

Reasonable Pluralism, Interculturalism, and Sterba on Question-Beggingness

David Cummiskey

The Journal of Ethics
An International Philosophical Review

ISSN 1382-4554

J Ethics

DOI 10.1007/s10892-014-9177-y



The final publication is available at link.springer.com.

Reasonable Pluralism, Interculturalism, and Sterba on Question-Beggingness

David Cummiskey

Received: 18 June 2014 / Accepted: 19 June 2014
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

Abstract

In *From Rationality to Equality*, James Sterba (From rationality to equality. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) argues that the non-moral, and non-controversial, principle of logic, the principle that good arguments do not beg the question, provides a rationally conclusive response to egoism. He calls this “the principle of non-question-beggingness” and it is supposed to justify a conception of “Morality as Compromise.” Sterba’s basic idea is that principles of morality provide a non-question-begging compromise between self-interested reasons and other-regarding reasons. I will focus, first, on Sterba’s rejection of the alternative Kantian rationalist justification of morality, and second, I discuss the logical principle of non-question-beggingness and I argue that Sterba is wrong to assume that there is a formal, logical requirement that a rational egoist must provide a non-question-begging defense of egoism. I argue that, like the Kantian, Sterba needs a more substantial conception of practical reason to derive his conclusion. My third focus is the problem of reasonable pluralism and public reason (Rawls in *Political liberalism*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1996; *The law of peoples with the idea of public reason revisited*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999). The Rawlsian principle of public reason is analogous to Sterba’s principle of non-question-beggingness. Sterba recognizes that public policies should respect competing perspectives and that a public conception of justice must be justifiable to all reasonable people. The problem is that that reasonable people disagree about fundamental moral questions. Rawls calls this the fact of reasonable pluralism. I argue that an intercultural conception of justice is necessary to provide a response to reasonable pluralism and a shared basis for public reason.

Keywords: Interculturalism; Kantian Rationalism; Morality as Compromise; Multiculturalism; Public Reason; Rawls; Reasonable Pluralism; James Sterba

D. Cummiskey
Bates College, Lewiston, ME 04240, USA
e-mail: dcummisk@bates.edu

Reasonable Pluralism, Interculturalism, and Sterba on Question-Beggingness

Different contexts require different argumentative starting points. For example, if I am trying to defend a Kantian Consequentialist hybrid moral theory, it makes a difference if I am speaking to a Kantian or a consequentialist. Since each starts with different assumptions, each will have different questions and objections. Nonetheless, the major philosophical questions are, first, whether any moral principles, consequentialists or deontological, can be based on reason alone and, second, what is the supposed Kantian rationalist basis of deontological constraints. On the other hand, if I were outside the narrow philosophical circle and debating public policy or constitutional principles, it would probably be a mistake to start a policy argument with the Kantian conception of a categorical imperative.

In general, if I hope to change minds, I have to be keenly aware that different people start with very different assumptions. In addition to disputes about rationalism, some people are religious, and some are not; some religions are monotheistic and some are not; some religions embrace a form of theological voluntarism, or divine command theory, others embrace a natural law theory or a form of theological rationalism. Leaving religious ethics aside, some people start with a tacit assumption of methodological individualism and others begin with more communitarian assumptions. For some, the autonomy of the will is the source of the dignity of humanity; for others, we matter because we are interconnected, mutually interdependent, and are all equally vulnerable to suffering. It is commonplace that for different people, and different cultures, there are significant differences in the comprehensive conceptions of the right and the good. These different starting points contribute to the intractable nature of many moral and political discussions.

In both the philosophical subculture and the broader public realm, we are faced with ongoing and unresolved disputes. As John Rawls has emphasized, it seems that free and unforced reflection results in Reasonable Pluralism (Rawls 1996: 54-58). However well reasoned my own views, indeed, however sound or self-evident I think they are, I should also recognize that thoughtful, reflective people disagree with me. I suspect that the most important question for contemporary political philosophy is the appropriate response to the fact of Reasonable Pluralism: *How can we formulate shared public policies when we disagree so profoundly?*¹

Sterba's solution is his model of Morality as Compromise, which is itself based on "the principle of non-question-beggingness." His focus is, first, on the conflict between egoism and altruism and, second, on the conflict between economic liberty rights and welfare rights. Sterba intends to answer the egoist and libertarian challenge and he defends a demanding egalitarian, socialist morality. To quote Sterba,

¹ This paper was first drafted for a Symposium sponsored by the American Philosophical Association Committee on Public Philosophy: "Can Philosophy Provide a Foundation for Public Policy or Is It Question-Begging All the Way Down?" at the American Philosophical Association, Atlanta, December 2013.

