

Gert, Joshua. *Normative Bedrock: Response-Dependence, Rationality, and Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 218. \$65.00 (cloth).

In this excellent book, Joshua Gert tries to “demystify the normative” (1). He first defends a philosophical method he calls “linguistic naturalism”, which is inspired by Huw Price’s pragmatism and Philip Pettit’s global response-dependence (7). He then uses this method to give a response-dependent account of “basic” normative concepts, which are “ones that are not defined in terms of other concepts, and that one learns to apply non-inferentially” (1). In doing this, Gert concentrates on the concept of rationality and the concept of harm. Finally, he suggests that we can use this account of basic normative concepts to demystify complex normative concepts, such as moral concepts (122).

Anyone who thinks that normativity is more mysterious than Gert takes it to be should read this book very closely. Gert’s arguments are detailed, interesting, and suggestive. I learned a lot from reading this book. But, in the end, I was not convinced.

One thing I was not convinced by is Gert’s linguistic naturalism. Gert writes that this method assumes that “the stable parts of our language – that is, the language that everyday people have been successfully using for scores of generations – are in perfect order as they are” (7). He takes this to imply that error theories about these parts of our language must be false. That seems to me far too quick. According to Gert, the “bare fact that children can be taught to use the notion of moral responsibility . . . in recognizable ways – that certain claims about such responsibility are clearly acceptable, and others clearly not – is enough to show that there is some flaw in any argument that purports to show that it is incoherent” (7). But children can also be taught to use the concept of a round square in recognisable ways, and this concept is *clearly* incoherent. Arguments that purport to show that the concept of moral responsibility is incoherent therefore cannot be brushed aside so easily. Gert may think what gives such arguments their apparent force is “our immediate tendency, once we depart even the first few steps from the everyday use of a certain

term . . . to wade into a sea of incoherence” (8). But why does this tendency not count as part of our everyday use? And more importantly, what explains why the sea we wade into is one of *incoherence* rather than coherence, if not that the concept of moral responsibility that we use to wade into this sea is itself incoherent? Gert has a lot more to say about his linguistic naturalism, mainly by connecting it to Price’s and Pettit’s views, but what he says does not address these worries.

I also was not convinced by the response-dependent account of basic normative concepts that Gert defends on the basis of his linguistic naturalism. Gert introduces this account by comparing it to a similar response-dependent account of colour. Consider the following response-dependent account of redness:

(R1) “An object X is red if and only if X is such as to elicit a red-response from statistically normal human beings, outdoors at noon on an overcast day, in a statistically high proportion of cases” (81).

Gert rejects this account, since he thinks that the higher the percentages that determine what counts as ‘statistically normal’ and ‘statistically high’, the more plausible the ‘if’ part of the account becomes and the less plausible the ‘only if’ part becomes. He also notes that (R1) cannot be extended to some other secondary qualities, such as a sound’s having a very high pitch: for if this pitch is sufficiently high, only a minority of human beings will be able to hear this sound. Gert takes this to show that we should adopt a different response-dependent account of redness and other secondary qualities instead, which should look like this:

(R2) “An object X is red if and only if the appropriate visual response to X, for human beings under normal conditions, is a red-response” (86).

Gert takes the notion of appropriateness in (R2) to be normative. But he has a very broad conception of normativity: he says that there is “nothing particularly *ethical* or *rational* or *prudential*” about this notion of appropriateness, and that it should instead

be understood in terms of “accuracy, a concept that is normative in virtue of its relation to the normative notions of truth and falsity” (88-9).

With this response-dependent account of colour in place, Gert defends a similar response-dependent account of basic normative concepts. I will focus on his account of rationality. Gert defines ‘rational’ as ‘not irrational’, and says that his notion of rationality is “a relatively weak one according to which we regard an action as rational when we think it ‘makes sense’” (109). He speculates that human beings have a dedicated mechanism that attributes goals to others on the basis of their behaviour, and he claims that an irrational action is an action that gives rise to “goal-puzzlement” (105), which is the failure of this mechanism to attribute a plausible goal to the person who performs this action. Though Gert does not formulate his account of irrationality as explicitly as (R2), this suggests that he endorses the following claim:

- (I) An action X is irrational if and only if the appropriate response to X, for human beings under normal conditions, is goal-puzzlement: puzzlement brought about by a failure to attribute a plausible goal to the agent who is performing X.

Does (I) give a plausible response-dependent account of irrationality? The concept of appropriateness in (I) is a normative concept, since it is the same as the concept that appears in (R2). As I understand him, Gert wants to give response-dependent accounts of all basic normative concepts. If appropriateness is a *basic* normative concept, a similar biconditional must therefore give a response-dependent account of appropriateness. This biconditional would have to start as follows:

- (A) A response X is appropriate if and only if the appropriate response to X, for human beings under normal conditions, is . . .

