

Gert on Subjective Practical Rationality

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It has become common in discussions of practical rationality to distinguish between objective and subjective rationality. Surprisingly, however, one finds few attempts in the literature to offer a precise characterization of either form of rationality, especially when it comes to detailed necessary and sufficient conditions. One noteworthy exception is the recent account of both concepts provided by Joshua Gert in his book *Brute Rationality: Normativity and Human Action*.¹ I have already critically evaluated Gert's proposal regarding objective rationality elsewhere (Miller 2005), and so the purpose of this paper is to consider Gert's novel view of subjective practical rationality. After briefly outlining the account, I present two objections to his view and then consider his own objections to a rival approach to understanding subjective rationality which I take to be much more plausible.

1. Gert's Account

According to Gert, to say of an action that it is objectively rational is to bestow on it the highest normative recommendation there is in favor of the action (1-10). An agent may be mistaken about whether the action really is objectively rational, since such a fact is not something to which we will always have veridical epistemic access. Nonetheless, if an action is objectively rational, there is no sense to be made of the claim that we should not perform it.

¹ Joshua Gert, *Brute Rationality: Normativity and Human Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. All page references in the body of the paper are to this book.

In contrast, subjective practical rationality pertains to the processes of deliberation and acting that the agent actually goes through. It is directly connected to our evaluation and assessment of agents (3), and to call an action ‘silly,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘boneheaded,’ or ‘a bad idea’ is to evoke concepts which fall under the heading of subjective irrationality (143). In a similar vein, subjective rationality also bears a close relationship to concepts pertaining to “freedom, moral responsibility, disabilities of the will, competence to give consent, and so on” (153). Most views of subjective rationality will allow that an agent could act in a way that is subjectively rational but objectively irrational if, through no fault of her own, she was mistaken about what was the best thing to do but otherwise satisfied the relevant subjective rational norms.

Beyond this, it is difficult to say much more about subjective practical rationality without begging the question against either Gert’s view or the more traditional internalist approaches to subjective rationality to be mentioned below. So let us proceed directly to Gert’s positive account:

- (1) An action is subjectively irrational iff it proceeds from a state of the agent that (a) normally puts an agent at increased risk of performing objectively irrational actions, and (b) has its adverse effect by influencing the formation of intentions in the light of sensory evidence and beliefs (160).

As stated, (1) is intended to be neutral with respect to different accounts of objective rationality. Thus my critical remarks in what follows will not presuppose any of the details of Gert’s proposal regarding the nature of objective rationality. Simply in order to illustrate how (1) is supposed to work, however, we can note that for Gert:

- (2) An action is objectively irrational iff 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 same consequences, or will get pleasure, ability, or freedom, to a compensating degree (141).

Thus with this proposal in mind we can see that according to Gert, if certain of a person’s actions proceed from a desire to harm himself and others (a desire which, let us suppose, leads to the

formation of various intentions to act harmfully), then his actions will be subjectively irrational since this desire increases the risk of performing objectively irrational actions according to (2).

2. Against Gert's Account of Subjective Practical Rationality

Such an account of subjective irrationality in (1) strikes me as unpromising for two main reasons. First, consider Frankfurt's famous examples of a willing and an unwilling drug addict (Frankfurt 1971). In each case, the addicts have a powerful desire to take drugs which, we may plausibly assume, normally puts them at increased risk of performing objectively irrational actions. In the one case, however, the addict is a willing addict in virtue of identifying with that desire, whereas in the other case he is alienated from the desire and views it as a causal force outside of his will with which he does not identify.²

Now suppose that in both cases the first-order desire to take drugs causes the formation of intentions which in turn lead each addict to make an injection. According to (1), both the willing and the unwilling addict would be performing actions which are subjectively irrational since the causally relevant desire in each case satisfies both (a) and (b). But this is problematic given that Gert intends his account in (1) to capture the sense of rationality relevant to moral responsibility, freedom, disabilities of the will, and the like. For given (1), the actions of both addicts receive the same evaluation as subjectively irrational, while it seems that they intuitively deserve very different evaluations when it comes to moral responsibility and the other related concepts that Gert mentions. Presumably the willing addict can experience himself as freely making the injection as a result of a desire which is part of his will, and his action will be one for which he can be held responsible and hence properly blamed to a significant extent. The unwilling addict, on the other hand, may experience himself as acting in ways which are beyond

