DISCUSSION

WHY PASS EVERY BUCK? ON SKORUPSKI'S BUCK-PASSING ACCOUNT OF NORMATIVITY

Rach Cosker-Rowland

In *The Domain Of Reasons* John Skorupski develops an account of normativity that reduces all normative claims to claims about reasons.[1] Skorupski then argues that this account of normativity in terms of reasons can provide insights into the relation between our thoughts, the world, and the self. This is an impressive and admirable endeavour, executed with poise and rigour.

The concept of a normative reason has increasingly come to interest philosophers at least since the seventies, and, according to Skorupski, this should not surprise us; the only surprise is that it should have taken philosophers so long to focus on this concept (p. 1). T.M. Scanlon ratcheted up the interest in normative reasons further in his *What We Owe To Each Other* by suggesting that goodness and value should be analysed in terms of reasons; such analyses of goodness and value in terms of reasons have come to be known, following Scanlon, as 'buck-passing' accounts.[2]

Skorupski advocates a buck-passing account of more than just evaluative concepts, such as goodness and value; Skorupski claims that all moral concepts, such as (moral) wrongness, and all epistemic concepts, such as warrant and the a priori, can be analysed in terms of reasons as well.[3] For Skorupski, any normative concept, by which Skorupski means any concept that is not a descriptive concept (p. 77), contains only one normative ingredi-

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[1]   John Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxxii + 560pp, £55.

[2]   T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 96–97.

[3]   Skorupski (personal communication) would not characterise his accounts of *all* normative concepts as buck-passing accounts; he thinks that this does not do justice to some of his accounts of normative concepts and presents an under-discussed big picture in terms of an over-discussed little one. I think that characterising his account as a buck-passing account of normativity helps situate it and focuses this discussion. There is no danger in characterising Skorupski's account in these terms so long as we do not see Skorupski's account of all normative concepts in terms of reasons as merely an extension

ent, the concept of a reason (p. 78). For instance, the concept of 'murder,' has a descriptive component and a normative component, but the normative component comes to nothing more than a (particular) reason (p. 97).

But, why adopt buck-passing accounts of all normative concepts? Many others who are attracted to buck-passing accounts of goodness and value do not favour analysing every normative concept in terms of reasons. Skorupski cites several considerations, but I shall suggest that none of them favour passing *every* normative buck. Skorupski also argues for a meta-ethical view he calls cognitive irrealism. He claims that cognitive irrealism sidesteps the arguments of non-cognitivists and error-theorists, and is distinct from intuitionist and reductive realist meta-ethical views. I shall argue that cognitive irrealism depends on the view that normative facts, which for Skorupski are facts about reasons, are nominal facts; if facts about reasons are not nominal facts, there is no meta-ethical space for cognitive irrealism. I argue against the view that facts about reasons are nominal facts, and thus against cognitive irrealism.

I

Skorupski distinguishes between two types of facts: substantial facts and nominal facts. Substantial facts can cause things in the world, or be caused to do things in the world (p. 404). No nominal facts have this causal standing. All nominal facts stand in a 'one-one relation to true propositions,' and so can be picked out, at least, by reference to distinct true propositions (p. 61). Thus, since 'Hesperus is a planet,' and, 'Phosphorus is a planet,' express different propositions they also express different nominal facts. But, these statements express the same substantial fact, namely, that Venus is a planet (pp. 403–4). According to Skorupski, all normative facts are facts of the form (p is a reason for A to ϕ) (p. 77), and all normative facts are nominal facts (p. 404). I will hereafter call facts of the form (p is a reason for A to ϕ) reason facts – these normative nominal facts should not be confused with facts *that are reasons*, such as p when (p is a reason for A to ϕ).

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of buck-passing accounts of evaluative concepts, and think of a buck-passing account as just an account of a concept sometimes thought to be irreducible or unalaysable in terms of normative reasons.