“[Morality as Compromise] is based on the claim that the principle of non-question-beggingness favors morality over egoism, where morality is understood to be a nonarbitrary compromise between self-interested and altruistic reasons. A crucial step in this argument for morality is to cast the basic conflict with egoism not as a conflict between morality and self-interest, but rather as a conflict between altruism and self-interest . . . I also argue that morality can be non-question-beggingly justified by appealing to premises that the egoist (and the altruist), in fact, share with the moralist.” (2013: 2-3)

Sterba goes on to argue that even minimal moral assumptions, assumptions that libertarians accept, lead to a non-question begging defense of egalitarian socialism, which includes robust duties to future generations and to protect the environment. Sterba explains,

“My strategy is to find conflicts of (negative) liberty within the libertarian perspective, and then argue that when these conflicts are appropriately resolved, they favor an allocation of liberty that supports a right to welfare. Since fundamental rights are universal rights for libertarians, I then argue that extending this right to welfare to distant peoples, and, particularly, to future generations leads to the egalitarian requirement that we use up no more resources than are necessary for meeting our own basic needs, thus, securing for ourselves a decent life but no more.” (2013: 5-6)

Sterba concludes with an additional argument that there is no non-question begging argument for the special moral status of human beings and that we must recognize the moral status of all living beings (2013: 139-43).

As this brief summary indicates, *From Rationality to Equality* is an ambitious project and it is chock-full of interesting issues and arguments. Sterba engages an encyclopedic range of alternative views and he never sugarcoats his conclusions. There is much worthy of careful attention in this book, but I will concentrate on Sterba’s most basic argument for “morality as compromise” and contrast it with an alternative response to moral disagreement. My own view is that Reasonable Pluralism requires a more intercultural conception of ethics and justice for multicultural societies. First, I am not convinced by Sterba’s argument because I do not agree that the principle of non-question-beggingness provides a simple and non-controversial resolution to moral conflict. As a result, second, we need an alternative moral response to reasonable pluralism. After contrasting Sterba’s argument from non-question-beggingness with Kantian rationalist approaches, I sketch an alternative intercultural approach to pluralism and questions of justice.

1. On Begging-Questions

What’s wrong with begging a question? Often, nothing at all: Arguments start with premises, which are assumed for the sake of argument. The assumption of any argument is question-begging against any person who does not accept the assumption in question. As a result, if I want to convince someone of a conclusion, I need to start with shared assumptions, search for common ground, or argue from assumptions the other is disposed to accept (at least provisionally). Of course, a circular argument that has the same premise and conclusion (p therefore p) is never interesting. On the other hand, an

argument that starts with comparatively weak, uncontroversial premises and leads us to a surprising or more controversial conclusion is an interesting argument. The power of arguments is that they exhibit the implications of beliefs, values, and assumptions. If we initially accept the premises but resist the conclusion of a good argument, we must revise our web of beliefs, and reconsider the premises and/or conclusion.

Can complex arguments be non-question-begging in some absolute or intrinsic sense?² An argument that begins with premises that no person can rationally reject is intrinsically non-question-begging. When it comes to a moral argument that is supposed to provide reasons for rational beings as such, the assumptions must themselves be necessary. Kant and many Kantians aspire to provide an argument that binds all rational beings in this way. If we are focused on practical motivational questions, and this is the focus of Sterba's *Morality as Compromise*, then "the determining ground of the will" must itself be universal and unconditional. Any argument that starts with particular desires, or contingent ends, cannot provide unconditional reasons. Kant (at least on Korsgaard's reading) argues that unconditional reasons must be intrinsically reason-giving; they must somehow be a condition of all other contingent values, or the source of the reason-giving status of all other subjective reasons (Korsgaard (1996). If a practical argument begins with contingent, subjective and optional ends (and Sterba's argument fits this model), it logically cannot justify categorical reasons. Only a universal, objective and unconditional end, an end-in-itself (perhaps rational nature itself), can provide the determining ground for categorical reasons; reasons which all rational beings must accept. Any meta-ethical approach that defends categorical reasons in this way is aptly called Kantian Rationalism.³

Like many contemporary philosophers, Sterba remains unconvinced by Kantian Rationalism (see Sterba 2013, chapter 2, "The Historical Connection to Immanuel Kant."). Instead of the Kantian argument for the rational necessity of morality, Sterba starts with the assumption that people can act in either an egoistic manner or an altruistic manner and he asks, which are supreme, altruistic or egoistic reasons? He answers that morality involves a compromise between the reasons offered by egoists and altruists. Although Sterba does not defend a theory of practical reason, he seems to assume here that the contingent ends of an agent are *prima facie* sources of good reasons or valid claims. One difficulty in evaluating Sterba's argument is figuring out his conception of reasons and inter-personal justification.