² For more on identification and alienation, see Frankfurt 1988, Velleman 1992, and Bratman 1996.

his control and outside of his will, and we would be far less inclined to blame him to the same extent once we learned about the mental battle he is undergoing against his addiction. So the account of subjective rationality in (1) seems to not be closely tied to the concepts with which it is supposedly related, or at least not in this case.³

This example raises a second and more general concern about (1), which is that by tying subjective rationality so closely to objective rationality, Gert's account has thereby lost the appropriate subjective footing it needs to have to such notions as moral responsibility and disabilities of the will. This second concern in my view is more important than the first and takes us to the heart of why (1) is implausible. Whether a given state of mind will "normally put an agent at increased risk of performing objectively irrational actions" is something about which everyday agents will at times have very little reliable evidence because of the tremendous epistemic difficulties involved in determining such a thing, and this is true with the comparative harm/benefit account of objective irrationality in (2) as well as with a host of other views in the literature. As a result, it is hard to see how our notions of moral responsibility and the like would

³ Nor is this meant to be an isolated example; the literature on identification is rich with similar cases. For related examples, see Velleman 1992, 2000 and Bratman 1996.

As an anonymous referee has pointed out to me, it may be important to specify whether the willing addict's desire to take drugs is irresistible or not. Suppose that it is irresistible. Then since subjective rationality may only apply to actions which stem from desires which are judgment-sensitive, it would follow that the willing addict's action of taking drugs is *not* subjectively rational, contrary to what we said above.

One response would be to challenge the idea that subjective rationality requires judgment-sensitive attitudes. But even granting this assumption, the above will not be of any help to Gert's proposal. If subjective rationality requires having judgment-sensitive attitudes, then the same would hold straightforwardly for subjective irrationality as well. So it would follow that in this version of the case, the willing addict's behavior would be *non-rational*, and that his irresistible desire has absolved him from praise or blame (although he still might be to blame for the actions which led to his acquiring the addiction in the first place). But this still conflicts with what Gert's account implies. For the willing addict's behavior would satisfy both conditions of (1), and so would be subjectively *irrational* according to (1) rather than subjectively *non-rational*.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the willing addict's desire to take drugs is very powerful, but still sensitive to some extent to the agent's judgments and motivating reasons. Furthermore, those judgments and reasons fully support taking drugs. Then Gert's view would imply again that the action which results is subjectively irrational, but now in this version of the case it seems clear that the action would be subjectively *rational* (albeit objectively irrational).

So it seems that there is a dilemma here – either the willing addict's desire is irresistible or it is not, but in each case Gert's view provides us with an implausible result.

closely track such epistemic successes and failings. For example, many agents might scrupulously examine their mental states, and yet despite their best efforts unknowingly end up with states of mind which normally increase the risk of performing objectively irrational actions. But I suspect that we would *not* want to always call their actions subjectively irrational, and in some cases would *not* blame them for acting the way that they did.⁴ Similarly, agents might just so happen to form mental states which unbeknownst to them turn out to normally *decrease* the risk of performing objectively irrational actions, and yet such good luck on their part does *not* contribute to their actions' deserving our praise and esteem.

3. In Defense of an Alternative Approach

As a general alternative, my view is that subjective practical rationality is roughly a matter of the agent's actions being properly responsive to the practical reasons that the agent has *by his or her own lights*. Here I find myself in good company: Gibbard, Copp, Parfit, Scanlon, Joyce, Sobel, and Kolodny, among many others, all seem to hold similar views.⁵ And such a view gives a more intuitively compelling account of the above examples. The willing addict would be subjectively rational in taking the drugs since by his lights the relevant normative considerations favored such an action, whereas the same action would be subjectively irrational for the unwilling addict. Hence the difference in our ascriptions of degrees of moral responsibility and blame in these two cases could be correlated in part with a difference in our evaluation of the subjective rationality of each addict's action. Similarly, someone who scrupulously examined and endorsed the reasons which led her to perform an action and yet

⁴ Nor would we invoke any of the negative terms that Gert is trying to 'collect,' such as 'silly,' 'stupid,' 'boneheaded,' 'a bad idea,' 'crazy,' 'insane,' and so on (143).