Skorupski's cognitive irrealism depends on reason facts being nominal facts. He contrasts cognitive irrealism with realism, characterising realism about reason facts as the view that reason facts are substantial facts. Skorupski agrees with error-theorists that reason facts that had causal standing would be metaphysically 'queer,' (p. 440) and tries to sidestep this 'queerness' by claiming that reason facts are nominal facts. Nominal facts do not have causal standing, and are either equivalent to or very close to true propositions, and thus normative nominal facts are at least less metaphysically 'queer' than substantial normative facts. Cognitive irrealism can also avoid the Moorean open-question arguments that Skorupski believes realist views that reduce normative facts to non-normative facts are vulnerable to because on Skorupski's view there are still irreducible normative facts (pp. 447–451). If reason facts are not nominal facts, there is no space for Skorupski's cognitive irrealism, since if reasons facts are not nominal facts, they are either substantial normative facts, or substantial non-normative facts, and, according to Skorupski, realism is the view that reason facts are substantial facts.

There is at least one serious problem for the view that reason facts are nominal facts: the view overgenerates reason facts. Nominal facts are presumably individuated in the way that propositions are individuated, in a way such as the following: nominal fact P = nominal fact Q if necessarily whoever believes P believes Q.[4] Given such a way of distinguishing nominal facts, consider three different specifications that Ulrike Heuer gives of her reason for going to see Tom Stoppard's play *Jumpers*:

1. Going to see *Jumpers* would make for an entertaining evening;
2. *Jumpers* promises to be funny and amusing;
3. *Jumpers* is witty in its use of language and sharp and clever in portraying a philosopher's vanities and weaknesses.[5]

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[4] See Matthew McGrath, "Propositions", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/propositions/>, section 8. I do not assume that this is the only or best way to individuate propositions, but that this is the most intuitive way, and that any plausible view of the individuation of propositions will have similar results in the cases I consider in this discussion.

[5] Ulrike Heuer, 'Explaining Reasons: Where Does the Buck Stop?' *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, www.jesp.org, (2006), vol. 1, no.3, pp. 22–23.

Let's assume that Heuer is right about 1–3, but that (1) going to see *Jumpers* will make for an entertaining evening for Heuer *only* because (3) *Jumpers* is witty in its use of language and sharp and clever in portraying a philosopher's vanities and weaknesses, and also that this (3) is the *only* way in which Heuer will find (2) *Jumpers* funny and amusing; assume that 1 and 2 are true, but *only* because 3 is true. 1–3 still yield three reason facts:

4. The fact that going to see *Jumpers* would make for an entertaining evening is a reason for Heuer to go to see *Jumpers*;
5. The fact that *Jumpers* promises to be funny and amusing is a reason for Heuer to go to see *Jumpers*;
6. The fact that *Jumpers* is witty in its use of language and sharp and clever in portraying a philosopher's vanities and weaknesses is a reason for Heuer to go to see *Jumpers*.

4–6 are distinct nominal facts by the individuation test I proposed, since someone could believe 4 without believing 5 or 6, could believe 5 without believing 4 or 6, and could believe 6 without believing 4 or 5. But, intuitively, 4–6 are not distinct reason facts; 4–6 are only three distinct expressions of one reason fact; as 1–3 are three distinct expressions of one reason. If reason facts are nominal facts, and 4–6 are distinct nominal facts, but not distinct reason facts, how can Skorupski explain that distinct nominal facts are not distinct reason facts?

Perhaps, Skorupski could say that someone with *full information* would not believe 4 if they did not believe 5 or 6, would not believe 5 if they did not believe 4 and 6, and would not believe 6 if they did not believe 4 and 5. However, this is not a plausible test for proposition individuation, since if someone had full information they would not believe that 'Hesperus is a planet' without believing that 'Phosphorous is a planet,' and these are clearly distinct propositions. Since nominal facts stand in a one-one relation to true propositions such a test is not plausible for nominal fact individuation either. A similar test might be utilised by Skorupski to individuate reason facts. But, even if such an individuation test served to individuate reason facts, Skorupski would be left with the burden of explaining why statements of distinct nominal facts are not statements of distinct reason facts, and can be statements of the same reason fact, when reason facts *just are* nominal facts.