Here is a puzzle. Sterba rejects the Kantian conception of practical reason, and goes on to argue that a non-question begging argument must give weight to the reasons offered by egoists and altruists. In doing so, he assumes that the contingent and conditional ends of egoists and altruists provide a *prima facie* rational ground for practical reason and that morality involves balancing competing contingent reasons. These assumptions "beg the question" against Kantians unconvinced by Sterba's

² On begging questions, also see Josh Gert's discussion (this journal).

³ For an alternative to Korsgaard (1996), see Stephen Darwall's development of the moral significance of the second-person standpoint for an alternative Kantian approach (Darwall 2009) and his discussion of Sterba (this journal).

rejection of rationalism. I think that the assumptions are probably incompatible with realism or objectivism about practical reason (for example, Gert, Scanlon, Parfit).

Of course, Sterba rejects these approaches, and moves on to develop his alternative account. This is how arguments work. In developing substantial theories of practical reason and morality, we build on premises that other reasonable people reject. Sterba might object that he does not beg any questions because he has already responded to and provided reasons for rejecting all of these alternative conceptions of practical reason. But if I instead find the Kantian conception of morality based on unconditional reasons convincing, and Sterba does not, what is the significance of the claim that I am begging the question when I reject his view of practical reason and morality?

It is also important to note that when the Kantian moralist, or moral realist, rejects the idea of morality as compromise, the Kantian or moral realist is not assuming that their contingent altruistic ends are reason giving (and that the egoist ends are not), they are instead objecting to the idea that practical reason is merely instrumental and that morality is based on mere subjective inclination or a distinct type of preference. The point of Kant's argument in the *Groundwork* is that the motive of duty is not simply another contingent, subjective desire; it is not an other-regarding sentiment or sympathetic inclination. Both the naturally sympathetic person and the dutiful person have the same end of helping others in need. The difference is that the dutiful person wants to help because it is the right thing to do in that circumstance. The action is motivated by principle, not a contingent inclination. Morality commands unconditionally. Focusing on the particular ends of agents thus cannot capture the moral motive, Kant argues. Instead, we must turn to the intrinsic form of the principle of action.⁴ After additional argument, Kant concludes that the supreme principle of morality is:

Act only on maxims that you can also will to be a universal law of nature.

Sterba argues that the egoist also acts on principle, and according to a conception of law as such, namely "the basic principle of universal ethical egoism:

Each person ought to do what best serves her own self-interest."

Sterba continues, "[N]eedless to say, these alternative "laws" are quite different ... In any case, what we can see here is that both the principle of egoism and Kant's categorical imperative have the form of ultimate practical laws." (2013: 17)

The difference in these two "ultimate practical laws" is indeed significant; they are fundamentally different. The egoist's law is based on interests and as such is not an unconditional principle at all. For Kant, it is analogous to the hypothetical imperative; it commands that we take the necessary means to advance our ends, with the addition that it

⁴ Sterba focuses instead on Kant's conception of freedom and rejection of compatibilist conceptions of freedom. Sterba's argument here is interesting, but it does not address contemporary Kantians or Kant's main point that the form of willing and necessary ends are required to capture the idea of duty and acting on principles. Whatever be the metaphysics of free rational action, according to Kant, the impulse of inclination alone cannot capture the concept of duty and ground moral responsibility. For a detailed reconstruction of Kant's argument, see Korsgaard (1996), chapter 2, "Kant's analysis of obligation: The argument of *Groundwork I*" and for Kant's conception of freedom, chapter 6, "Morality of Freedom."

restricts one's interests to self-interest. (Does Sterba's egoist principle prohibit helping others if one is inclined to do so?) The distinctive feature of Kant's categorical imperative is that it is a formal principle that abstracts from the content of the principle and focuses on the form of the maxim. Moral laws are universal and are not conditioned by particular contingent desires. The formula of universal law asks, can the subjective principle of the will also, at the same time, serve as a universal law for all rational agents?

