

Conversion Injustice

A Generative Relational Account of Value Conversion

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Abstract

One party takes a value belonging to a category and returns a value belonging to another, holding that the second is equivalent to the first. Wages returned for labour, money returned for land, compensation returned for the dead: the transaction may balance and still be felt as a wrong, and the wrong is not located where distributive theory looks for it. This paper locates it in the proposition of equivalence itself. It argues, first, that the capacity to write such a proposition is not held in advance but generated by the act of crossing categories, so that the question of who owns the right of interpretation is the wrong question; and second, that alienation cannot serve as the criterion of injustice, since if every interpretation carries power then alienation distinguishes nothing. The criterion offered instead is closure: a conversion is unjust when the party who received the return can no longer put the equivalence itself back in question, but at most appeal within a rate already fixed. Two forms of closure are distinguished, procedural and structural, the latter arising where the conversion removes the very subject who would reopen it; incommensurability is recast as the limiting case of the second rather than as an independent prohibition. The account is stated with its cost: closed rates tend to be stable and open ones to fail, so revisability raises the frequency of conflict while lowering its intensity, and no inference from stability to legitimacy is available. The paper does not claim to settle value conversion but to identify it as a neglected structure, and closes by setting out the eight questions that follow if the structure is real, the last of which asks under what conditions a conversion rule can be kept open at all.

Keywords: value conversion; equivalence; closure; revisability; compensation; apology; incommensurability; justice.

A note on the standing of this paper. This is a position paper. It identifies a structure, advances a single criterion for it, and states the price of holding that criterion. It does not survey the literatures on distributive justice, recognition, or epistemic injustice; it marks where each stops and proceeds. The argument is carried by six definitions and claims and by one case, the asymmetry between compensation and apology, which is not given a section of its own but is put to work where it bears. Its ambition is to name a structure and open a programme rather than to complete a theory, and the closing section of questions is accordingly the part of it the author takes most seriously. Should the criterion be shown to coincide with one already available, or to license verdicts its author would refuse, the paper fails and would wish to be told so. Objection, correction, and counter-evidence are welcome at huangwanhong@serendip.ngo.

1 THE IMPASSE

A negotiation is under way that will not end. One party demands acknowledgement of a wrong; the other offers a sum. The sum rises. The demand does not move. Each increment is read by the party offering it as movement toward the other and by the party refusing it as a further instance of the same refusal, so that generosity and insult are produced by one and the same act. Observers describe the impasse as intransigence on one side or bad faith on the other. Both descriptions presuppose that the parties are quarrelling over an amount.

They are not. What is in dispute is whether a sum is the kind of thing that can stand in this place at all. One party has written a proposition, that money may be returned for dignity, and treats the remaining question as arithmetic; the other has not granted the proposition and cannot state its refusal in the terms the arithmetic allows, since to name a figure at which the exchange would be acceptable is already to concede that the exchange is of the right kind. Refusal therefore presents as unreasonableness, and every increase in the offer sharpens the appearance.

The available frameworks each reach this scene and stop. Distributive justice asks who receives what and how much, and so takes the currency of the distribution as given at the moment it begins to work. The justice of exchange asks whether the parties consented, and so is satisfied by a consent that may have been given to a proposition one party did not write. Recognition theory sees that what is demanded is not a good but a standing, and locates the wrong in the withholding of that standing, without asking how the substitution of a good for a standing came to be sayable in the first place. Epistemic injustice comes nearest, since it concerns who is credited as a knower and a teller; but its question is who may speak, and the question here is who may lay down what may be exchanged for what. That question has no settled place.

2 THE PROPOSITION OF EQUIVALENCE

Set the structure down at its minimum. A party takes from another a value belonging to one category and returns a value belonging to a second, asserting that the two stand equal.

Definition 1 (Conversion proposition). *Where A takes from B a value of category C and returns to B a value of category D , asserting $C \equiv D$, A is said to have written a conversion proposition.*

The equivalence asserted is not mathematical. Nothing in the categories themselves fixes a rate at which labour becomes wage, land becomes compensation, or injury becomes settlement; the rate is established by an interpretation, and once established it is treated as though it had been

found rather than made. The whole of what follows turns on the difference between a rate found and a rate written.

Claim 1. *The injustice, where there is one, occurs at the moment the equivalence is written, and not at the taking or at the return. A transaction whose accounts balance may therefore be unjust, and its balance is no answer to the charge.*

The claim severs the analysis from the tradition it is closest to. If the wrong were in the taking, the remedy would be consent; if in the return, the remedy would be a larger return. The impasse of §1 shows that neither remedy touches it, since consent was given and the return has risen. Both leave the written proposition standing, and it is the written proposition that the refusing party is refusing. This also explains the perverse dynamic already noted: raising the offer is an act performed *inside* the proposition, and each performance re-asserts it.

3 THE GENERATION OF LEGISLATIVE STANDING

It is tempting to say that *A* writes the proposition because *A* holds power over *B*, and to make the analysis a search for the antecedent asymmetry. The order is the reverse of this.