Since the term ‘appropriate’ appears on the right-hand side of (A), however, (A)

cannot by itself determine the extension of the term 'appropriate'. This means that (A) does not give a response-dependent account of the concept of appropriateness.

Alternatively, the concept of appropriateness may be a complex normative concept, which is defined in terms of other concepts. But then same problem appears in a more complex form: the basic normative concepts in terms of which the concept of appropriateness is defined then cannot determine the extension of the term 'appropriate', since the term 'appropriate' appears on the right-hand side of the biconditionals that determine the extensions of these basic normative concepts.

Gert is, of course, aware of this objection, which is a variation on Crispin Wright's well-known objection to response-dependent accounts of moral concepts (Wright, "Moral Values, Projection and Secondary Qualities", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* suppl. vol. 62 [1988]: 1-26). Gert seems to think that his response-dependent account of basic normative concepts avoids Wright's objection because the term 'appropriate' *also* appears on the right-hand side of (R2), which means that there is no disanalogy in this respect between Gert's response-dependent account of basic normative concepts and his response-dependent account of colour (120-1). But this misses the point of Wright's objection. The point of this objection is not that response-dependent accounts of normative concepts must be analogous in all respects to response-dependent accounts of colour. Rather, the point is that a biconditional with a normative term on its right-hand side cannot by itself determine the extension of that very normative term. Such a biconditional therefore does not give a response-dependent account of the concept that this term denotes. Gert may be right that the appearance of the term 'appropriate' on the right-hand side of (R2) is not a problem for his response-dependent account of colour. But if the concept of appropriateness is a normative concept like all other normative concepts, the appearance of this term on the right-hand side of (I) *is* a problem for Gert's response-dependent account of basic normative concepts.

The obvious way out, of course, is to deny that the concept of appropriateness is a normative concept like all other normative concepts. This may be what Gert has in mind. For though he thinks that the concept of appropriateness is normative, he

takes our use of the term ‘appropriate’ to arise from widespread agreement in response, just as our use of colour terms like ‘red’ arises from widespread agreement in response, and he writes that his notion of appropriateness “depends heavily on statistical matters” (131). But as Gert realises, this gives rise to a different objection to his response-dependent account of rationality: what reason do we have to care about whether our actions are rational or irrational if counting as irrational is, as Gert himself puts it, “essentially determined by how certain linguistic pressures transformed statistical normality into an objective referring term” (131)? I think that is an excellent question. But Gert tries to answer it by saying that this question cannot even be coherently formulated. He writes:

Presented with a direct response-dependent account of ‘morally wrong’, one could ask whether or not one had any *reason* to avoid such action, or why one should regard it as *irrational* to perform such an action. . . . In order to express this worry, we need to make use of the normative notions of rationality and reasons. But the response dependent account [I have] offered is itself an account of irrational action. The notion of a reason for or against action is then, on this account, defined in terms of the systematic roles that certain considerations play in determining whether or not action counts as irrational. The worry about normativity, therefore, cannot arise for these notions, since they are normatively basic. There is, that is, no way of formulating the worry (131).

That seems unconvincing to me. After all, *any* account of basic normative concepts, no matter how crazy, can be defended in this way. Suppose that I defend an account of rationality according to which an action’s rationality consists in its benefitting my best friend Bob. You may then ask: if this account of rationality is correct, why should I care about whether an action is rational or irrational? That is clearly an excellent question. I cannot brush it aside by saying that since the concept of irrationality is a basic normative concept, your question cannot even be coherently

formulated. For this reply only answers your question if we both presuppose that my account of rationality is correct. Moreover, if it were true that such an excellent question cannot even be coherently formulated if my account of rationality is correct, that would *itself* suggest that my account of rationality is *incorrect*.

Gert could reply that we should reject my crazy account of rationality because it gets the extension of the term ‘rational’ wrong: it applies the term ‘rational’ to many actions that are not in fact rational and applies the term ‘irrational’ to many actions that are not in fact irrational. But suppose that I modify the account: since I know that you and I both think that Bob actually approves of an action if and only if this action is rational, I now say that an action’s rationality consists in its actually being approved of by Bob. We then both agree that my new account is extensionally correct: it applies the term ‘rational’ to all and only actions that we think are in fact rational and applies the term ‘irrational’ to all and only actions that we think are in fact irrational. But you may *still* ask: if this account of rationality is correct, why should I care about whether an action is rational or irrational? I think that remains an excellent question, which I still cannot brush aside by saying that since the concept of irrationality is a basic normative concept, your question cannot even be coherently formulated. And if I cannot brush this question aside in this way, neither can Gert.

I therefore think that *Normative Bedrock* fails to demystify normativity. Normativity still seems more mysterious to me than Gert takes it to be. But I also think that this book presents the best sustained response-dependent account of normative concepts that has so far been given. Anyone with an interest in the nature of normativity will have to engage with Gert’s arguments.¹

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