For Kant, the question is whether the egoist can will that egoism serve as a universal law. Of course, if egoism were a universal law, for familiar (Hobbesian) reasons, the egoist's own interests would be undermined. Kantians thus argue that egoism fails the categorical imperative test. Universalized egoism undermines the egoist's interest. The egoist is better served by familiar moral principles. I assume that this is familiar ground.

Sterba begins his argument, "From Rationality to Morality" (2013: ch.2), by rejecting Alan Gewirth's and then Christine Korsgaard's fleshing out of Kant's argument. Sterba argues that Gewirth fails to show that a conception of prudential oughts and rights are ruled out by Gewirth's principle of generic consistency. Korsgaard argues that agency presupposes a practical identity, and that, because of the public character of reasons, we cannot consistently have a practical identity without also having a moral identity that acknowledges the moral status of all other persons. By means of analogy with competitive games, Sterba argues that the egoist can satisfy Korsgaard's publicity requirement and fully recognize that others have reasons that the egoist often has reason to ignore. Sterba concludes,

"My critique of Gewirth's and Korsgaard's justifications of morality is that their appeal to consistency alone is too thin a reed on which to support a justification of morality. To properly justify morality, we need to go beyond consistency and embrace non-question-beggingness as well." (2013: 31-32)

Much has been written about Kant's conception of the categorical imperative and defending the Kantian approach is not my objective here.⁵ The point instead is that the Hobbesian egoist or Humean, and the Kantian have different conceptions of practical reason. Sterba's "Morality as Compromise" does not complete or supplement the Kantian project, as he sometimes claims. By basing morality on the contingent interest and ends of hypothetical egoists and altruists, he is engaging in a fundamentally different project. But, on the other hand, by assuming that the egoist and altruist aim to justify themselves to each other with a non-question-begging argument, he also seems to be tacitly assuming a non-interest based conception of interpersonal justification.

Sterba assumes that an "altruist" would like to be able to construct a good argument favoring morality over egoism; and he thinks that a good argument favoring morality must not beg-the-question against egoism (2013: 33-34). Now I suppose an altruist, or moralist, might want to convince egoists to change their views - but there is no reason why this must be so. An altruist may be inclined to help others in need and unconcerned with the motivations of egoist. Similarly, if I am inclined to act on what I take to be good moral reasons, I need not assume that these reasons are binding or

⁵ See Cummiskey (1996) Appendix on Kantian Internalism.

supreme in Sterba's sense that I have a non-question-begging argument against egoism. In addition, an argument addressed to altruists, which demonstrates that their *altruistic desires* provide *good reasons* for action, is itself an interesting argument. And the same is true for egoists.

If egoists do not care about justifying themselves to altruists, or moralists, they are not begging any questions. It seems to me that Sterba begs-the-question against egoists by assuming that they must justify themselves, or their conduct, to others. If egoists do not care about others, and have no interest in moral requirements, why must they justify themselves to others?

Although Sterba claims to be making a simple "nonmoral" claim about good arguments (2013: 70), I think that he is actually assuming that good reasons must be impersonal or impartial; and it is this assumption, without further argument, that begs-the-question. Sterba responds that egoists, who reject the demands of morality, think that they are being rational; they are confident that they are not acting contrary to reason. And Sterba takes this to mean that they have to be able to justify themselves to an altruist by providing non-question-begging reasons for being an egoist and rejecting altruism.

Sterba characterizes his project in two importantly different ways. On the one hand, Sterba is arguing that rationality requires an agent to have reasons for adopting one doctrine over another. So on this view, it's not really that the egoist owes a justification to the altruist. One owes a justification to oneself.⁶ On the other hand, Sterba unpacks this idea with the requirement that the egoist and altruist must produce an argument that answers the challenge posed by the other perspective. So, on the one hand, Sterba starts the section called "My Argument" as follows,

So let us begin then by imagining that each of us is 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 ... it is a question about what considerations it would be rational for us to accept as reasons for action at the deepest level—in our heart of hearts—since we are trying to answer this question as far as possible without self-deception or hypocrisy. (2013: 32)

The idea here is that we are asking what reason we have for adopting either self-interested or other regarding considerations as reasons. I take this to be a question about the nature of practical reason. Sterba, however, continues his argument in a different direction. He suggests, on the other hand,

