namely, that he exists or he doesn't? Well, in some sense, yes. But it doesn't follow that one can set the odds of each possibility being true at 50%. In fact, the proposal that we should do this in all cases where there are but two possibilities can be reduced to absurdity by the following argument. Let's think for a moment about how many things would have to be true in order for God to exist: if there's a God then someone knows what you had for breakfast today (because God knows everything). What are the odds that someone knows this? It

has just been suggested that in cases like these where there are only two possibilities – someone knows or no one knows – we should set the possibilities at 50% each. But now, if this someone is God, he also knows what you had for breakfast yesterday, too. What are the odds that someone knows this? Let's say 50%, for the usual reason. Now what are the odds that someone knows both of these things? Well, 50% times 50%, i.e., 25%. But if something is God, there are infinitely many such things that would have to be true of him (for he's supposedly infinitely knowledgeable, and there are infinitely many things to know). What are the odds that something knows infinitely many facts his knowing each of which is 50% likely? Well, 50% times 50% times 50%...and so on, to infinity. And that number is one over infinity, that is, effectively zero. So in the absence of evidence, the odds of God's existing are effectively zero, even if we are to generally count probabilities in the absence of evidence in the way our opponent would like.

In application to Sterba's combatants, in the utter absence of evidence that egoism is true, or altruism, the odds of each being true is effectively zero; and so are the odds of the so-called intermediate position's being true, the compromise position which Sterba calls Morality. How can this be, you ask? If there are three positions, egoism, altruism, and the middle-position, aren't the odds of each being true at least 33%? Well, but in fact there aren't just three possible positions; there are infinitely many, each representing a greater or lesser degree of compromise compared to either of the egoistic and altruistic extremes. (E.g., there is the view that one should be in x degree nice to others, another view to the effect that one should be in $x+1$ degree nice to others; or be nice to n others, or be nice to $n+1$ others, etc.) So if we say the odds of a given one of these positions being true is one over the infinitely many positions there are, then the odds of a given one of them being true is effectively zero.

But mustn't it be higher than zero? (Ditto for the likelihood of God's existing?) After all, surely there is a difference between an infinitely small chance of something's being true and a zero chance. And this difference could make a difference. For example, if the possible reward of heaven is infinite happiness, then the expected utility of believing in God would be a finite number, namely the one yielded by multiplying the one over infinity chance that the belief is right, and the infinity over one utility of the outcome of one's being right. In fact, we might say (although the math is getting dicey), the expected utility of believing in God is, say, effectively equal to one utility unit. And as long as the cost of having the belief is less than one unit, there will be a net expected gain in believing. Well, if these infinitely many options are exhaustive, just perhaps. In a fair lottery over n possibilities, the odds of any given item's winning is one over n . Each is equally unlikely to win. Now suppose n is infinite – you win if you guess the right number between 0 and infinity. Then each is infinitely unlikely to win.

But at any rate, speaking of positions in the egoism/altruism spectrum, the odds of any of these positions being correct could in fact be 0 if the egoism/altruism spectrum does not exhaust the range of options. E.g., maybe the right choice isn't the one egoism would recommend, or altruism, or even something in between, but, say the choice recommended by virtue theory, or by divine command theory. And that choice may benefit no one – not those the altruist favours, and not either those the egoist favours; and so it is not an intermediate position between egoism and altruism. (For that matter, J.L. Mackie's error theory of morality might be the truth, namely, the view that no normative claim is true, not the view of the egoist, or of the altruist, or of any of the in-between-ists,