⁵ See Gibbard 1990: 18-22, Copp 1997: 42, 44, 52-53, Parfit 1997: 99, 2001, Scanlon 1998: 25-30, Joyce 2001: 53-55, Sobel 2001, and Kolodny 2005. Of these, I am the least confident in characterizing Parfit's view as belonging with the others. Much of what he says in his 2001 is in line with the above description, but at one point (2001: 33) he seems to have a view in mind which also involves a relation to objective and not just to subjective or motivating reasons.

nonetheless happened to act in a way that was objectively irrational, might still be deemed *subjectively* rational in this instance by the above account. On the other hand, someone who was led by a tempting desire, addiction, phobia, or the like to act in a way that was not in line with what he took himself to have most reason to do, may still luck out and do something objectively rational. But in this instance and in contrast to Gert's proposal, the above account would rightly deem his action to *not* be subjectively rational.⁶

What does Gert have to say about this alternative approach to subjective rationality? The closest he comes to addressing it is with his critical discussion of the following view:

⁶ An anonymous referee has suggested that I clarify the relationship of Nomy Arpaly's claims about practical rationality in chapter two of her book *Unprincipled Virtue* to the approach mentioned in this section. Clearly this is a topic that requires a more detailed discussion than is available here, but let me at least make a few brief observations.

The central claim Arpaly seeks to advance in that chapter is that "sometimes an agent is more rational for acting against her best judgment than she would be if she acted in accordance with her best judgment" (2003: 36, emphasis removed). To use one of Arpaly's own examples, Emily believes that she should earn a Ph.D. in chemistry, but "as she proceeds through a graduate program, she starts feeling restless, sad, and ill-motivated to stick to her studies. These feelings are triggered by a variety of factors which, let us suppose, are good reasons for her, given her beliefs and desires, not to be in the program" (49). When she one day quits on an impulse while condemning herself as irrational for doing so, according to Arpaly she nevertheless "acts far more rationally in leaving the program than she would in staying in the program, not simply because she has good reasons to leave the program, but also because she acts for these good reasons" (50). Here Arpaly is assuming a reasons internalist position according to which an agent's good practical reasons are grounded in the satisfaction of her desires given her beliefs (37).

As I see it, the main challenge to locating Arpaly's view in relation to the above is that she never appeals to the distinction between objective and subjective practical rationality, but rather just talks at the general level of practical rationality as such. Furthermore, if we invoke this distinction on her behalf, many of her claims look to be ones about the *objective* rationality of actions and agents which she repeatedly seems to connect to the good normative reasons agents actually have regardless of whether they recognize them or not. For example, Arpaly says that Emily "leaves the program for good reasons, and her only irrationality is in her failure to give up her errant conviction," whereas another person who leaves the program because of a deep lack of self-esteem would be doubly irrational – both for the false conviction and for acting against that conviction for *bad* reasons (50).

Assuming, though, that Arpaly's claims are instead best understood as pertaining to subjective practical rationality, it is clear that her approach would then differ significantly from the view on offer in this section. That view relativises practical rationality to those considerations which are taken by the agent to be reasons from the first person perspective. But as the case of Emily shows, on this interpretation of Arpaly's approach Emily would be acting in a way that is subjectively rational even though at the time she is utterly ignorant of the reasons for which she quits the program. Whether this would be a more promising approach to developing a detailed positive account of subjective practical rationality is an issue that will have to be left for another occasion, but what is clear is that it would end up being a fundamentally distinct approach from the above. Indeed, so long as we keep in mind the fact that Gert's view of subjective practical rationality in (1) is neutral on competing views of objective rationality and reasons for action, the interpretation of Arpaly's approach in this paragraph seems very much in the spirit of Gert's own theory in (1). Working out all of these details would, however, require a separate paper.