"In trying to determine how we should act, *let us assume* that we would like to be able to construct a good argument favoring morality over egoism, and given that good arguments are non-question-begging, we accordingly would like to construct an argument that does not beg the question." (2013: 33; emphasis added)

This is the first sentence of his "Non-Question Begging Argument." Notice that this assumption is not the same as the initial suggestion that we should have reasons for adopting self-regarding or other-regarding considerations as reasons for action. The newly introduced rational requirement, that we must construct a good argument favoring our reasons that answers all challengers, is an additional and substantially different

⁶ I thank Paul Schofield for this suggestion.

requirement. Why is an egoist (or altruist) *rationally required* to accept this assumption? Why must an egoist produce an argument that an altruist will consider a good argument? This additional requirement is not an elaboration of the first idea; it is an additional rational requirement in need of justification. Sterba's principle of non-question-beggingness is a really a substantial requirement of practical reason.

Sterba later (half-heartedly) acknowledges that he has introduced a moral principle under the guise of a non-controversial principle of reason.

“What the principle of non-question-beggingness requires is that we be fair or unbiased in our use of premises in deriving conclusions. It is a requirement of fair argumentation ... In my argument for Morality as Compromise, the requirement of fair argumentation leads to a fair standard for leading one's life, which is recognizably a moral standard. So there is a sense in which in my argument the morality of the conclusion is contained in its premises as well.” (2013: 57)

In acknowledging this point, Sterba also objects that Kant, Gewirth, Korsgaard and others are not criticized for smuggling in moral premises in deriving morality from reason. First, this is especially puzzling since the common criticism of their arguments, by Sterba and others, is that you can't get substantive conclusions out of formal principles alone. This is an analogous objection. My objection to Sterba is that he has introduced a substantive principle of reasonableness, or fairness, that is no less controversial than the Kantian views that he has rejected. A second difference between Sterba's view and the Kantian views, I think, is that the Kantians do not appeal to a supposedly non-controversial principle of logic, as Sterba does, but instead recognize that they must defend a substantive (and controversial) conception of practical reason.

Unless one can show that subjective reasons require objective reasons, or that practical reasons must be impersonal or impartial, or that there are categorical reasons, the egoist can rest satisfied with some form of internal rational consistency. Recall that Sterba thinks the Kantian argument fails and that egoism can serve as an ultimate practical law of the will; that it satisfies both Gewirth principle of generic consistency and Korsgaard's constitutive identity and publicity conditions. If egoists are rationally consistent and are not acting contrary to reason, why must they additionally justify themselves to others?

Now to be clear, there may be good Kantian arguments that refute egoism. Alternatively, selfish egoism may be confused and internally incoherent. Let's assume that one can be either a selfish knave or caring and virtuous person. Hume may be right that if one is “modeling a life” and prefers the most satisfying life, then the virtuous life is to be preferred to the life of a sensible knave - even though there is no practical argument that will motivate knaves to change their ways (Hume 1751/1983). Buddhists may be right that selfish egoism is based on confusion and delusion, and that the best and happiest life is the compassionate and virtuous life (Dalai Lama 1999). There may be good arguments that vindicate virtue in this fashion. But logic alone does not require that we justify ourselves to anyone. There is no logical requirement that one justify oneself to others. Interpersonal justification is instead a substantial requirement of practical reason. In short, the assumption that interpersonal justification is required itself requires argument. To start with a basic requirement of interpersonal justification, as Sterba does, is itself question-begging.

2. Reasonable Pluralism and Public Reason

Let us now return to the idea of “non-question-beggingness” as it applies to Reasonable Pluralism in multicultural societies and the Rawlsian idea of Public Reason. Political philosophy is not Sterba’s focus and in his short two-page discussion of “Political Philosophy and the Justification of Morality,” he argues that morality as compromise provides a shared basis for public policy. Sterba writes,

“To come under the sway of Morality as Compromise, one simply needs to be able to appreciate the ways that one’s actions can benefit oneself and others and to appreciate good arguments for weighing those benefits. That is all that is required in order for the justification for Morality as Compromise to be accessible to all the members of a society.” (2013: 53)

In responding to Candace Volger, Sterba writes,

“At the end of her critique, Vogler cautions that the long history of past injustices should make us wary of what reason-based arguments in ethics can do to improve the world in which we live. She may be right. But, of course, philosophers have been searching at least since the time of Plato for an argument that shows that morality is rationally required with little success.