or of any of the normative alternatives to those on the egoism/altruism spectrum.) Indeed, the foregoing reasoning rules out another form of argument Sterba gives for his intermediate position, namely, that if we have no non-question-begging way of ruling out egoism, and no non-question-begging way of ruling out altruism, then we must accord both some probability of being true, or must take the truth to be some compromise between the two. Sterba thinks this follows on pain of begging the question. But this won't work. Just because we have no reason to rule something out doesn't mean we have reason to rule it in. Besides, while Egoism and Altruism are logically mutually exclusive positions, they are not in combination logically exhaustive of all possible positions. After all, as we've just seen, it could be that the truth about what we ought to do is to follow divine command theory, a theory that could in principle recommend choices that would be approved by neither the egoist nor the altruist, as would be the case if God demanded that we all behave in ways inimical to anyone's welfare. And this means that, instead of having to think egoism and altruism are both plausible because we can't rule them out, we could claim that neither is plausible in the face of the divine command theoretic alternative, something we would in turn have to rule out. Put another way, something can be acceptable by default only if every competitor view to the so-called default view is ruled out, and if the so-called default view is not itself ruled out.

V Sterba's Argument and Negotiating Situations

Another thing that might be conferring an air of plausibility on Sterba's argument is our sense of what it's reasonable to be like in negotiating situations. We start far apart in trying to reach agreement, and then we say things like, "come on, meet me half-way", or "let's meet in the middle", or "let's not be extremists", or "let's compromise". The appropriateness of this may source in the fact that, in these situations it is typically true that some deal is better for both parties than no deal, and no deal will be forthcoming without compromise.

But this factor is not relevant to Sterba's case. Sterba is not arguing that the egoist and the altruist are two people trying to cut a deal, a deal where the middle ground gives each enough to induce them to accept the deal, and where the absence of such a deal is worse for both. That would be a bargaining theoretic, contractarian argument, an argument not unlike the one David Gauthier makes for Prisoner's Dilemma situations: suppose you have your projects, let's say altruistic ones; and suppose I have my projects, let's say egoistic ones. Suppose each of us could do better at advancing our projects with the help of the other. But to receive the help of the other, we have to commit to helping the other in turn. That is, for me to get your help in my egoistic projects, and for you to get my help in your altruistic projects, each of us must commit to doing something that advances the projects of the other. I must in effect become a little less egoistic, and you must in effect become a little less altruistic. The deal is rational for us to make provided we each profit from the others' help more than we lose in giving help ourselves. This will be true if we are in a situation where our joint effort yields a co-operative surplus we can agree to split. Perhaps we each need money. I think all money should be spent on me, you think all money should be spent on poor people. Now we have a business opportunity requiring mutual trust. I want to engage in the venture because it will yield me more money I can spend on me, you want the venture because it will yield you more money

you can spend on poor people. The venture won't work unless each of us commits to not trying to steal the others' share of the profits. This galls each of us, because each of us must commit to allowing the other to spend some of the profit in ways we think are stupid, evil even. But each of us has a stake in making this commitment because our making it allows each of us to better advance our own projects. And so we make the commitments, even though for the altruist this means agreeing to some egoistic activities of another, and even though for the egoist this means agreeing to give away some of the money she would rather have had to the altruistic activities of another.

This is all well and good. But it doesn't speak to the relation between Sterba's egoist and altruist. For his opponents are not working out how best to live with each other, nor how best to profit in behaviour towards each other.

