

Skorupski on *Being For*

In his delightfully presumptuous article, ‘The Frege-Geach Objection to Expressivism: Still Unanswered’, John Skorupski claims that

Schroeder [in *Being For*] has given an incorrect account of negation for normative sentences. Moreover, his account does not distinguish negations proper from the case where negation occurs internally, that is, in subordinate scope – it gives an account of the former that conflates them with the latter. We are right back with the problem of negation... [p 9]

If correct, this would indeed be a worrisome charge, since the account that I developed in *Being For* on behalf of metaethical expressivism is motivated precisely in order to solve exactly this kind of problem. Fortunately, it is easy to see that Skorupski’s account is based on a very simple confusion.

To put Skorupski’s objection in context, it helps first have a brief refresher on how the expressivist semantic view in the first half of *Being For* works. This view is only intended to provide a semantics for a purely normative language, with no descriptive predicates, and it is this view to which Skorupski objects. The precise version of the view is stated in chapter 6. On this view, the semantic value of each n -place predicate is an $n+1$ -place relation. The semantic values of predicates compose with the semantic values for names, quantifiers, and connectives in the normal way, and so the semantic values of sentences are properties. From a formal point of view, there is nothing different between this proposal and the addition of an extra parameter of evaluation to a truth-conditional semantic framework. That is one helpful way of seeing why the view *cannot* have any problems with composition that a relativist truth-conditional view would not have.

What makes this view distinctively expressivist, however, is the *interpretation* that we give to the properties that are the semantic values of sentences, and the interpretation that we give to what it is to believe such a property. Instead of interpreting them in terms of some kind of relativized truth, we interpret the property associated with each sentence, ‘P’, as telling us what someone who believes that P is thereby committed to doing. And to believe that P is to stand in the kind of mental relation to this

property that commits one to acquiring it. I stipulatively call this the attitude of *being for* – hence the title of the book.

Just to illustrate with one example – the leading example from the book – if the relation semantically assigned to ‘wrong’ is *blaming for*, then the semantic value of ‘stealing is wrong’ would be the property of *blaming for stealing*. That means that someone who believes that stealing is wrong is committed to blaming for stealing. And so to believe that stealing is wrong is to be for blaming for stealing. Importantly, the only part of this claim that comes from the semantic analysis of ‘wrong’ is the relation *blaming for*. The ‘being for’ part comes not from the compositional semantics at all, but from the accompanying account of what it is to *believe* one of these properties. Now, it may seem unintuitive that believing is just being for. But remember that the aspirations of this simple theory are only to account for a simple *normative* language, with only normative predicates. The second, much more critical, half of *Being For* is devoted to investigating whether and, if so, how, this idea can be extended to a language with both normative and descriptive predicates, but it is to the simple, normative language that Skorupski objects.

So if from a formal point of view, everything works the same way in this simple expressivist language as if we just added a parameter to an ordinary truth-conditional semantics, how could Skorupski have become confused into thinking that there is some lack of structure? The answer is simple: he simply helped himself to the assumption that there was such a lack of structure. Here is the key passage, with italics added for emphasis:

What, though, are the normative sentences, ‘A’, ‘B’, etc., that ‘express states of being for’? Schroeder does not say. *We can take them to be ‘should’ sentences, so that, for example, ‘we should blame x’ expresses FOR(blaming x), ‘we should kiss and tell’ expresses FOR(kissing and telling).* [p II-12]

The core idea throughout *Being For* was that instead of treating normative predicates as semantically contributing attitudes, we should instead see them as contributing contents. In this truly remarkable passage, however, Skorupski simply helps himself to the assumption that normative predicates like ‘should’ *do* simply contribute attitudes. In other words, in order to set up his criticism of my book, he helps himself to the very assumption that it is the *main contribution* of my book to show how to reject.