But suppose that now a consensus began to emerge that we finally did have such an argument justifying morality, and suppose further that another consensus began to emerge that there is still another argument that could be joined with the previous argument that shows that morality leads to substantial equality. Suppose that neither argument is very complicated or difficult to understand.” (2013: 71)

This is a puzzling response to Vogler. Is Sterba suggesting that his argument can put to rest Reasonable Pluralism? Of course, Sterba believes his own argument; but he also seems to believe that he has provided a simple and uncontroversial argument that can provide the basis for a shared social consensus on a secular egalitarian conception of morality. We all believe our own arguments; the problem for political philosophy is that other reasonable people also always remain unconvinced.

In contemporary political philosophy, even those inspired by Kant’s approach realize that the Kantian Rationalist approach to justification is at least controversial. For many political philosophers, there is recognition that free and unforced agreement on a shared comprehensive conception of morality is not a reasonable or realistic expectation. The goal is thus more modest. For example, instead of an argument binding on all rational agents, Rawls’ Political Liberalism (1996) addresses the argument to all reasonable agents. Roughly, a reasonable person is committed to treating other persons with equal concern and respect. When it comes to public policies and principles of justice, the goal is to formulate principles of justice and public policies that are either shared or at least justified to all reasonable citizens. Reasonable public policies should treat all persons as “free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position” (2001: 578). Given the fact of Reasonable Pluralism, mutual respect requires that we set aside our competing comprehensive conceptions of the good, and justify coercive laws and public policies from a shared public perspective, which Rawls calls the perspective of Public Reason.

As I see it, Sterba's argument from non-question-beggingness also presupposes Rawls' distinction between the reasonable and the rational and it is really addressed to reasonable people. Reasonable people recognize a demand for interpersonal justification.

On the other hand, in contrast to Sterba's approach, reasonable people do not start from an orientation of pure self-interested egoism (or pure altruism). With the exception of pathological sociopaths, most people care about other people. Of course people care about themselves, but they also care about family, friends and neighbors. In addition, the interests of any person are often seamlessly connected with the interests of others. As a result, most actions either benefit (or harm) both self and others. The idea of society as a collection of solitary egoists, with distinct and opposing interests, is a philosophical fiction. I assume that this is not a surprising claim. If we aim to justify ourselves to reasonable people, why focus on the perspective of the solitary egoist?

This is not to deny that there are conflicts of interest within families and friendships, but these conflicts can be addressed from the perspective of shared ends and mutual concern. I suspect that Sterba would point out that conflicts of interests still arise when considering the interests of those outside one's circle of concern. Like Peter Singer, Sterba is essentially arguing that we should expand the circle of concern for others so that we treat the interests of all people with equal concern and respect (and all creatures with appropriate concern and respect). Indeed, Sterba's objection to Singer's concrete proposal, specifying our obligations to contribute to global welfare, is that Singer does not adequately address the interests of future generations or issues of environmental sustainability. I believe that it is thus safe to describe Sterba's position as a form of cosmopolitan egalitarianism. We can therefore ask whether his argument for cosmopolitan egalitarianism is based on shared non-question-begging assumptions.

Consider Sterba's "non-question-begging" compromise between the "*liberty of the rich to enjoy their surplus*" and the "*liberty of the poor not to be interfered with in taking the surplus resources of others.*" Doesn't this description of the conflict itself beg-the-question? Assuming that - there is a prima facie liberty right to take the resources of others - is the same as starting with the assumption that there are no libertarian property rights; this way of posing the question assumes that the rich do not have a prior legitimate claim on their resources. Even if one agrees with the conclusion, framing the question in this way begs-the-question against libertarian property rights.⁷

What if we move beyond disputes between libertarians and egalitarians? For Sterba, the moral point of view is defined by reciprocity and balancing competing interests. As a descriptive matter, Jonathan Haidt and colleagues have argued that six moral foundations, not just reciprocity and care, shape the moral point of view. The psychological foundations of moral judgment are like taste buds, Haidt argues, that combine in different sub-cultures, and individual people, to give rise to competing moral orientations. In addition, to core universal consideration of care/harm and fairness/reciprocity, the other foundations include liberty, loyalty (in group/out-group discrimination), authority (respect and deference), and sanctity or purity (which is sanctioned by moral disgust). Haidt also argues that the current American liberal vs.

