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Reconsidering Gilbert' s Account of Norm-Guided Behaviour

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Abstract

Gilbert' s understanding of social norms is considered by some as a promising alternative proposal to standard rational choice accounts of norm-guided behaviour. In this paper, I evaluate her position on social norms. Focusing on the social rationality of individuals, Gilbert tries to explain norm-based behaviour in terms of the normativity of norms and grounds that normativity in the ways individuals are part of a social setting. More precisely, Gilbert argues that rational agents are motivated to act according to social norms irrespective of their individual preferences. This is so because rational agents can be motivated by the normativity of social norm, that is, their understanding that they ought to act accordingly. Gilbert defends this view in two steps. She argues that (1) the ' ought' of a social norm is grounded in a joint commitment; and (2) it is rational to act according to the dictates of a joint commitment. In this paper, I argue that although Gilbert' s account on norm-based behaviour advances interesting intuitions, she fails on both levels. First, the normativity of social norms can be seen as grounded in joint commitments; and second, Gilbert does not provide sufficient reason to believe that it is indeed rational to act according to one' s joint commitments.

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