

Jan Narveson and James P. Sterba

Are Liberty and Equality Compatible?

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Are Liberty and Equality Compatible? takes the form of a debate between Jan Narveson and James P. Sterba on the question posed by the book's title. That, at any rate, is how it is previewed in the brief (and negligible) introduction. Yet this turns out to be a debate not about the conceptual compatibility of different values, but about whether a right to welfare can be derived from a 'libertarian conception of freedom'. While the exchange between these two justly famous philosophers is rich and sophisticated, *Are Liberty and Equality Compatible?* is thus perhaps mistakenly titled. Sterba's argument involves showing that equality is 'required by' liberty—a far more significant task than showing that these two values are merely 'compatible'. And even Narveson, who takes the opposing side in the debate, accepts that any incompatibility between liberty and equality—understood 'as ideas' and nothing more (123)—is contingent, not necessary.

The book is organized into four parts, the first and second of which are dedicated to setting forth Sterba's and Narveson's detailed arguments. Parts 3 and 4 feature much briefer responses by each philosopher. The arguments of both philosophers move effortlessly from tight conceptual matters, to foundational questions of moral theory, to discussions of other philosophers' views, and they even involve well-placed bits of empirical research.

Sterba proceeds first. His argument is that an ideal of 'negative' liberty—the liberty not to be interfered with—leads to and requires substantial equality. The argument's first step involves showing that there are conflicts between the negative liberty of the rich and the negative liberty of the poor: 'the liberty of the rich not to be interfered with in using their surplus resources for luxury purposes, and the liberty of the poor not to be interfered with in taking from the rich what they require to meet their basic needs' (117). Sterba claims that the liberty of the poor is morally enforceable over the liberty of the rich, arguing on the basis of 'one of the most fundamental principles of morality' (15)—the 'ought' implies 'can' principle—that reasonableness is here on the side of the poor. What this establishes, to make a longer story much shorter, is a 'moral and rational grounding for a negative right to welfare' (117). Sterba's conclusion is that each is entitled to a share of resources adequate to meet 'their basic needs so as to secure a decent life' (4), subject to the proviso that individuals do 'all that they legitimately can to provide for themselves' (32). What makes the proposal egalitarian (rather than merely welfarist or 'sufficientarian') is the extension of a right to welfare to distant and future peoples. This, Sterba argues, 'leads to substantial equality where each of us is guaranteed the resources for a decent life but no more' (259).

Sterba's argument is clear and compelling. He does not, however, say enough about how to differentiate with any precision the 'basic needs' to which we are entitled

on his view from non-basic needs to which we are not. No one will deny that some human needs are basic and incontrovertible. The need for a natural environment that supports human life, food, water, clothing, and shelter pick out the most conspicuous and universal of such needs. But well beyond this minimum, human beings need companionship, meaningful work, social acceptance and recognition, leisure and relaxation, feelings of safety and security, hobbies and interests, sexual activity, and so on. Sterba himself admits that ‘companionship and self-realization’ are among the needs judged to be ‘necessary to ensure a decent life’ (3-4; 108-9). And it is here that some counter-intuitive implications for distributive justice arise. It just seems peculiar for a distributive scheme to remunerate people because they have unfulfilling sex lives, or because they have difficulty cultivating lasting friendships. How might a theory of justice go about discriminating between lives that were ‘sufficiently fulfilling’, as against those that mandated a compensatory transfer of resources? The very idea sounds absurd—not to mention intolerably intrusive. To paraphrase one of G. A. Cohen’s quips: ‘Hi! I’m from the Ministry of Equality. Are you by chance feeling adequately fulfilled today?’

Sterba’s account of basic needs is also oddly suited to deal with what philosophers call *particularist* goods. Unlike various ‘all-purpose’ goods (Rawlsian ‘primary goods’ say), many of the good things we enjoy are *sui generis*: their value and meaning are indissolubly connected to who we are, to what we regard as valuable, to what matters for us. The value of particular friendships, to take one obvious example, cannot but depend upon the histories, interests, and associations particular people have in common. And this sort of particularity makes friendship the sort of good that is awkward for an impartial distributive scheme to accommodate—as if my government might dip into its stash of ‘friends’ and issue me new ones when my current pals decide they have had enough of me. While these issues about specifying basic needs are important for Sterba to clarify, they do not by themselves undermine his argument from negative liberty to a right to welfare.

Jan Narveson’s argument assumes a much more conventionally libertarian shape. His contribution to the book begins with long—and mostly illuminating—conceptual elaborations of the ideas of liberty and equality. Though he raises several important points about the meaning of liberty and equality, Narveson sometimes moves too fast here, particularly as he swiftly dismisses any attractiveness that the ideal of equality (variously understood) might be thought to have: ‘moral equality’ leaves us having ‘to scratch our heads a bit’ (151); ‘luck egalitarianism’ (152-3) and the idea of ‘equal freedom’ (149-50) are completely rejected in two whole pages apiece!

Narveson denies what Sterba centrally affirms: that anything of moral substance is to be concluded from the ‘banal’ and ‘jejeune’ point that the liberty of the rich and the liberty of poor come into conflict. Narveson is ready to concede that someone endures a loss of liberty—technically speaking—when they are prevented from doing something that would illegitimately reduce someone else’s freedom. Admitting that the murderer’s freedom is reduced when he is prevented from carrying out his desired killing is not, however, to strike a blow against the ‘liberty that the libertarian wants to require us to respect’ (170). Still, this ‘banal’ concession is not entirely innocuous. For, as Sterba

points out, Narveson must now differentiate between ‘approved’ and ‘disapproved’ liberties, to distinguish between the kinds of things we should be free to do, and the kinds of things that we are legitimately prevented from doing—by the ‘guns of the state’ if necessary. The concession softens the claim, thought by Narveson to be definitive of philosophical liberalism, that ‘there is no second-guessing of the individual: the citizen-consumer is king. If that individual seriously prefers x to y, then society is to take it that so far as he is concerned, x is to be chosen over y’ (160). But, of course, once it is granted that some liberties may be rightfully restricted, it turns out (thank goodness!) that *some* second-guessing of the individual is permitted after all.

Narveson’s story about approved and disapproved liberties is not without its justification, of course. The justificatory path leads, coherently and convincingly, from a Hobbes-inspired version of the social contract through to an endorsement of full property rights for all without a right to welfare. That old libertarian chestnut—original acquisition—seems to play a role along the way too.

In the end, it appears that the crucial locus of the debate—‘the central point of disagreement’, as Narveson says (260)—concerns two different ways of conceiving of the nature of morality and the tasks of moral theory. On Narveson’s view, each of us begins with an independent life of our own, i.e., with our own desires, ambitions, and projects. The ‘basic question for moral theory’, then, ‘is to what extent this independence is to be trimmed down in response to the impingements of one’s fellows’ (260). Sterba has no wish to deny or minimize the importance of independent individual lives, of course. Still, implicit in his contribution to the book is a more positive and capacious conception of the subject of moral theory. Rather than construing morality as nothing more than the limits of our individualistic independence, Sterba is concerned to locate principles that we ought to regard as reasonable (even if we at the moment do not), about what we owe to each other. Morality on Sterba’s view is not simply a question of setting limits on independent individuals’ choices and actions—though it is that too. It is also, more positively, ‘a nonarbitrary compromise between self-interested and altruistic reasons’ (101).

It is not clear how this deeper question about the nature of morality might be resolved in a non-question-begging way, but here, it seems, lies the crucial terrain in this fascinating debate.

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