- (3) An action is subjectively irrational if, relative to the beliefs of the agent, it is objectively irrational (154).⁷

He rejects such an approach because of examples like the following:

[S]uppose that I believe that I can fly, and therefore that I will not fall to my death when I jump off of the roof of my apartment building. Despite the fact that I do not believe I will be harmed by jumping, it is still subjectively irrational to jump. Why? Because I *should* believe that I will be harmed (154, emphasis his).

Naturally we would want to hear some more details about this case, and in particular why the person believes that he can fly in the first place. For there are at least two importantly different versions of this example, and yet in neither of them does it seem to me that the person's action of jumping off the building is subjectively irrational. In the first version, let us suppose (rather artificially perhaps) that the person in the example does not have any evidence about the harmful effects of jumping off buildings. We might imagine, for instance, that he has lived a very sheltered life, and furthermore has been indoctrinated into believing that he can fly. With this background information about the case, I suspect many people would want to say that neither the person's action nor even his belief is subjectively irrational, although both are surely objectively irrational. We can see this in our attitude towards the person's act of jumping off the building, as

⁷ It is worth briefly mentioning that (3) may not precisely capture what the philosophers mentioned above have in mind. For example, some of their remarks suggest that they instead are advocating a view like the following:

(3*) An action is subjectively irrational if, relative to what by the agent's own lights are reasons for action, it is objectively irrational.

But (3*) is equivalent to (3) only if subjective reasons for action are certain beliefs or the propositional contents of those beliefs. Yet such an assumption is, needless to say, highly controversial. Perhaps the most common approach to subjective practical reasons involves treating them as desires rather than beliefs (see, e.g., Smith 1987, 1994: chapter four, 1998: 18, and 2003: 460). So it is not immediately clear what Gert would have to say about (3*).

To be fair, (3*) should not be attributed to any of the philosophers cited above in particular without first examining the details of their respective proposals. It should also be stressed that it is only *one* way of potentially developing the connection between subjective practical rationality and the first person perspective. As an alternative, for instance, one might also add an additional normative component to (3*) such that the agent has also utilized certain ways of finding out relevant information that someone with her historical background, social surroundings, mental capacities, and so forth would be expected to have employed. Even with this added condition, however, (3*) would still serve as a rather distinct proposal from Gert's (1).

For the purposes of this paper, however, I set (3*) aside and examine only how Gert objects to (3). Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful discussion.

we would not be inclined to blame him much if at all once we learned about the upbringing he had received.

According to the second version of the case, the person did in fact have plenty of evidence beforehand that jumping off a high building would harm him. He saw several action movies involving villains plummeting to their deaths, and was also injured a few years ago after falling from a wall. Yet let us suppose that despite this evidence he still forms the belief that he would not die if he jumps. Why would he do such a thing? Perhaps because he also has a deep wish to fly, or has an unconscious desire to fly, or has a powerful emotional experience when he imagines himself flying, or the like. Due to one or more of these non-cognitive psychological states, it may turn out that the empirical evidence has no force for him. What should we say here? In such a case as well, it seems that his action of jumping *would* be subjectively rational; the epistemic counterevidence simply does not serve as a motivating *reason* by his own lights against jumping. Rather, to the extent that there is a subjective rational failing going on in this version of the case, it is a subjective *epistemic* failure in forming and retaining such a belief about flying in the first place in the face of the recalcitrant evidence.

To his credit, Gert does anticipate the kind of response just given to this second version of his example, whereby what might have seemed like a subjectively irrational action was really a rational action arising from a subjectively irrational belief. As far as I can tell, here is Gert's primary objection to such a move:

. . . not all actions that are based on irrational beliefs are viewed in the same way, with reference to moral responsibility, free will, etc. If I irrationally believe that wearing green brings me small pieces of good luck, and for that reason I wear green, this action would not typically be regarded as irrational at all. And if it were, it would not be regarded as being nearly as irrational as my jumping out of the window, thinking I could fly. This difference in the rational status of the action has nothing to do with the degree of irrationality of the belief (156).

