

## Agent-Relativity: Concept and Relevance

The idea of agent-relativity appears in many places. For instance, the success of the consequentialising project depends on there being agent-relative value. Further, the divide between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories has been cashed out in terms of the divide between agent-neutrality and agent-relativity. Moreover, deontic restrictions imply agent- and time-relative reasons.<sup>54</sup> Also, it is understood that being agent-relative is a characteristic that deontic restrictions share with other moral phenomena, such as an agent-centred prerogative. (There is an agent-centred prerogative just in case (i) an agent's  $\varphi$ -ing is morally preferable to her not  $\varphi$ -ing and (ii) her  $\varphi$ -ing is not morally required.) Finally, in the previous chapter, I have been arguing that the deontic restriction against killing the innocent is problematic because its implied agent-relativity does not sit well with the plausible victim-focused explanation of the wrong-making feature of the actions over which it quantifies. Given the ubiquity of the concept and its relevance for my project, it will be helpful to have a more precise characterization of agent-relativity.

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54 That deontic restrictions are agent-relative is, in a sense, controversial; compare Mack (1998). However, it seems pretty clear that the sense of agent-relativity that Mack has in mind is quite different from the concept of agent-relativity which is under consideration here. It is here assumed that every reason is either agent-relative or agent-neutral depending on whether the specification of the reason necessarily contains reference to the agent for whom the reason is a reason. Mack denies that every reason is either relative or neutral. This, in turn, is due to his assumption that agent-neutral reasons correspond to agent-neutral value and that agent-relative reasons correspond to agent-relative value – where the latter is taken to be identical to what is valuable or good for the agent. Against this backdrop, it is clear that one must deny that deontic restrictions are agent-relative – just as one must, against this backdrop, deny that they are agent-neutral. If all agent-neutral reasons are reasons to promote agent-neutral value, then, of course, deontic restrictions do not imply agent-neutral reasons. For deontic restrictions have nothing to do with the promotion of agent-neutral value (if that value is understood as the value of certain actions being or not being performed). And if all agent-relative reasons are reasons for the agent to promote his or her own well-being, then, of course, deontic restrictions do not imply agent-relative reasons. For deontic restrictions as such have nothing to do with the well-being of the agent who abides by them. (I say 'as such' because it might be the case that an agent, say, has made it his personal project to abide by deontic restrictions – in which case abiding by them would promote his well-being. Moreover, not abiding by deontic restrictions might come with emotional, psychological, social, or even legal costs. However, this does not mean that this is also what explains and/or justifies them.)

That being said, it is worth noting that speaking of agent-relativity as such obscures the fact that being agent-relative is a predicate that can be applied to a variety of objects. Thus, one might speak of agent-relative values, reasons, requirements, principles, or theories, respectively.

Further, one will have to concede that *agent*-relativity is not the only kind of relativity relevant to the debates mentioned above. The idea of time-relativity versus time-neutrality will be of equal import, at least with respect to some of those debates. Lately, it has been argued that we should also make room for the idea of patient-relativity, as opposed to patient-neutrality (cp. Hammerton 2016). Nevertheless, I will here concentrate on the idea of agent-relativity, hoping that the insights gained at the end of the discussion can then easily be transferred to others forms of relativity.

#### 4.1 Agent-Relativity: Some Examples

That spending €10 on a cinema ticket will ensure Peter's having an enjoyable evening is a reason for Peter to spend 10€ on a cinema ticket. That donating €10 to a charity organization will provide some child in sub-Saharan Africa with vital vaccinations is a reason for Peter to donate €10 to the relevant charity organization. Scenarios as these are usually taken to provide examples of agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons, respectively. The former reason is taken to be a relative reason, because, in specifying the reason, one has to refer to the agent for whom it is a reason. The latter, by contrast, is taken to be a neutral reason, because, in specifying the reason, no reference to the agent for whom it is a reason is necessary.

Further, it is often said that there are at least three moral phenomena that are agent-relative (or else imply agent-relativity).<sup>55</sup> First, there are deontic restrictions. For instance, it seems that I have reason not to break my promise even in order to prevent others from breaking their promises. Thus, a deontic restriction on promise-breaking implies there being agent-relative reasons. Why? Because if there were only neutral reasons – say, reasons to prevent promises in general from being broking – we could not make sense of a deontic restriction on promise breaking.

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55 I say at least, because, Dancy (1993), for one, argues that there are more than these three types of agent-relative reasons – and that we should be careful not to lump them together.