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Gert, Joshua. *Brute Rationality*.
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Joshua Gert's *Brute Rationality* defends the following thesis: there are two types of reason in the practical domain—"requiring" and "justifying" reasons, respectively. Roughly, a requiring reason is such that if an agent fails to act as it directs, then that agent is practically irrational. By contrast, a justifying reason is such that it renders actions practically rational that would otherwise be irrational. For example, a consideration that directs you not to harm yourself severely when such harm is readily avoidable and serves no good whatsoever is, intuitively, a requiring reason. To ignore such a consideration is irrational. However, a consideration that favors allowing yourself to be harmed severely in order to aid a dying innocent is a justifying reason. You are not required to allow such harm to come your way, but it is rationally permissible to do so given the goods that are at stake. No one could rightly accuse you of being irrational in so behaving.

Gert argues that, while this distinction between types of reason is grounded in ordinary thinking, it "has been completely overlooked by virtually every contemporary ethical theorist" (16). Consequently, philosophers have not appreciated its theoretical significance. And its theoretical significance, if Gert is right, is considerable. For if there are both requiring and justifying reasons, Gert argues, we will be able to make significant headway on issues such as the dispute between internalists and externalists about normative reasons, the rationality of morality, supererogation, and a good deal more.

The central thesis of Gert's book, then, tells us that justifying reasons are such that they render actions rational that would otherwise be irrational. About this claim one wonders: how should we understand the type of rationality in play? And what is the relation between rationality thus understood and the notion of a practical reason?

With regard to the first question, Gert maintains that we should understand the type of rationality in question to be a species of not "subjective," but "objective," rationality. And the best way to understand the latter notion, according to Gert, is via the concept of "regarding something as irrational." Modified slightly, Gert's official account of objective practical rationality falls into two parts and runs as follows:

A1. *S regards an action as irrational iff S cannot see, and does not believe*

that there are, any consequences of the action that could allow someone sincerely to advise someone else to do it.

Having this concept in hand, we can then introduce the following "substantive reference-fixing definition":

A2. An action is *objectively irrational* iff virtually everyone would regard the action as irrational, if they were fully informed about all nontrivial consequences of the action. (140)

Extrapolating from this, Gert's idea appears to be that justifying (as well as requiring) reasons can render an action objectively practically rational since "virtually everyone" who was fully informed would believe that there are features of that action that could allow someone sincerely to advise someone else to perform that action.

In response to the second question raised, Gert maintains that when it comes to the practical domain, the basic normative notion is not that of a reason for action, but that of an action's "wholesale rational status" (62; however, also see 77 for a refinement of Gert's view). Against theorists such as Scanlon who take the concept of a reason to be explanatorily basic, Gert makes two points. First, Gert maintains that if we take the notion of a reason as basic, we are "almost forced" to assess reasons only in terms of their strength and, thus, view them as species of requiring reasons (65). But, if Gert is right, viewing reasons thus fits very poorly with our commonsensical view that reasons can contribute to the rationality of action in ways other than by their strength as reasons. For example, common sense tells us that there is nothing practically irrational about contributing one's money to support a small private school rather than sending it to Oxfam, even though the reasons for sending one's money to Oxfam have just about maximal normative strength. Second, in response to Scanlon's question, "How do reasons count in favor of actions?" the advocate of the reasons-are-basic view has no informative answer to offer. Her only reply is: "As a reason." By contrast, if we take the concept of rationality as basic, we can offer an informative answer to Scanlon's question. One answer to the question, "How do reasons count in favor of actions?" is: "By being able to make it rationally permissible to perform actions, in cases in which, without them, it would be irrational" (66).

Suppose, then, that we recognize a distinction between two types of normative reason that play different normative roles, maintaining that requiring reasons are not simply justifying reasons that have been given more normative strength. What are the theoretical benefits of recognizing this distinction? Gert identifies several, among which are the following.

First, in Gert's estimation, it is very plausible to accept the following three claims: that it is sometimes rational to sacrifice one's well-being for the well-being of another, that no morally required action is subjectively irrational, and that it is sometimes rational to act immorally. (Roughly, actions are subjectively irrational, for Gert, just in case they proceed from a state that normally puts an agent at increased risk of performing objectively irrational actions.) If we accept the distinction between justifying and requiring reasons, however, then we have strong grounds for adopting all three of these plausible claims. For, if Gert is

right, justifying reasons are precisely the sort of thing that can render altruistic actions, morally required actions, and immoral actions practically rational.

Second, Gert maintains that recognizing the distinction between justifying and requiring reasons can help to dissolve the dispute between (normative) reasons internalists and externalists. As Gert understands them, reasons internalists maintain that something can count as a reason for an agent only if it finds a corresponding motivation in that agent, provided that she is deliberating rationally. Externalists deny this, maintaining that something can be a reason for an agent even if it need not motivate her when fully rational. Gert contends that recognizing the distinction between requiring and justifying reasons allows us to appropriate what is most plausible in both reasons internalism and externalism. According to Gert, internalism is true of requiring reasons, for these reasons must be such that they motivate a fully rational agent. However, externalism is true of justifying reasons, as these reasons can fail to motivate someone who is perfectly rational.