I must confess that I am not sure what to make of these remarks. Both examples here involve objectively irrational actions, to be sure, and let us suppose both involve subjectively irrational beliefs. But once these irrational beliefs are in place, the resulting actions seem to be perfectly rational in both cases. Nor do I see any difference in moral responsibility, freedom of the will, and the like that needs to be explained. The only difference in responsibility that I can make out is a difference in *epistemic* responsibility as presumably the person in the second case should be epistemically blamed to a greater degree given how much more recalcitrant evidence he had to ignore as compared to the person in the first case.⁸

So much, then, for Gert's alleged counterexample to the proposed account of subjective rationality in (3). More recently, Gert has tried out another example which he also thinks will do the job. It is worth quoting Gert here at length:

Consider the following two people: Noah, the character from the Bible, and Peter, a modern-day schizophrenic. Let us assume that both of them have the very same subjective evidence that God is speaking to them, telling them of an upcoming flood, and directing each of them to build an ark. The difference is that for Noah, his experiences are caused by God speaking to him, while for Peter, they are the result of an unusual chemical environment in his brain. My view is that with regard to the kind of subjective rationality that is relevant to mental illness, moral responsibility, and so on, Noah's actions count as perfectly rational, while Peter's do not. Seen from the inside, however, there is no difference. This is why I think a substantive, externalist, reliabilist account of subjectivity rationality is the correct one . . . The right thing to say is that Peter is suffering from a mental illness, and that the actions that stem from this illness equally clearly count as irrational actions.⁹

I want to first respond directly to this example, and then draw a more general lesson from it as to where the disagreement between myself and Gert seems to lie.

⁸ For those whose intuitions suggest that there is a significant difference in *moral* responsibility in these two cases, advocates of (3) can still claim that such a difference can be adequately explained by the prior difference in the degree of epistemic failure involved. Suppose we change Gert's first case to one in which the person avoids green objects because he irrationally thinks that all inanimate objects with that color attempt to bite him when he touches them. Then if such avoidance behavior were considered to be morally blameworthy, it would surely be so to roughly the same extent as that of the person who thinks he can fly. Yet the similarity in the degree of their moral responsibility seems to be adequately explained by the prior similarity in the degree of their epistemic responsibility. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting a similar example.

⁹ "Reply to Commentators." Symposium on *Brute Rationality*. American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting, March 2006.

What should the defender of a view like (3) say about this example? My own inclination is to say much the same thing that we did about the second version of the case involving the person jumping off a building. Certainly we can agree that Peter is suffering from a mental illness, and that his belief about the flood is a mad belief without any epistemic warrant whatsoever. Nonetheless, *given* that he has it *and* is unaware of his illness, his action certainly seems to make sense and appears to be rational. His responsibility for performing the action is certainly mitigated, but not because of anything having to do with subjective rationality, but rather because of the mental illness which produced the action in the first place.

Note that there is another interpretation of the case which, in my view, is less compelling than the above, but which is still more plausible than Gert's. On this reading, Peter's actions stemming from the mental illness are not irrational, but rather are *non-rational*. The chemical imbalance in his brain has undermined his capacity for rational thought in general, or at least it has done so with respect to certain areas of his mental life. Thus we might refrain from holding the relevant actions of such a person accountable to the standards of subjective rationality in the first place.¹⁰ Instead, we might say that Peter's actions are rationally neutral, and that his illness has absolved him of responsibility for them. Thus according to this response, for such an example to be used against the advocate of a view like (3) is less than compelling since that view presupposes (or at least should presuppose) that the actions in question are actions which stem from the exercise of an agent's rational capacities, and only thereby come under the purview of subjective rational evaluation.

4. A Fundamental Methodological Divide?

¹⁰ And the same claim applies to the person's *thoughts* and whether they should be held to the standards of subjective *epistemic* rationality.