Claim 2. *The capacity to write a conversion proposition is not held antecedently but generated by the act of crossing categories: whoever performs the conversion thereby acquires the language in which conversion is described.*

The firm converts labour into wage, and comes to hold what a reasonable wage is. The physician converts illness into treatment, and comes to hold what recovery is. The court converts an offence into a penalty, and comes to hold what proportionality is. In none of these is the standing conferred first and exercised after. It accrues because one party occupies a position from which both categories are visible at once, and a proposition of equivalence can be written only from such a position. The party whose value is taken typically stands in one category alone; that is not a contingent weakness but the shape the act of conversion imposes.

Two consequences follow. The first is that negotiation is a weak safeguard, since it proceeds in the language the conversion has already generated: the labourer bargains over the wage and by bargaining affirms that labour is the kind of thing a wage answers. The second is that *who holds the right of interpretation* is the wrong question. The holder is whoever performs the conversion, and there is no arrangement of conversion in which nobody performs it. A criterion resting on the distribution of that right will therefore condemn every conversion, which is to condemn none.

4 CLOSURE

The natural criterion to reach for is alienation: the interpretation is imposed, the imposition distorts, the distortion is the wrong. It does not survive contact with §3.

Claim 3. *Alienation cannot serve as the criterion. If every interpretation is formed within relations bearing power, then alienation is not the exception but the ordinary condition of interpretation, and a mark borne by everything distinguishes nothing. To make it the criterion is to read a descriptive proposition, that asymmetry generates power, as though it were a normative one.*

What the criterion must instead register is not whether the proposition was written under asymmetry, but whether the writing has terminated the relation's capacity to write again.

Definition 2 (Closure). *A conversion proposition is closed when B can no longer raise the assertion that $C \neq D$, or when raising it can operate only as an appeal within the established rate and cannot revise the rate itself. It is open where the assertion can still reach the rate.*

Criterion. *The injustice lies in closure, not in alienation. An alienated but open conversion is not for that reason unjust; a fairly negotiated but closed one is not for that reason just.*

The criterion draws the line where the practice of grievance already draws it. To be told that one's compensation may be recalculated is a different condition from being told that the calculation is settled and only its application remains reviewable. The first leaves the relation able to produce a proposition it has not yet produced; the second has converted a relation into an institution.

Consider filial support. A parent's rearing is taken; care in age is returned. The categories plainly do not match, no rate was ever jointly written, and the asymmetry at the time of the taking was total, the recipient having then no capacity to consent to anything. Alienation as a criterion condemns this, and with it every relation of dependence, which is reason enough to reject it. The criterion of closure does not condemn it, and for the right reason: the parent may still say *this is not what I wanted*, the child may still revise what care is taken to mean, and the terms of the exchange continue to be rewritten over the length of a life. What makes filial support tolerable is not that its rate was fair but that its rate was never final.

5 TWO FORMS OF CLOSURE, AND REFUSAL

Closure arrives by two routes, and they call for different remedies.

The first is *procedural*. The channel of revision is cut by institutional means: a settlement extinguishes further claims, a limitation period expires, a treaty declares a matter finally resolved, a contractual term forecloses reopening. The subject who would revise the rate persists and retains the will to revise it; what has been removed is the passage from the will to the rate. Procedural closure is in principle reversible, and much political labour consists in reopening it.

The second is *structural*. Here the conversion itself removes the party who would reopen the rate. Compensation paid for a death arrives after the only party whose category *C* was taken has ceased to exist. Money paid for ancestral land, once the valley is flooded, is paid to a community whose capacity to state what the land was is dissolved along with the practices that constituted the statement. Restitution offered to a language that assimilation has ended is offered to no one able to price it. In these cases the rate is not merely protected against revision; there is no longer a subject positioned to revise it. Structural closure is not reversible in the way the procedural kind is, and this is what distinguishes the wrong of the dam from the wrong of the expired claim.

This yields the paper's treatment of incommensurability.

Claim 4. *Incommensurability is the limiting case of structural closure, not an independent prohibition. To say that a category admits no conversion is to say that any conversion of it destroys the subject who could contest the conversion.*

The recasting is made for a reason and carries a cost. Taken as an independent prohibition, incommensurability would install in the account a term that no relation may revise, a value fixed prior to and immune from the generation that the rest of the argument makes fundamental. The recasting keeps the account to one criterion. What it gives up is the strong intuition that some conversions would remain wrong even if every party survived to contest them and freely declined to; against that intuition this paper can say only that a conversion contestable and uncontested is not the case anyone actually has in mind when they call a value beyond price.

There remains a position the account must make room for.