However, Sterba might want to give this contractarian approach more thought, since it affords another way of arguing for a balance between egoistic and altruistic considerations, for justifying a certain conception of what exactly that balance ought to be, and even for motivating people into compliance with that conception of the balance. Elsewhere Sterba is skeptical of the workability of Gauthier's views to the effect that it is rational to comply with agreements it is maximizing to make but not to keep, agreements of the sort required in Prisoner's Dilemmas. Sterba thinks that while there is some reason to make the agreements, there remains good reason to default on them, so that it has not been demonstrated rational to keep the agreements. But as Jan Narveson has pointed out, it may be enough to show that rational agents would see reason to arrange for the enforcement of these standards on everyone, including themselves, since that represents a better arrangement for each person, even though the enforcement will make it impossible for any given person to cheat. Indeed, the behaviours everyone's being advised to behave as an egoist would recommend, and the behaviours everyone's being advised to behave as an altruist would recommend, begin to converge in Gauthier's system. For egoists contracting with each other will in effect agree to contracts benefitting others when this benefits themselves, with the result that the egoists will wind up behaving in ways that are in effect altruistic; and altruists contracting with each other will wind up behaving in ways that are in effect in some degree egoistic, since they will want each person to have to some degree some of the benefits they would attain were each person negotiating as an egoist – even altruists want egoists to get some benefit, all other things equal, because, by definition, the altruists want everyone to benefit, including egoists. In fact, so long as all parties are presumed to have equal powers and equal capacities to consume benefits, the outcomes of these contracting procedures will exactly overlap: each person bargaining selfishly will get exactly what she'd get were the altruist doling things out trying to make sure that everyone benefits equally.

VI Sterba's Argument and the Rhetoric of Reasonableness

Now back to Sterba's own argument. Another possible source of its appeal is that it concords with the rhetoric of reasonableness: moderation generally sounds better than extremism. But while it may be true that there is reason in some sense of reasonableness for each of the egoist and altruist to meet in the middle, this is just to push the question back from, "is there decisive reason to be moral" to "is there decisive reason to be 'reasonable'?" And we've still been given no independent reason to be "reasonable".

Indeed, it's not really clear what sort of reasonableness is in play, that is, what end the reasonableness is supposed to serve. If, for example, it is supposed to induce moderate behavior in the person to whom the argument is carried, we've been given no reason to think that being moderate one's self will or ought to induce moderation in the other. It's not like there's any guarantee that if one party is reasonable in this sense, the other will or must be, too – it didn't work for Chamberlain with Hitler, for example. So why should it work between egoist and altruist? Besides, at best this would return us to something like Gauthier's argument, discussed above, in which case we might as well give a proper decision-theoretic, contractarian rationale of the sort Gauthier tries to give.

VII Sterba's Second Main Argument –Balancing Egoistic and Altruistic Considerations

Now I want to say something about Sterba's second main argument, that if we've established that sometimes egoistic reasons should prevail, and sometimes altruistic reasons, the only reasonable -- i.e., non-arbitrary -- way to play them off each other is by having strong egoistic reasons beat weak altruistic reasons, and vice versa. I dispute that this is true. Since egoistic and altruistic reasons are incommensurable, it does not follow that each is best respected by the stronger of one in its own terms beating what is, in its different own terms, the weaker of the other. But won't Sterba's "method of the middle" establish their commensurability? Actually, to claim that there exists a middle ground between incommensurables is dubious: if they truly are incommensurable then there is no such thing as a middle ground between them. It is one thing, for example, for me to worry, egoistically, that a given surgical procedure will hurt me a lot but do me a lot of good, another will hurt me only a little but only do a little good, and to think maybe I should opt for a middle ground procedure that will hurt only a middling amount and do me a fair bit of good. But it is another thing for me to think that a given event will hurt me, while another will hurt you. There is no middle in that contrast, for I don't feel your pain, and you don't feel mine – there is no relevant middle level of pain felt by anyone in such a case, for the kinds of pain are incommensurable. Or imagine two different criteria for the preferability of an object: one person says an object is more preferable the brighter its colour, another person, the greater its weight. Now suppose we have two objects, O1 and O2; O1 is brighter than O2, O2 is heavier than O1. What would it be to play these criteria off of one another in deciding which object is most preferable? Since one criterion is keyed solely to differences in colour, the other solely to differences in weight, there is no such thing as, for example, an object meeting the weight criterion by being very, very bright in colour, and no such thing as an object meeting the colour criterion by being very, very heavy. The criteria are incommensurable; no amount of colour brightness equals any amount of weight. So no level of colour brightness is the right amount to demand in lieu of any weight, nor vice versa. There is no such thing as a commensurated weighting of these things.