In a moment, I am going to express some reservations regarding certain features of Gert's project. But before I do so, let me first emphasize that *Brute Rationality* is a very fine book. It is crisply written, laced with wit, and carefully argued. Moreover, I believe Gert is right to emphasize that the central claim of the book—namely, that there is a distinction between requiring and justifying reasons—is of genuine philosophical importance; its plausibility should lead philosophers to reassess some fairly deeply entrenched views regarding practical rationality according to which reasons are to be evaluated entirely in terms of their normative strength. In short, I recommend *Brute Rationality* to anyone who is interested in issues of practical rationality and how they bear upon moral theory.

Now for the reservations: at the outset of his book, Gert claims that at the heart of his discussion is the treatment of practical rationality offered in chapter 7. Recall that, as it is expressed in principle A2, Gert's account of practical rationality tells us that an action is objectively irrational just in case virtually every fully informed agent would regard it as irrational; or, as Gert sometimes puts the matter, "no one could sincerely recommend" the performance of such an action (140). Gert then claims that the following principle is a plausible extensional equivalent to the more formal A2:

A3. An action is objectively irrational if and only if it involves a nontrivial risk, to the agent, of nontrivial pain, disability, loss of pleasure, or loss of freedom, or premature death without a sufficient chance that someone (not necessarily the agent) will avoid one of these consequences, or will get pleasure, ability, or freedom, to a compensating degree. (141)

In what sense, though, do A2 and A3 offer us an account of *objective* irrationality? Although I find Gert's discussion somewhat elusive on this point, there seem to be two ways in which these principles offer us an objective account of irrationality.

First, Gert maintains that he is interested in defending the existence of a fundamental normative principle with respect to practical rationality (2). To qualify as fundamental, suggests Gert, a principle must pass two tests: in the first place, it cannot make sense to ask: "Why should I follow this?" Moreover, it

cannot be such that one can sensibly offer reasons against it (2–3, 7). If I understand Gert correctly, A3 or the normative principles it directly implies (e.g., that an agent ought not to act in such a way that involves a nontrivial risk of serious harm to himself without some compensating benefit for himself or someone else) are supposed to be fundamental, the “end of the normative road” (149). So, according to this account, an act is objectively irrational just in case it fails to conform to A3 or the normative principles it directly implies.

Second, a normative principle is objective insofar as it is the object of “near unanimity” (141). Indeed, Gert claims that it is sufficient agreement among qualified agents that itself yields an objective fact as to what kinds of action are irrational (142).

Consider, however, the rational egoist. She would reject the claim that A3 is extensionally equivalent to an adequate account of the concept of objective irrationality. For she believes that a fully informed agent would never visit harm upon herself if doing so did not also yield a corresponding benefit for herself. (I am interpreting A3 in such a way that it leaves open the possibility that it is rational to sacrifice one’s own well-being for another.) Or consider the neo-Stoic. She maintains that consensus has little to do with objective rationality. Objective rationality consists simply in responding to reasons as one ought or as the virtuous agent would. Moreover, she rejects the idea that an action is rational only if it benefits herself or someone else. In her view, it may be perfectly rational to die prematurely in symbolic protest to great evil—even when there is virtually no chance that such protest will benefit herself or others. For to do so is to respond appropriately to the reasons in play.

The egoist and the neo-Stoic appear to use the term ‘rational’ in a sense not fundamentally different from the way in which Gert does (by contrast, cf. 142, where Gert claims that the Humean uses the term in a different sense). After all, advocates of both of these views maintain that to say that an action is objectively irrational is to say that it “absolutely should not be performed” (137). And this, says Gert, is the sense of irrationality that A3 is attempting to capture. But if this is right, it is difficult to see how principles A2 and A3 could offer us an adequate account of objective practical rationality. A3 and the normative principles it implies, for example, are not objective in the fundamental sense since they fail the two tests that Gert furnishes. A neo-Stoic could clearly sensibly ask why he should never sacrifice his own well-being in the absence of securing a correlative life good such as pleasure, freedom, or the like for himself or someone else. Moreover, A3 and the normative principles that it implies are clearly open to sensible objections. According to the neo-Stoic view, for example, A3 places undue emphasis on the welfare of agents, ignoring the importance of having an admirable life history. Granted, disagreement of this sort among advocates of A3, egoists, and neo-Stoics does not itself imply that there are no objectively irrational act types. But on the assumption that there are a sufficient number of egoists and neo-Stoics about, it follows that advocates of A3, egoists, and neo-Stoics are all aware of agents who could sincerely (and sensibly!) recommend rejecting A3 and the normative principles it implies. However, if that is right and A2 is true, it follows that there are far fewer objectively irrational act types than many of us have believed. And that seems odd. Not only does this seem odd, it raises questions about how we could, according to Gert’s

position, gain a cognitive grip on the concept of irrationality in the first place. Gert's view is that "overwhelming agreement in what people regard as irrational . . . is what allows for the ostensive teaching of the concept" (148). But, if what I've suggested is true, there is not the type of overwhelming agreement necessary to satisfy A2. And this implies that, if a view such as Gert's is correct, the conditions necessary for acquiring the concept of objective irrationality are not intact.

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