Skorupski could claim that nominal facts are individuated in another way, such as: nominal fact P = nominal fact Q if *either*

necessarily whoever believes P believes Q, *or* nominal fact P refers to the same substantial facts and ascribes the same properties to the substantial facts to which it refers as nominal fact Q. If nominal facts were individuated in such a way, 4–6 would not be distinct nominal facts; however, 'Hesperus is a planet' and 'Phosphorous is a planet' would not be distinct nominal facts either. If 'Hesperus is a planet' and 'Phosphorous is a planet' are not distinct nominal facts, and nominal facts are distinct from substantial facts, the notion of a nominal fact becomes less natural and more mysterious, since nominal facts no longer correspond to the unproblematic notion of a true proposition. This response would make the view that reason facts are nominal facts much less attractive.

Skorupski could bite the bullet and say that 4–6 are distinct reason facts, but that there is no reason for Heuer to count or weigh the reasons cited in 4–6 separately. This would be odd. Sometimes there is no reason for us to take certain reasons into account, such as when these reasons are excluded in some way, or are too weak to be worth considering. For instance, if you have an obligation to pick up your child from school, there is no reason to count the fact that you are looking forward to picking her up in your deliberation, although this is a further reason to pick your child up from school.[6] But, in such cases the reasons that there is no reason to count are intuitively distinct reasons that have the property of being reasons in virtue of intuitively distinct reason facts; in contrast 1–3 and 4–6 are not intuitively distinct reasons and distinct reason facts (respectively). The counter-intuitive view that 4–6 are distinct reason facts counts against cognitive irrealism, and requires explanation. The clearest explanation is that reason facts are not nominal facts; rather, reason facts are something else, and nominal facts, which are little more than true propositions, can express true claims about reason facts.[7]

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[6]   See Ulrike Heuer, 'Wrongness and Reasons,' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* Vol. 13:2 (2010), pp. 142–143.

[7]   Skorupski (personal communication) has told me that he does not find the view that 4–6 are distinct reason facts counter-intuitive. In response to my argument, Skorupski claims that although 1–3 are distinct facts they are not distinct reasons. On this view, we should not count 1–3 distinctly because 1–3 are not distinct reasons, but 4–6 are distinct reason facts, which only differ as to whether they cite 1, 2, or 3. This strikes me as a strange view, since facts are reasons in virtue of their relationship to other things, relationships

II

The central thesis of *The Domain of Reasons* is that the sole normative ingredient in any normative concept is that of a reason (pp. 77–78). Skorupski does not argue that normativity can only be reductively analysed in terms of reasons; it might be that all normative concepts can be reductively analysed in terms of, for example, value and/or ought as well (p. 54). But, then why analyse normative concepts in terms of reasons? Why endorse a buck-passing account of every normative concept? Skorupski claims that 'more general philosophical considerations' count in favour of analysing normative concepts in terms of reasons rather than in terms of any other notion (p. 77), and provides four such considerations:

(1) If there is a strong case for cognitive irrealism, and an account of normativity in terms of reasons allows for a more elegant version of cognitive irrealism, then, other things being equal, we should favour such an account of normativity over other accounts (p. 4).

(2) The reduction links to an independently plausible account of value in terms of pro-attitudes.

(3) A buck-passing account of normativity 'links with a uniform and natural meta-theory of reasons across all spheres.'

(4) Reducing normativity to reasons 'clears up the obscure relation of normative supervenience, which simply reduces to the reason relation' (p. 481).

In the previous section I argued against the plausibility of Skorupski's cognitive irrealism. If that argument is sound, then (1) does not count in favour of buck-passing about all normative concepts. The second and third considerations do not seem to favour analysing all normative concepts in terms of reasons either. Consider (3) first. An account of normativity that did not reduce all of normativity to reasons could link naturally to Skorupski's uniform and natural meta-theory of reasons across all spheres. On such an account, the concept of a reason would be a uniform

which consist in reason facts, and on this view the relational reason facts 4–6 are distinct, but 1–3 are not distinct reasons. How can this be if reasons are reasons in virtue of reason facts?

notion across all spheres, but all value concepts, for instance, would not be analysed in terms of reasons.