So I find Gert's own account of his example to be far from persuasive. But the above passage is also interesting for the way in which it highlights what is likely to be a fundamental methodological divide in thinking about subjective rationality. As Gert makes clear, regardless of the exact details of his positive proposal, he is generally committed to a broadly *externalist* approach to subjective rationality. Other philosophers such as Gibbard, Joyce, and Scanlon, on the other hand, seem to be internalists about subjective rationality. Now the 'internalist' and 'externalist' labels are often less than helpful, especially given the various ways that they have been employed in discussions of warrant, justification, reasons, and motivation. But as an initial characterization, we can say that Gert's remarks in the passage above seem to commit him to an externalist view such that the conditions necessary and sufficient for subjective rationality are each external conditions. For internalists, on the other hand, these conditions are each internal conditions whereby a normal person has (or potentially could have) special epistemic access as to whether or not they are satisfied.¹¹ This special access might, for instance, involve being able to use reflection alone to determine whether an action is subjectively rational, or being certain that it is subjectively rational (not, however, under that description of course). Externalist conditions, on the other hand, might involve the claim that the action must arise from reliable action-guiding processes to which the subject need not have or even potentially could have special access.

Now clearly this is not the place to attempt to adjudicate between internalist and externalist approaches to subjective practical rationality. Instead let me simply register three

¹¹ There are a number of alternative ways of developing the internalist and externalist positions. For example, one could formulate a weaker version of each such that internalism is the view that only *one* condition on subjective rationality is an internal condition, and similarly for externalism. A range of intermediate positions could be developed as well. For a helpful survey of these formulational issues when it comes to the internalism/externalism debate about epistemic justification and warrant, see Bergmann 1997.

Note that Gert seems to intend both conditions in his proposed account of subjective practical rationality in (1) to be understood as external ones.

broad concerns with the externalist position, not by way of trying to settle the issue, but rather by way of hopefully lending some credence to internalism as a more promising methodological approach in this area. The first is that when it comes to subjective *epistemic* rationality, an internalist approach is widely endorsed in the epistemology literature (see, e.g., Bonjour 1980; Foley 1987). And this is for good reason; a person who is dehydrated and drinks a clear liquid which he believes is water (but which is really an indistinguishable toxic liquid), would have a false belief but not be epistemically blameworthy. His belief about there being water in the glass, we would naturally say, was a rational belief precisely because from the first person point of view he satisfied the reasonable norms of belief-formation. But if this is right, then why would not his *action* of drinking the water also be rational as well precisely because the person acted in a way that befitted the evidence and reasons for action as he saw them? Thus if internalism is true about subjective epistemic rationality, it is unclear what considerations would prevent it from also being true of subjective *practical* rationality as well.

The second concern appeals to considerations of epistemic responsibility. There is a longstanding tradition in epistemology of tying notions of epistemic praise and blame to the special access required by internalism.¹² One intuition guiding this tradition, for instance, has been that people can only be held responsible for something, whether it be a belief, an action, a character trait, or the like, provided that the norms governing that thing are standards against which the agents themselves can measure their success or failure at complying. Epistemic internalist positions can capture this intuition via standards to which agents have (or potentially could have) special access as to how well their beliefs are conforming, whereas for externalists a

¹² For a helpful survey, see Plantinga 1993b: chapter one. See also the discussion in Bonjour 1980, 1985, 2002, Kornblith 1983, Bach 1985, Montmarquet 1985, Odegard 1992, Bishop 2000, and Foley 2002. Thus Michael Bishop writes that the notion of responsibility that has “dominated analytic epistemology” involves the idea that “to be epistemically responsible is to display in one’s reasoning the virtue (or virtues) epistemic internalists take to be central to warrant or justification, e.g., coherence, having good reasons, fitting the evidence” (2000: 180).

belief might count as warranted even though the agent has no awareness whatsoever that the process which produced the belief is, for example, reliable.¹³ Thus if it is correct to think that there is a connection between epistemic internalism and responsibility for belief formation, then the challenge for Gert is to be able to explain why there is not a similar connection between internalism about subjectivity rationality and responsibility for action.

