

Gert, Joshua, *Normative Bedrock: Response-Dependence Rationality and Reasons*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, x + 218 pp, hardback,

Joshua Gert does himself a big disservice with his introductory chapter, which is a meta-philosophical manifesto for what he calls 'linguistic naturalism' or 'pragmatism' and which turns out to be the Wittgensteinianism that scarcely dares to speak its name. This will provoke unnecessary sales-resistance in many readers (as it did in me) and it is redundant anyway, because his meta-ethics does not presuppose his meta-philosophy. Another thing that irked me was Gert's meandering prose. Like many Wittgensteinians, Gert employs a 'lead you up the garden path' style where the idea seems to be to tell a story according to which the preferred view drops out as the natural thing to think, defusing counter-arguments along the way. For me at least, this made the book a real chore to read, especially as Gert, often seemed to be defusing counter-arguments to theses which had not yet been clearly articulated.

So much for style: the substance is rather better. Gert starts with colour-concepts, which he takes to be response-dependent, and argues (roughly) that they can correspond to objective properties if the response in question is sufficiently widely shared. If there is not enough agreement about whether something is red then if I say 'this is red', my utterance conveys more about me than about the object in question, and the discourse cries out for an expressivist semantics. (Query: Why not a relativist semantics?) Gert is at pains to stress that although a response-dependent property can only aspire to objectivity if enough people agree in their reactions, such properties are not to be *analyzed* in terms of the reactions of the majority – rather the consensus of reactions enables us to talk about some reactions as being correct and others defective. (I wasn't convinced.) The pay-off comes with a response-dependent account of two bedrock normative concepts: irrationality and harm. An action is irrational if (as Hume might have put it) the desires that appear to prompt it excite a general sentiment of incomprehension. (It is at least minimally rational if it not *irrational*). Something constitutes a harm if we are collectively averse to it for ourselves and for those we care about. This explains what is ridiculous about those earnest attempts to give a rational explanation of why death is a harm. It's a harm because we are averse to it, and since this constitutes normative bedrock there is, in a sense, no answer to

the question of why death is bad, though there is presumably an evolutionary explanation of why we think it is.

With harms, Gert may be on a winner, but when it comes to irrationality I don't think that there is the kind of consensus of incomprehension that his theory requires. Though there are a few desires that seem weird to almost everybody, there is not enough agreement in our reactions to give us a sense of irrationality, anymore that there is enough agreement in our reactions to underwrite a moral sense. Nice try though.