Such an account would also be more natural and intuitive than Skorupski's buck-passing account of normativity. We can see this if we look at some of the costs of passing every normative buck. Since Skorupski claims that all goodness can be analysed in terms of reasons it is no surprise that he thinks that a good heart can be analysed in terms of reasons; though his particular analysis is surprising: according to Skorupski, a good human heart is one that there's reason to choose if one has reason to arrange for the circulation of blood in a human being (p. 85). It is extremely counter-intuitive that *all* things that are good are good *because* of such reasons. For intuitively, there is a reason to choose a good heart if one has reason to arrange for the circulation of a blood in a human-being because the heart is good; the heart is not good because there is a reason to choose it in such a context (p. 455; compare p. 89). Skorupski thinks that the intuition behind such objections is a realist one, namely, that there is a real property of goodness that lies behind reasons that is more real, or 'out there' than reason relations are (p. 456).

But this seems to be a mischaracterisation. The intuition is simply that goodness and value are prior to normative reasons. Goodness and value are the natural subjects of ethical discussion and there needs to be a very good justification for reducing these concepts to reasons – and especially to counterfactual reasons. Such a reduction seems to overstretch our concept of a normative reason and leave it playing an unfamiliar role. This is presumably why others who endorse buck-passing accounts of certain types of goodness and value do not insist that all types of goodness and value can be reduced to reasons. Parfit, for example, only claims that the goodness and value we are *most concerned with* can be reduced to reasons.[8]

The second consideration that Skorupski cites in favour of all-out buck-passing does not seem to provide support for the view either: the fact that value, or some kinds of value, can be analysed in terms of reasons for pro-attitudes does not make a case for analysing all moral and epistemic concepts in terms of reasons.

The final consideration that Skorupski presents as favouring an account of all of normativity in terms of reasons *is* the right kind

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[8]   Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 38–39.

of consideration to support such all-out buck-passing. If the reduction of all normative concepts to reasons made the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative less puzzling, this would count in favour of analysing all normative concepts in terms of reasons.

Simon Blackburn famously posed the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative as a problem for non-naturalist moral realists. The supervenience relation Blackburn had in mind was approximately the following:

> *Supervenience.* It is necessarily the case that there can never be a normative change without a non-normative change (at least in the same world).

That is, actions A1 and A2 are normatively different only if they are non-normatively different.[9] According to Blackburn, the non-naturalist moral realist has no way to explain *Supervenience*, and *Supervenience* requires explanation.

Would an analysis of all normative concepts in terms of reasons make *this* supervenience relationship less puzzling? I cannot see how this could be so. Skorupski claims that an analysis of all normative concepts in terms of reasons 'would show that the rather puzzling relation of supervenience that holds between the normative and the [non-normative] simply reduces to those reason relations' (p. 56). But, all that was puzzling about the relationship between the normative and the non-normative was that there cannot be a normative change without a non-normative change – that *Supervenience* holds. The view that normative changes are nothing more than changes in reasons does not help to explain *Supervenience*. Skorupski seems to recognise this at one point, as he claims that even if *Supervenience* is still a puzzle for an account of normativity in terms of reasons, the notion of supervenience is replaced by the notion of a reason on such an account, and this leaves only one puzzle instead of two (p. 56).

I take it that the notion of supervenience that Skorupski has in mind is one that figures in statements such as the following, 'the goodness of John's running into the house to save a child supervenes on non-normative features of that action, such as the

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9   See Simon Blackburn, 'Moral Realism,' in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 118–119.

disposition of John's manifested in the action, and the fact that John's performing that action saved the child's life.' I struggle to see how *this* supervenience relation was ever puzzling; in this case it is just the good-making relation. It certainly does not seem puzzling in cases of attributive goodness, in which, for example, the fact that a knife is a good knife supervenes on the fact that that knife cuts well. It may seem more puzzling when something is intrinsically good, or good *simpliciter*, rather than good as a particular kind of thing (such as a knife), or where an action is morally wrong. But, it seems that what is puzzling here is not the supervenience relation, but rather the particular concepts of intrinsic goodness, and of moral wrongness.

III

Skorupski has done everyone working on normative reasons an immense service by unearthing many interesting features of normative reasons, and has provided a detailed and insightful defence of a buck-passing analysis of all normative concepts. However, Skorupski ultimately fails to demonstrate that there are any advantages to analysing all of normativity in terms of reasons; he fails to tell us why we should pass every normative buck.[10]

Department of Philosophy
University of Reading
Reading RG6 6AA
r.cosker-rowland@leeds.ac.uk