Still, one might argue that letting the strong in, say, altruistic considerations trump the weak in egoistic considerations, is, after all, a middle position, at least in the sense of not letting either sort of consideration exclusively always have its way. That is, while egoism and altruism are incommensurable, the ideas of egoism always being used to decide and of altruism always being used to decide are commensurable, because each

proposes a frequency of use of a decision procedure, and different proposals about frequency of use of something are commensurable, since there is a middle use frequency. Mightn't this be enough to establish that there is some sense in which egoism and altruism are commensurable and therefore such that there is a middle ground between them? Sure. For in this case we have two extremes on a common spectrum; since the spectrum is common ground, the positions are commensurable on that ground; and since the extremes aren't logically exhaustive of positions on the spectrum, there is at least one intermediate position on it. And so shouldn't we then move to that ground?

Well, let's concede the commensurability of egoism and altruism in that sense. But this is still no help. For recall that Sterba's method of the middle so radically underdetermines the correctness of any intermediate position as to be of no use – it doesn't tell us which intermediate position to occupy. (Think of the case of rain on the moon with which we began.)

Here, for example, is a way in which the egoist might propose to be respectful of the altruist: she grants that the more strong an altruistic reason there is for doing something, the more it tends to trump a given egoistic reason. But she could insist that it does this in some highly discounted way. E.g., suppose I can save some people by pressing a button, but in pressing the button, I'll contract an infection that will require my arm to be amputated. The egoist might concede that the more people who might be saved, the greater the reason I have to press the button, but insist that the reason isn't strong enough until the number of lives at stake is, say, that of fifty people. Or a billion people. Both of these views respect the ranking of considerations given by the altruist in the sense that both acknowledge that the greater the altruistic reasons, the more they are decisive. But these two positions – fifty people vs. a billion -- differ radically in how they proportion the response. And yet since the positions aren't in any other sense commensurable, there's no obvious way of saying that neither of these views respects altruistic reasons enough.

Sterba will of course say that any proposed discounting of the degree to which the other criterion trumps the criterion in question other than the one he proposes would be question-begging. And yet so is the non-discounting he proposes. For after all, in the absence of independent reasons, why should non-discounting be preferred to discounting? It just might be the truth, for example, that egoistic reasons should yield to altruistic reasons only in very extreme cases. In fact, that's what a lot of not obviously immoral people who otherwise have no theoretical stake in the matter think.

But one way of reading Sterba is as saying that, whatever might in the end justify some position or other on the egoistic/altruistic spectrum, that thing would have to justify an intermediate position in order not to be question-begging. So we can find out what position is justified by finding out what position is appropriately intermediate. The idea is that the intermediateness of the position is a formal constraint on the position being able to be justified. But while this is an intriguing idea, I cannot see its being made out. For as we saw earlier, this would require that being in the middle equals being warranted. But we've already seen several instances of this being false; that is, we've already reduced the argument to absurdity. Therefore it is false both that being in the middle is required for being warranted, and that being in the middle is sufficient for being warranted.

VIII Sterba's Master Argument as Proposing the Method of Agreement as the Means of Avoiding Question-Beggingness

Sterba may reply, however, that the sense of non-question-beggingness he is deploying is not that of a position's being independently evidenced. It is rather that of the parties in a dispute not assuming the very thing they are setting out to prove against the other. And while one way of avoiding question-begging in this scenario would, of course, be for the parties to provide independent evidence for the truth of their views, Sterba may be saying that another way of doing it is by moderating one's view so that it is not so very different from the view of one's opponent. I say the welfare of others is never relevant to which choices I should make, you say it's always relevant, and then I say, well, OK, I'll grant that it's at least sometimes relevant, although we still need to work out exactly when and how. Surely at this point I'm at the very least begging the question against you less. For I've come to disagree with you less. That is, our positions are closer to being the same. And to that degree, whatever is an argument for one is in part an argument for the other, or is an argument for a part of the other. And so each position is, to that degree, not a position against the other. In fact, even if there is no independent evidence for any of the positions, to the degree that the positions are similar, to that degree neither position is a position against the other, and so to that degree neither can be said to be begging the question against the other. If you think P and I think P, then neither of us is begging the question against the other (not even if there is no independent evidence for P, although in that case we may both be begging the question against someone who denies P).

