The idea that normative properties have an intimate connection to human responses is a highly attractive one. The plausibility of such a relation, and the difficulty of accounting for it in realist terms, has been part of the motivation for many anti-realist views in metaethics, including constructivism and expressivism. Response-dependent metaethical theories explain this link between human responses and normative properties, while also allowing for more realist construals of normativity. This is especially true for theories that look to color properties as their model for response dependent properties. Giving “murder is wrong” the same ontological status as “lemons are yellow” is surely no small victory for the realist, so a response dependent account, if successful, has a lot to offer. Joshua Gert’s book “Normative Bedrock” offers a sophisticated, closely argued and well developed response dependent theory, and provides an important contribution to the literature on response-dependent theories of normativity, and to metaethics as a whole.

Gert’s theory relies on his approach to philosophy of language and metaphysics, which he calls linguistic naturalism. Linguistic naturalism is characterized by an indifference to the project of reductionism, which entails “a willingness to take very many domains to be sui generis without worrying about it” (pg.9). This is combined with a thoroughgoing deflationism about all semantic concepts. To say that a term really refers to a property, for instance, is just to say that “those who make claims incompatible with the opinion of normal people with regard to the instantiation of these properties would be appropriately regarded as mistaken” (pg. 35). In other words, semantic terms like “property” or “reference” are not taken to say anything about the link between our language and the world, but instead pick out particular features of our linguistic practice, such as our practice of correcting others or regarding them as mistaken in certain circumstances.

Gert focuses on two main questions in investigating normative terms- the question of origin and the question of inheritance. The question of origin asks how and why we might have come up with such terms in the first place. The question of inheritance asks how the term could have been learned and taught. Defending a response dependent account of morality, on this approach, will involve showing how uniformities in human responses could have made it useful for us converge on the application of moral terms, and to regard as mistaken those who failed to agree in their application of these terms, and how we could have succeeded in teaching these terms and thus preserving them.

Gert offers an extended series of thought experiments to show how contingent regularities in human responses could give rise to terms with the grammatical features of referring terms (and hence, given his deflationism, establish the existence of appropriate properties). He considers a series of worlds in which the degree of regularity in human color vision is slowly decreased. We start out with universal agreement on the color of objects, at which point color words will behave exactly like referring terms. As we increase the amount of disagreement, it will become less and less useful to see this disagreement as stemming from some people being in error. At first, this will just result in a “penumbra” of cases in which there is no clear fact of the matter-in other words, color words will begin to have an increasing degree of vagueness. Eventually, we reach a
point at which the notion of error is abandoned, and hence the term will cease to function as a referring term. Instead, terms with this degree of disagreement tell us more about the person using the term than they do about the object described. Thus, the key to developing a realist response dependent account of ethics is to find responses that human beings have a sufficient degree of agreement in that they can serve as the basis for terms with the features of referring terms.

One of the most interesting and innovative features of Gert’s view is his broadening of the kind of responses to which response dependence accounts of morality might look. As Gert points out, existing response dependent accounts have focused on pro- and con-attitudes. However, there are many more responses that could be the basis for response dependent terms. Gert offers an account of practical rationality that is based on the response of “goal puzzlement”. Gert marshals a range of psychological evidence to support his conjecture that our ability to interpret and assign goals to others is based, at least in part, on a subpersonal action interpretation system. Furthermore, in order to make the speedy interpretation of others actions possible, it is plausible that this system has some built in constraints on the kinds of goals it is willing to assign to others in order to make sense of their actions. For instance, the system might always assign some desire to avoid death, and might be unwilling to assign the goal of seeking out suffering without some corresponding benefit. When someone acts in a way that cannot be made sense of within these restraints, for example by failing to take a simple and cost free action to avoid death, the action interpretation system is unable to make sense of their action, leading to the response of goal puzzlement.

On Gert’s account, roughly, behaviours that trigger the response of goal puzzlement (in enough people enough of the time) are irrational, with “rational” simply meaning “not irrational.” Now, Gert is clear that this is only a very weak notion of rationality, whereby only manifestly crazy options are rules out, and so for any choice situation there will usually be many rational options. Still, Gert argues that this notion of rationality is one of the bedrock normative concepts, out of which other normative concepts can be defined. For example, he suggests that practical reasons could be defined in terms of practical rationality, as considerations that could make an action go from irrational to rational (for reasons for an action) or from rational to irrational (for reasons against an action).

This account is ingenious, and rigorously argued, but it does give rise to one of my main concerns with his approach. Goal puzzlement is a very third-personal phenomenon. Its main function is in interpreting the actions of others. We do, of course, make use of normative concepts in assessing one another, but we also use them in making decisions and guiding our own actions. If the core normative notions out of which all our other normative concepts will be defined are so third-personal, then there is a worry about how we can understand the more first personal, deliberative normative concepts. Gert’s account of objective reasons casts contributes to this worry. Objective reasons are defined in terms of what an observer would judge rational (in the sense of avoiding goal puzzlement). Importantly, this is an external appraisal of the action, which is ignorant of the actual desires and goals of the agent. This ends up entailing that “if [an action] could make sense, our interpretive mechanisms will make sense of it (even if that means those mechanisms are actually misrepresenting the motives of the agent)” (pg. 174). But it is
hard to see why, in deliberating, we should care about a concept that is based on how those ignorant of our motives will respond to our action.

Gert admits that this account goes against the focus on deliberation that is a feature of most accounts of objective reasons. However, Gert does not think that this is a problem, arguing that “we do not need to make sense of our own actions” (179). While true, this seems to beg the question. It is Gert’s own account that implies that the function of normative terms is to make sense of actions. On accounts more friendly to the deliberative conception of normativity, one of the functions of normativity is to help us decide what to do, not only to interpret action. Gert needs to give further consideration to how to accommodate some first personal form of normativity, or else make a more detailed argument as to why no such account is needed.

This criticism aside, however, this is an excellent and important book. Gert impressively combines detailed arguments with breadth of scope. In this short review I have been unable to even touch on many of the arguments, such as Gert’s powerful argument that response dependent accounts need not associate a response dependent concept with a single response, but can instead associate it with a function from one’s circumstances to the response evoked, or his account of how we can explain \textit{a priori} synthetic moral knowledge based only upon a modest capacity for self knowledge, of the same kind that allows us to know what we believe or desire. This book articulates a new and fascinating model for response dependent theories, and is a must read for anyone interested in such theories.

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