⁷ For a substantial discussion of Sterba's argument against libertarianism and for eco-socialism, see Miller (this journal).

conservative divide is partially explained by the greater moral significance conservatives place on considerations of loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Haidt 2013).

As a normative matter, one can question the independent moral salience of these other foundations. In fact, I believe that loyalty, authority, and disgust must be justified by more basic factors like care/harm and reciprocity. I am also partial to arguments, found in J.S. Mill and Rawls, that individual liberty rights are based on utility and/or reciprocity. These conclusions, however, require substantive philosophical arguments. When it comes to public policies and cosmopolitan justice, in addition to welfare and fairness, one must also consider the moral salience of loyalty, preserving cultural identity, individual and group responsibility, liberty and authority.

In addition, one of the more interesting contemporary cross-cultural debates is over the supposed primacy of individual rights. If one considers non-Western perspectives, for example, Confucian and Buddhist perspectives, one finds that responsibilities and relationships are considered prior to individual rights (Ihara 1998, 2004). (These perspectives share some of the communitarian assumptions of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.) Sterba assumes that his principle of non-question-beggingness can provide a shared mediating principle for settling all of these fundamental disputes. I have suggested, however, that his argument actually assumes a robust conception of reasonableness and the egalitarian conclusions that he claims to justify.

3. Interculturalism

Reasonable Pluralism requires a more intercultural conception of ethics and justice for multicultural societies. An intercultural approach seeks out some shared ground, some limited agreement, as a precondition and basis for compromise. Definitions of interculturalism emphasize the willingness and capacity of an organization, or government, to ensure that cultural difference is acknowledged and respected in a planned and systematic way. Interculturalism also refers to a policy or model that advocates, or advances, harmonious relations between cultures - based on an integration process that does not seek to eliminate differences. Interculturalism strives for multicultural integration, in a shared political society, without requiring cultural assimilation or comprehensive agreement on a shared comprehensive conception of the right and the good.

Let me offer a brief sketch of the outlines of this alternative approach to political philosophy. *Integration* involves an understanding of social procedures and the ability to navigate one's way through society with ease and comfort. Integration does not require *assimilation*. To be assimilated is to become culturally and behaviorally similar to the dominant population and to internalize the cultural values of the dominant or majority culture. With assimilation, ethno-cultural differences are comparatively superficial, or at least subordinate, aspects of one's civil identity. *Multiculturalism*, in contrast to assimilation, embraces distinct minority subcultures within a broader society. Multiculturalism usually includes minority rights that help preserve and protect a subculture from the other (more dominant) cultural groups. *Interculturalism* strives for integration without requiring assimilation, or any form of internalized subordination. Nonetheless, intercultural integration also promotes social cohesion and social unity.

In addition, an intercultural approach to public policy emphasizes the fluidity of cultures, the internal diversity, and the indeterminacy of cultural boundaries. Reasonable

Pluralism also exists within every culture. Some approaches to multiculturalism treat sub-cultures as themselves homogenous and uniform in their belief and values. Amartya Sen calls this “Plural Monoculturalism” and it too violates the principle of Reasonable Pluralism (2006). Cultures are not internally uniform and static. Indeed, in response to internal and external criticism, cultures adjust, change and progress. Current cultures are the result of past cultural exchanges, mutual influence and integration. For Tibetans, for example, Buddhism was imported from China and India and slowly integrated with the previously indigenous Bon religion. As Martha Nussbaum has emphasized, “Cultures are not museum pieces to be preserved intact ... real cultures contain plurality and conflict, tradition and subversion. They borrow good things wherever they find them” (1999: 37). In short, mutual respect for cultural differences is compatible with intercultural dialogue and disagreement.

Finding common ground in the face of reasonable pluralism is the challenge for an intercultural approach to justice and public policy. To use Sterba’s terminology, the challenge is to defend policies and principles from starting assumptions that do not beg-the-question against other reasonable views. Interculturalism thus presupposes a Rawlsian conception of a shared, inclusive, “Public Reason” for a pluralistic, multicultural society.

The starting point for public policy is a mutual recognition of reasonable pluralism. From this starting point, we need to construct or discover an overlapping consensus on a shared conception of Public Reason. Public policy should be based on Public Reason. When it comes to a “thin” or “exclusive” conception of Public Reason, supposedly based on mutual respect and reciprocity alone, however, I am more skeptical (but see Watson and Hartley 2009). As a secular liberal, a thin conception of public reason, which excludes and bars all reference to more comprehensive conceptions of the good, captures my liberal sentiments nicely. Nonetheless, I am skeptical that adequate substance can come from such a thin starting point.