Finally, when it comes to externalism about epistemic *warrant* – roughly, that property or set of properties which makes the difference between true belief and knowledge – even externalists are widely agreed that one of the necessary conditions for warrant is an internalist no-defeater condition. Alvin Goldman, for instance, claims that a belief in some proposition *p* cannot be warranted if the person believes (whether rightly or not) that *p* is undermined by counterevidence (Goldman 1986: 62-3, 111-2).¹⁴ It would appear that, if nothing else, the same kind of internalist no-defeater condition is also needed in an account of subjective practical rationality. Recall that Gert's account is the following:

- (1) An action is subjectively irrational iff it proceeds from a state of the agent that (a) normally puts an agent at increased risk of performing objectively irrational actions, and (b) has its adverse effect by influencing the formation of intentions in the light of sensory evidence and beliefs (160).

Now suppose that the state which produced an action A by agent S is a true belief that S ought to A, a belief which it so happens does satisfy (b) but *not* (a). Thus according to (1), A would not be

¹³ For a similar characterization of epistemic internalism and externalism on this point, see Bonjour 2002. Bonjour also nicely expresses another intuition behind the alleged connection between responsibility and epistemic internalism:

What epistemic duty requires should surely depend on the epistemic resources that are available to a person. It is certainly possible that a person's epistemic situation, the kinds of evidence and cognitive tools and methods of inquiry available to him or her, might be so dire or impoverished (as a result of either individual or cultural deficiencies) as to make it difficult or impossible to come up with strong evidence or good epistemic reasons for beliefs about many important matters. In such a situation, it is far from clear that people who accept beliefs on less than adequate evidence or reasons or perhaps even at times on none at all, while still doing the best that they can under the circumstances, are guilty of any breach of their epistemic duty or can properly be described as epistemically blameworthy or irresponsible (2002: 236).

Indeed, this same kind of point was used earlier in criticizing Gert's account of subjective rationality in the practical rather than the epistemic realm.

¹⁴ See also Nozick 1981: 196 and Plantinga 1993a: 40-42. For a helpful discussion of these issues, see Bergmann 1997.

subjectively irrational. But suppose as well that by his own lights S at the time of the action had very strong undefeated reasons for not performing A. It would then seem that intuitively his A-ing was subjectively *irrational* in light of the presence of these defeaters. Yet (1) gives the opposite result.¹⁵ Thus at the very least Gert should follow the lead of externalists in the epistemology literature and supplement his account with an internalist no-defeater condition.

5. Conclusion

Overall, then, I think we have good reason to be skeptical about the details of Gert's account in (1). In the process we have also seen two more general themes emerge. The first is that construing subjective practical rationality in terms of objective rationality runs the serious risk of losing the appropriate connections to related notions of responsibility, freedom, and the like. Given how difficult it will often be to determine whether an action is objectively rational or not, an agent could make mistakes and perform objectively irrational actions in cases in which it intuitively seems that she is not to be blamed for doing so. The second and related theme is that the plausibility of one's account of subjective practical rationality may hinge crucially upon whether one adopts a broadly internalist or externalist approach. And one way to make such a choice is to first examine accounts of subjective epistemic rationality. The prominence of internalist accounts there should, in my view, lend credence to internalist accounts in the practical realm as well.

Of course, criticism is one thing; advancing a positive view of one's own is something else altogether. So while I have raised doubts in this paper about Joshua Gert's account of

¹⁵ It is the role of undefeated defeaters which, I suspect, explains our intuitive classification of the unwilling addict's actions as subjectively irrational, rather than the fact that the desire to take drugs puts the addict at increased risk of performing objectively irrational actions.

subjective practical rationality, I am fully aware that the daunting task still remains of more fully developing a plausible alternative position.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thanks to several anonymous referees for very helpful written comments which substantially improved the paper. An earlier version of this paper was part of my contribution to the Authors-Meets-Critics Symposium on *Brute Rationality* at the 2006 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting. My thanks to Josh Gert for allowing me to make use of part of his reply on that occasion, as well as for his generous support and feedback.

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