Can Raz consistently suppose that fundamental moral principles are satiable?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Joseph Raz claims that the fundamental principles of morality and politics are satiable: there is a point at which one has fulfilled them. I argue that Raz cannot consistently endorse this claim, given his approach to saving lives.

Draft version: Version 2 (September 22nd 2022, grammatical correction).

Three ghosts came to sue

Because the lifeguard saved the two

> In his much-admired book *The Morality of Freedom*, Joseph Raz writes:
>
> The ideals at the foundation of morality and politics are all diminishing and satiable principles. All I can do to support this sweeping conclusion is to show that one popular candidate for the status of a fundamental principle is satiable and diminishing. (1986: 241)

What does it mean to be diminishing and satiable? I shall focus on satiable. Satiable principles, says Raz, can be completely met whereas an insatiable principle can always be satisfied to a higher degree (1986: 235-236). Raz thinks that the principle that one should make people happy is satiable but the principle to maximize pleasure is not. He criticizes the utilitarian tradition for interpreting the former in terms of the latter. He also criticizes various egalitarian projects for treating insatiable principles as fundamental.

But can Raz consistently suppose that the fundamental principles of morality are satiable? I shall argue that he cannot. The obvious reason for supposing this is that one thinks, "We only ought to do something if we can do it." The fundamental principles will specify what we ought to do and for them to be legitimate, it must be that we can completely do what is specified and so they must be satiable.

Now years later, Raz considers the situation of a lifeguard faced with three people drowning on one side and two on another. He cannot save them all. Raz does not support the usual path towards saving three: there is no reason to do the impossible and three lives are worth more than two, so one has reason to save the three, not the two. Rather he argues like so for saving three: each life has value and is equally valuable, so there is reason to save all five; partial compliance with reason is better than no compliance and the closer to complete compliance one can get the better; saving three would be closer to complete compliance than saving two; so, given the lifeguard cannot save them all, he should set off to save the three (2003: 353).

This path towards the same conclusion does not seem compatible with ought-implies-can or satiable principles at the foundation of morality. How can Raz combine these two commitments?

(i)   There are or can be impossible demands of reason, which the moral person tries to get as close as possible to fulfilling.

(ii)   At the foundation of morality are satiable principles: principles which can be satisfied.

It does not seem that Raz can have both. If one allows for impossible demands of reason, then one has to be open to insatiable fundamental moral principles. (Will we

be introduced to some subtle distinction between the impossible demand of reason and the insatiable fundamental moral principle? Still once Raz lets in one into his moral explanations, I think he cannot rule out the other.)

References

Raz, J. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Raz, J. 2003. Numbers, With and Without Contractualism. *Ratio* 16: 346-367.