Well, all that's true. But if that's the sense of question-begging Sterba is interested in, there remains the problem that neither party has the slightest reason to make the concession. It is true that if they agreed, they wouldn't be begging the question against each other. But how is that a reason to move to agreement? Even if moving to the middle would mean they weren't question-begging against each other, this would only be because they had ceased to disagree so much; and the fact that this would be true if we moved to the middle isn't in itself a reason to move to the middle. Imagine how you'd respond if I said to you that you should agree with me because then you wouldn't be begging the question against me. Or that we should both move to a position neither of us now holds so that then we wouldn't be begging the question against each other. Or worse, imagine me saying that the only way you could avoid begging the question against me is by agreeing with me!

Yet troublingly, sometimes Sterba seems to be saying that only by moving to a middle position can the parties make it that they are not begging the question against each other. But it's just false that the only way to avoid begging the question against someone is to move towards their position. In fact, there is another way, namely, by providing independent evidence that your view is right and theirs, wrong. Indeed, that's the only way to provide a rationaly compelling reason to the other party to change their views, and, likewise for the other party to provide a rationally compelling reason to you to change your views.

And yet Sterba says the following extraordinary thing (pp. 46-47):

In the end, to avoid begging the question both sides must argue from premises that do not simply entail their favored conclusion. If either side refuses to do so, then begging the question is inevitable, although the blame for that failure of rational argument rests

entirely on whoever refused to argue from premises that do not simply entail her favored conclusion.

What could he possibly mean here? Surely the only way to argue well at all, never mind in a non-question-begging way, is to argue from premises that entail the conclusion for which one is arguing. Otherwise, what one has is an invalid argument that should persuade no one. What makes an argument question-begging is surely not that it entails its conclusion, but that it does so only by putting the conclusion in the premise. And so one thinks that this must be all that Sterba means to be ruling out in this extraordinary passage. Surely he cannot be ruling out arguing from premises that, taken together, entail the conclusion, just so long as no premise taken individually is both the same as the conclusion and essential for the argument's logical validity. Yet he repeatedly says things to the effect that the only way for the egoist and the altruist not to be begging the question against each other is for them to move to a middle ground. This suggests that he really does think the only way to properly not beg the question is to change one's views, not to give independent argument for them. But as we've just seen, in that sense of avoiding begging the question, one has no rationally compelling reason to avoid begging the question.

To see what really not begging the question would amount to, let us revisit some of the oppositional positions we've considered here. Take the question whether it rains on the moon. Here's a non-question begging argument to the conclusion that it never rains on the moon: raining is what happens when water vapour condenses out of the atmosphere as the temperature drops; the moon has no atmosphere; therefore it never rains on the moon. Here's a non-question-begging argument for the conflicting conclusion that sometimes it rains on the moon: sometimes the moon is impacted by a water-ice comet; and this produces a brief local atmosphere in the moon's vacuum above the crash site; and as the atmosphere there cools from the heat generated by the impact, the water vapour in the atmosphere condenses and rains onto the moon's surface, all of this happening before all of the vapour dissipates into the moon's large vacuum; therefore it sometimes rains on the moon. These are paradigms of what it would be to give non-question-begging arguments.

