

The Concept of Security

Uncertainty, Evidence and Value

Jonathan Herington

Dissertation Abstract

Typically we think of security as a good like any other, something with a fairly determinate content which is enjoyed by individuals or groups. There have been many conceptions of what this good consists in but little agreement. In this thesis I conduct an analysis of the concept of security, arguing that while conceptions of security disagree about the content of this good, they all rely on an underlying thin concept: a mode of enjoying that content 'securely.'

I provide an account what it means for an entity to enjoy a good securely from both a fact-relative and an evidence-relative perspective. From the fact-relative perspective I argue against a commonly held conception of secure enjoyment as protection from the interference of the powerful and instead suggest that it should be understood purely as the objective probability of enjoying the good in the future. From the evidence-relative perspective, I argue that we should understand the security of a good as the minimum degree of credence an agent may justifiably assign to enjoying that good. Securely enjoying a good therefore implies a reasonable guarantee of enjoying that good in the future, even in instances where the available evidence is limited or imprecise.

I argue that the secure enjoyment of goods, from both a fact-relative and an evidence-relative perspective, has an important role to play in moral decision-making. In particular, the importance an agent places on the fact-relative security of a good models the agent's attitude towards outcome risks. Likewise, in situations where there are multiple credence functions compatible with the evidence, placing special weight on the secure expected utility of an act, appears to model the importance of avoiding an epistemic risk. In this respect, the value of security may amount to ensuring the achievement of a minimally decent future despite the limits of the available evidence.

Chapter Summary

My thesis can be broken into two parts. In the first part of the thesis I lay some important groundwork for thinking about the concept of security, identifying common conceptions of security and some important distinctions which have hitherto been overlooked. In the second part I provide an account of secure enjoyment from both a fact-relative and evidence-relative perspective. Ultimately I argue that the secure enjoyment of a good is a distinct consideration with respect to deliberations on how an agent ought to act.

In Chapter One I explore the many different meanings which have been ascribed to the word ‘security.’ The rich history of the word itself, in Classical and European thought, illuminates many interesting, and sometimes forgotten, conceptions of what it means to be secure. I delve into this history, not to show that security has one correct definition to which we should return, but to show that the word has several features which have become obscured and conflated over time.

In Chapter Two I establish a conceptual framework for thinking about security by distinguishing between the concepts of security practice, being secure, and secure enjoyment. I argue that whilst we sometimes view security as ‘essentially contested’ we can, by distinguishing between these concepts and their various instances, make progress towards exposing the precise truth and value claims which are at stake when security is invoked. Moreover, I argue that conceptions of being secure – as a state, an individual or other kind of entity – posit that the entity must *securely enjoy* a set of specified goods in order to be secure. It is this structure, where a particular individual securely enjoys a set of goods, which is the hallmark of conceptions of security and which potentially grounds the special value of security.

In Chapter Three I explore the distinction between objective and subjective security, arguing that it obscures two important sets of distinctions. First, the objective-subjective distinction describes a distinction between the secure enjoyment of a set of concrete goods and the secure enjoyment of affective and psychological goods. Whilst some conceptions of being secure refer only to the secure enjoyment of external circumstances, others require that agents possess a “sense” of security. This can be distinguished from the view that the subjective-objective distinction refers to the perspective from which one judges whether a particular good is enjoyed securely. In particular, it appears that one can assess the secure enjoyment of a good from either a fact-relative, belief-relative or evidence-relative perspective. I posit that this more fine-grained set of distinctions allows us to build a model of the connection between the fact-relative, evidence-relative and belief-relative enjoyment of a set of goods, and the possession by an agent of the affective sense of security.

In Chapter Four I begin to give more content to the notion of fact-relative secure enjoyment by interrogating two potential conceptions of secure enjoyment. The promotional conception of security suggests that to securely enjoy a good is to have a high chance of enjoying that good in the future. The protective conception of security, on the other hand, suggests that to securely enjoy a good is to have a high chance of enjoying that good regardless of the dispositions of powerful agents towards you. Whilst the protective conception is intuitively appealing, I provide an error theory which suggests that the legitimate purposes of our conceptual analysis would best be served by adopting the promotional account.

In Chapter Five I take the promotional account from Chapter Four and seek to apply it to circumstances where our evidence about the future is limited or imprecise. I argue that given the available evidence, an agent may be justified in possessing a particular model of the future, which includes a set of epistemically possible futures and a credence function which assigns a probability to each future of being the actual future. Where the available evidence is compatible with multiple models of the future, then the degree to which a good is securely enjoyed is the minimum probability of enjoying the good were any of these models the actual way in which the future was structured.

In Chapter Six I ask what role fact-relative security and evidence-relative security have in determining which acts an agent ought to perform. Initially assuming a standard model whereby the best act is the act which brings about the best possible future, I ask whether secure enjoyment contributes to the fact-relative goodness of a possible world. I argue that it is likely that it does not, but that, nonetheless it may bear on what an agent ought fact-relatively to do. In particular, I propose that considering the fact-relative security of goods amounts to considering the moral appropriateness of taking risks with respect to unfavourable outcomes. Placing weight on the evidence-relative secure enjoyment of a good, as opposed to the maximisation of its expected enjoyment, amounts to considering the moral appropriateness of taking risks with respect to unfavourable outcomes and with respect to limited or imprecise evidence.