

**What is the difference between conceptual and moral relativism? Rejecting the nature-value contrast, with help from Joseph Raz**

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*Abstract.* I aim to undermine an account of the difference between conceptual and moral relativism according to which conceptual relativism focuses on the description of nature and moral relativism on values. I do so with some help from Joseph Raz.

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Moral relativism is more well-known than conceptual relativism, but what is the relationship between the two? The two theses below provide a starting point for clarifying this matter:

*(Value-focused thesis)* Moral relativism is relativism to do with values.

*(Nature-focused thesis)* Conceptual relativism is relativism to do with the description of nature.

If we conceive of a dualism of nature and values, each domain excluding the other, there is a total contrast between the two relativisms. But I wish to argue against this account of the difference, this nature-value contrast between the two doctrines, by rejecting the nature-focused thesis. There can be conceptual relativism which is not specifically about nature, in a sense that excludes values.

**The nature-values answer elaborated.** To present the answer more fully, it will be useful to introduce a simple form of moral relativism. Let us suppose that in society 1, we find the following moral code:

- (a) The good of the society as a whole has priority over the good of any individual;
- (b) An individual has no right to perform one action over another if that other action is better for the society.

And let us suppose that in society 2, we instead find a moral code which gives all individuals a set of basic liberty rights, which no one ought to violate. The simple moral relativist says, “There are different societies, with different moral codes, and one code is not the correct one, which all societies should adopt. If you are in one society, an action is wrong if it violates the moral code of that society. If you are in another society, an action is wrong if it violates the moral code of that society.”

Now let us turn to conceptual relativism. It seems the two societies presented, despite their different moral codes, might grasp other aspects of the world in the same way. They might have the same biology, chemistry, and physics, for example. Conceptual relativism, according to the answer specified, differs from moral relativism because it is about how two societies have different systems of concepts for describing nature and it says that we should be relativists about these systems of concepts. The details of this relativism can be filled in differently, and this is one approach (see Davidson 1973-4: 5): “There are norms associated with the concepts of one society, which lead to one account of what there is in nature, and norms associated with the concepts of another, which lead to another account, giving rise to the question of what there really is and there is no non-relative truth of the matter. What there is just depends on which conceptual scheme one uses.” For example, our society supposes that there are two sexes: male and female. Another society supposes that there is one sex and that the female system is the male system inside-out, and vice versa (see Laqueur 1986). Their scientists use various concepts in descriptions that we do not, such as the concept of

female testes in place of our concept of ovaries. If you use that conceptual scheme, there are female testes. Conceptual relativism is an extreme doctrine, but carries some attraction when there is no clear practical difference. One can successfully conduct medical operations, for example, while relying on either system of concepts.

**Raz versus the answer.** Material from Joseph Raz, slightly adapted, can be used to argue against this way of distinguishing relativisms (2003: 353). Raz, or an adapted Raz, asks us to consider what a lifeguard should do if three people are drowning on one side and two on the other. The lifeguard cannot save them all. One route to the conclusion that they should save the three is based on these premises:

- (i) Each of these lives is of the same value.
- (ii) The value of lives can be added.
- (iii) A person has no reason to do what it is impossible to do.

Given premises (i) and (ii), the three lives of the people drowning on one side are worth more than the two lives of the people drowning on the other. Given (iii), the lifeguard has no reason to save all of the people drowning. So the person should try to save the three. Let us call that the Kantian route, owing to (iii), which is reminiscent of Kant's thesis that ought implies can. (I may not have captured every premise involved for a valid argument, by the way, but we can overlook other components here.)

Raz offers a different route to the same conclusion. The different route involves rejecting (iii). A person thus has reason to save all five. How can they do that? Raz introduces this further commitment: partial compliance with reason is better than no compliance; and the closer one can get to complete compliance, the better. So the lifeguard has reason to save all five, unlike in the standard route, but the closest they can get to complying with this reason is

to save three, so given the further commitment that is what they should do. The conclusion is the same, but the route there is different.

From what has been said so far, it is not clear why we should favour one route over another, though Raz himself favours his route (2003: 353). Is there any practical difference? We have an example to do with values which is like the examples provided by conceptual relativists: both systems seem to work in practical terms, but their foundational premises and their associated concepts are different. If you use the Razian scheme, your account of what there is, when the lifeguard is making their decision, should include the following: a reason to save all five. If you use the Kantian scheme, there is no such thing. So the nature-versus-values contrast we started with is objectionable: we cannot say that moral relativism is relativism to do with values and conceptual relativism with the description of nature, understood as a domain excluding values.

**Objection.** Someone might say that conceptual relativism is about different systems of concepts and this example from Raz is about different premises. A premise is a proposition and that proposition is built from concepts. For example, the premise “There is only one sex,” is built from the concept of existence (“There is”) and the concept of a sex and more. But the conceptual relativist will probably say that changes in premises at a very foundational level inevitably involve changes in concepts as well. In the Raz example, they might well say that Razians and Kantians have subtly different concepts of what a reason is.

**Conclusion.** The examples which conceptual relativists offer often involve different descriptions of nature from different societies. The concepts used in these descriptions are different, with at least one society using unfamiliar concepts to us, but there is no practical difference (or at least there is the promise of no practical difference prior to careful

investigation): you can work with either set of concepts and manage various tasks. The conceptual relativist declares that what there is just depends on which conceptual scheme one uses. Here I have observed that we can also generate such examples to do with values, so the answer that conceptual relativism is to do with descriptions of nature whereas moral relativism is about different values fails. There can be conceptual relativism to do with the realm of values.

### References

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