Claim 5. *Refusal of conversion, the assertion that no rate obtains here, is a claim about categories and not a dispute about rates, and must be admitted as a distinct move. Absent it, the account collapses into the proposition that all values are ultimately convertible and only the terms remain to be settled.*

The party who will not name a sum is not withholding a number. They are declining to write a proposition, and the declining is intelligible precisely by §5: to accept that dignity has a monetary rate is to accept a rate whose future revision would require a standing that acceptance

itself surrenders. Refusal is warranted where conversion would be structurally closing, and unwarranted where it merely secures an advantage in a rate that would in any case remain open. The distinction is hard to draw in practice and the paper does not pretend otherwise; what it claims is that without the category of refusal the analysis has no way to represent the more common political demand, which is not for a better rate but for the withdrawal of the proposition.

Returned to the impasse, the scene resolves. The offering party has written a proposition and is negotiating inside it; the refusing party is refusing the proposition and has no move inside it by which to say so. Raising the offer is not movement toward the other but repetition of the assertion, which is why the impasse deepens as the sum grows. Apology, by contrast, is not a superior rate. It is the withdrawal of the proposition, which is why it costs so little and is conceded so rarely: what it surrenders is not a quantity but the standing generated in §3.

6 THE COST

The criterion should not be presented with only its advantages, since its principal difficulty is visible at once. Closed conversion rates tend to be stable. The wage relation is closed in the sense given here and has proved among the most durable arrangements in modern economies; historical acknowledgement is open, and negotiations over it fail for generations. If the account were to derive its normative half from its explanatory half, taking what endures as what is legitimate, it would deliver the reverse of its own verdict.

It does not, and the separation must be stated rather than assumed. The explanatory question, which conversions survive, and the normative question, which are just, do not share a criterion. Revisability raises the frequency of conflict and lowers its intensity: a rate that may be reopened is reopened often and is not worth a war, while a rate that may not be reopened is quiet until it is not. This is offered as the price of the criterion and not as a further argument in its favour. A theory of value conversion that promised both stability and openness would be describing something other than the world.

7 OPEN QUESTIONS

This paper does not solve the problem of value conversion. It identifies a structure that existing theories of justice pass over: the moment at which one category of value is written as equivalent to another. If that structure is real, a series of questions arises immediately, and none of them is answered here. They are set out as the substance of the paper's contribution rather than as an apology for its limits, since a first formulation earns its place by the work it opens rather than by the work it closes.

The first pair concerns the writing itself. *Who holds the authority to write a conversion rule?* Section 3 argued that the authority is generated by the act of crossing categories, but this set-

ties only its origin. Whether such authority can be delegated, whether it can arise without any institution conferring it, and whether two parties can genuinely write a rule together rather than one writing and the other assenting, are questions the account raises and cannot answer. *And when is a written rule legitimate?* Voluntary agreement, institutional recognition, and continual revisability are each candidates, and this paper has committed only to the third. It has not shown that the third is sufficient, nor that the first two are dispensable.

A second pair concerns the limits of conversion. *Do some values resist conversion altogether?* Human dignity, sacred sites, friendship, ecological integrity are the standing examples, and §5 recast their resistance as the limiting case of structural closure rather than as an independent prohibition. Whether that recasting is correct, or whether every value is convertible given the right interpretive conditions, is not established. *And can closure be identified before the fact?* The criterion of §4 is applied easily in retrospect and with difficulty at the moment of writing, since rates are rarely declared unrevisable and instead become so through use, as appeals within them are answered and appeals against them go unheard. Inability to contest the rule, institutional rigidity, asymmetry in the power to revise, and exclusion from reinterpretation are plausible early signatures. None has been tested.

A third group asks what the structure is good for. *How do conversion rules evolve?* They may stabilise, fragment, compete with rival rules, or co-evolve with the relations they govern, and the treatment here of a rate as a fixed equivalence is a simplification that a fuller account would abandon: conversion rules are themselves likely to be subject to generative dynamics. *What is their relation to political economy?* Wages, taxation, reparations, environmental offsets, insurance, and the valuation of care work all appear to rest on systematic conversion between categories, and whether these institutions are usefully redescribed as conversion systems is an empirical question this paper has not attempted. *And can the account explain conflict and reconciliation?* Many negotiations turn not on quantities but on whether one value may stand for another, which raises the possibility that failed peace agreements, rejected reparations, and grievances that persist across generations are failures of conversion rather than failures of distribution.

The last question is the one the framework of this paper makes unavoidable, and it is the one on which the account's value finally rests. *Under what conditions can conversion rules remain generative?* If justice depends not on the symmetry of a rate but on whether the rule that fixes it stays open to reinterpretation, then the practical question is not how to write a better rate but what institutional, social, and relational arrangements sustain the openness of the writing itself. Nothing in this paper indicates what those arrangements are. Naming the requirement is not the same as knowing how to meet it, and the distance between the two is the work that remains.

A note on method. The notation of §2 is retained only because it fixes the order of the terms, and no further formalism has been introduced. A conversion rate written as a function over weighted categories would supply an appearance of rigour that the argument has not earned, since nothing here is derived from the notation and every claim is stated in prose. The criterion of closure has an obvious dynamical reading, in which an open rate answers to a system retaining accessible states and a closed one to a system that has reached an absorbing state, but that reading is not attempted here, since it would require an account of what counts as a state, which the paper does not have.

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