IX Sterba's Argument and His Arguments Against Other Positions

Now, one thing I've left out of my summary of Sterba is his criticisms of other peoples' attempts to argue for egoism, for altruism, and for a balance between them. Perhaps it is his criticisms of these attempts that give him confidence that no other method of non-question-beggingness in the egoism/altruism debate can work. The idea is that the only thing left is moving to the middle ground. But for this to be plausible, Sterba would have had to establish that there is no possible non-question-begging argument in the standard sense of question-begging that could yield morality as the conclusion. And I doubt very much he's done this, because it's not the kind of thing that can be done by enumeration or brute force, that is, by having refuted each comer; for it's always possible that another argument will come along, perhaps one that will prove successful. The only sort of argument that could establish that what we have reason to do is necessarily some compromise between egoism and altruism would have to proceed by establishing that, necessarily, no other argument could fail to entail a contradiction, something I have not

seen Sterba give. In fact, on reflection, what I just conceded concedes too much. For even if no other argument in favour of his favoured balance could work, it doesn't follow that his argument works – as we saw, the mere fact that if the egoist and the altruist were each to move to the middle ground they wouldn't be disagreeing, and so wouldn't be begging the question against each other, is no reason at all for them actually to move to the middle ground.

X Non-Question-Beggingness and the Content of Morality, and Arguments for the Rationality of Morality

A final concern about Sterba's argument. Almost everyone agrees that morality is, at least roughly, some balance between altruistic and egoistic considerations. And many agree, and many more hope that it can be shown, that it is rationally obligatory to be moral. But is something the morally and rationally required thing because it is a balance between egoism and altruism? Does something have this status because it is the only non-question-begging position? Sterba in effect seems to think that something is morally and rationally obligatory because of these factors, and only because of these factors; for this would seem to follow from his claim that there is no other non-question-begging way to argue for such a thing's being morally and rationally obligatory; and one might think that whatever figures in the decisive argument for x must be of the essence of x. In this case, morality is that thing which is a balance between egoistic and altruistic considerations and supposedly it is rationally obligatory because supposedly it is the only non-question-begging position. But this we might well doubt. It's not crazy, but it can be doubted. For example, perhaps what really grounds the rationality of morality and fixes its content is Gauthier's contractarianism. And while Gauthier's version of morality – of the content of morality as a middle position between what egoism and altruism would recommend -- is similar to Sterba's, it is generated in different ways; and there are different arguments for its conclusions. The only sense in which non-question-beggingness is of the essence of the rationality of morality is that it is of the essence of any good demonstration of the rationality of morality. But this, of course, is also a sense in which non-question-beggingness is of the essence of everything. It is not specific to moral reasoning. Put another way, it is not the distinctive essence of anything in comparison with anything else.

On the other hand, perhaps this reflection lends strength to Sterba's case. For suppose morality is both rationally obligatory and some balance between egoistic and altruistic considerations. Well, if it is rationally obligatory, then presumably there is some conclusive or at least strong argument in favour of it. And this argument would have the property, perhaps among other properties, of not being question-begging. Can we work backward from these assumptions to this ground of morality?

Again, doubtful: even if morality is Sterba's balance, and even if it is rationally obligatory, and even if this means there must be a non-question-begging argument for it, it doesn't follow that this non-question-begging argument is Sterba's argument that only a middle position is non-question-begging.

XI Conclusion

So far as I can see, then, Sterba's "method of the middle" while intriguing, cannot establish morality as a balance between egoistic and altruistic considerations, a balance rationally obligatory to implement in action, simply by virtue of being a middle position between egoism and altruism.

Notes

¹ The argument is available in compact form in James P. Sterba, "Completing the Kantian Project: From Rationality to Equality", Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. 82, No. 2, (Nov. 2008), pp. 47-83. See especially pp. 50-54. However all of my references will be to the more extensively developed form found in James P. Sterba, From Rationality to Equality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Sterba's book is rich and interesting; but I shall focus only on the master argument at its center, simply because it is the only thing on which I think I have anything original to say.

² John Leslie, "Is the End of the World Nigh?", The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 40 (January 1990), No. 158, pp. 65-72.