Of course, since public reasons must be shared, they cannot simply presuppose particular religious or philosophical points of view. When it comes to constitutional essentials in particular, it makes sense to exclude all reference to particular comprehensive views from the realm of Public Reason. But when it comes to the background culture and broader realm of democratic deliberations, I would argue that we need a more inclusive conception of public reason, which allows non-public reasons as long as they (i) support the idea of public reason itself, or (ii) support or complement public reasons, and (iii) they do not threaten or show disrespect for others as equal citizens. These are broad-brush strokes. They only begin to address the nature and shape of the basic structure of a society committed to reasonable pluralism. Indeed, whether a multicultural consensus on a shared conception of Public Reason is truly possible is a topic for another occasion. (For a comprehensive discussion of the idea of public reason, see Gerald Gaus 2011)

Sterba’s approach to multiculturalism also presupposes a conception of shared public reason (Sterba 2001: 79 and 2013: 53). His starting point, however, is his defense of morality based on the uncontroversial (and universal) principle of non-question-beggingness. Sterba aspires to complete the “Kantian and Hobbesian project” and provide a rationally binding, categorical defense of his liberal, and robustly egalitarian, conception of morality and justice. Rather than responding to the (second-order) problem

of reasonable pluralism, Sterba is engaged in the (first-order) project of rationally vindicating morality. Again, Sterba's solution to the first-order problem involves deriving morality from the "principle of non-question-beggingness." This is an interesting project and Sterba's development of the radical egalitarian implications of morality as compromise is an important contribution to egalitarian ethics and political socialism. On the other hand, in the context of the second-order project of responding to multiculturalism and reasonable pluralism, I suggest that Sterba's solution is itself question-begging.

Conclusion

Reasonable people recognize a demand for interpersonal justification. In addition, reasonable people also recognize that reason alone does not lead to a consensus on philosophical questions, including meta-ethics, normative ethics, and religion. Reasonable and conscientious people will have deep and unresolvable disagreements about justice, ethics, and meaning of life. Leaving aside his substantive conclusions, the major difference between Sterba's view and my approach is that I think that the principle of interpersonal justification and reasonable pluralism together imply that one cannot resolve questions of public policy with a rationally conclusive argument. Instead, especially in a pluralistic society, we need to look for common ground. Intercultural justice presupposes an overlapping consensus on values and principles that will shape public policy and our shared political life.⁸

⁸ In articles (for example, Cummiskey 2011 and 2013) and a manuscript in progress, *Intercultural Bioethics*, I attempt to develop an intercultural approach that incorporates Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian perspectives.

References

- Cummiskey, David. 1996. *Kantian Consequentialism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cummiskey, David. 2011. The Law of Peoples and the Right to War: From Islamic Jihad to Buddhist Pacifism. In *The Morality and Global Justice Reader*, ed. Michael Boylan. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Cummiskey, David. 2013. Comparative Reflections on Buddhist Political Thought: Asoka, Shambhala and the General Will. In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven Emmanuel. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publisher.
- The Dalai Lama. 1999. *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Darwall, Stephen. 2009. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Gauss, Gerald. 2011. *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press.
- Hartley, Christie and Lori Watson. 2009. Feminism, Religion, and Shared Reasons: A Defense of Exclusive Public Reason. In *Law and Philosophy* Volume 28.5: 493-536.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2013. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books Random House.
- Hume, David. 1983. *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by J. B. Schneewind. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Ihara, Craig. 1998. Why there are no rights in Buddhism: A response to Damien Keown. In *Buddhism and Human Rights*, ed. Keown et al. Surrey: Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism, Psychology Press.
- Ihara, Craig. 2004 Are Individual Rights Necessary? In *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community*, ed. Shun & Wong. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Korsgaard, Christine. 1996. *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1999. *Sex and Social Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1996. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rawls John. 1999. *The Law of Peoples with The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rawls, John. 2001. The Idea of Public Reason Revisited. In *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. First published 1997 in *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64: 765–807.

Sen, Amartya. 2006. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Sterba, James. 2001. *Three Challenges to Ethics: Environmentalism, Feminism, and Multiculturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sterba, James. 2013. *From Rationality to Equality*. New York: Oxford University Press.