In the framework of the book, in contrast, it is easy where the problem comes from. Actually, ‘should’ complicates things, because it is a modal, and deontic modals embed non-normative sentences. Strictly speaking, in order to understand ‘we should blame for x’, we will need to understand how ‘should’ interacts compositionally with ‘we blame for x’, but since ‘blame’ is a non-normative verb, it obviously doesn’t appear in the simple, purely normative language discussed in the first half of my book. That is why

I stick to examples like ‘stealing is wrong’, which actually can be plausibly (though arguably this is wrong about natural language) construed as atomic.

So sticking to examples that it is actually possible to formulate in the language under discussion, let’s look at Skorupski’s allegation that my account ‘does not distinguish’ negations of different scope, as in the following:

- 1 Stealing is not wrong
- 2 Not stealing is wrong

Skorupski writes, of a similar pair of examples, ‘Nothing in Schroeder’s semantics serves to distinguish these.’ This is a striking allegation, particularly given that my account was motivated from the bottom up precisely in order to make exactly this distinction. I actually walk carefully through examples like these in the book, explaining that the former has the semantic value, *not blaming for stealing*, and the latter has the semantic value, *blaming for not stealing*. Consequently, to believe the former is to be for not blaming for stealing, and to believe the latter is to be for blaming for not stealing.

Of course, there is a true observation in the neighborhood, and that is that in order to treat either of these sentences, the highly simplified language from the first half of *Being For* needs to treat them as simple subject-predicate sentences, where ‘stealing’ and ‘not stealing’ are simple referring terms. That is not a problem with the semantic theory, however; it is just an observation about how restrictive the assumption of a purely normative language really is. After all, to treat ‘not stealing’ compositionally, we need to treat ‘stealing’ as a gerund formed from the verb, ‘steal’. But the verb ‘steal’ is clearly a descriptive, rather than a purely normative, predicate. So it is too much to ask for a compositional treatment of ‘not stealing’ in a language with only normative predicates.

After several more pages of errors, Skorupski closes with an illuminating discussion of my explanation of the validity of Geach’s familiar example of an argument by moral *modus ponens* – illuminating for the way in which it reveals the source of his confusion. He grants everything about how my explanation works, but objects that in my account of the conditional premise gives ‘or’ the wrong scope. Here is what he says:

We then have

- (P1) Lying is wrong.
- (P2) Either lying is not wrong or getting your little brother to lie is wrong.
- (C) Getting your little brother to lie is wrong.

Again this is deductively valid – by propositional logic alone. For Schroeder, however, endorsing the premisses [sic] and denying the conclusion expresses the following attitudes:

- (F1) FOR(blaming lying)
- (F2) FOR(not blaming lying or blaming getting your little brother to lie).
- (F3) FOR(not blaming getting your little brother to lie).

[...] Nonetheless, in Schroeder's treatment the problem has still not been solved, for an equally fundamental reason. F2 is not an admissible reading of P2. The problem is that F2 places the disjunction within the content of the attitude, whereas P2 has it with dominant scope. [p 17]

In order to see where this reasoning goes wrong, compare the following parody argument:

For the cognitivist, however, endorsing the premises and denying the conclusion expresses the following attitudes:

- (S1) BELIEF(lying is wrong)
- (S2) BELIEF(lying is not wrong or getting your brother to lie is wrong)
- (S3) BELIEF(getting your brother to lie is not wrong)

Nonetheless, in the cognitivist's treatment the problem has still not been solved, for an equally fundamental reason. S2 is not an admissible reading of P2. The problem is that S2 places the disjunction within the content of the attitude, whereas P2 has it with dominant scope.

Obviously, this argument is confused. Dominant scope for a descriptive sentence 'P' just *is* dominant scope within the content of what you believe, when you believe that 'P'. Believing that P or Q, where P and Q are descriptive sentences, is not a matter of either believing that P or believing that Q; it is a matter of having a belief with a disjunctive content. The *very same* goes for the expressivist view under consideration. The attitude of *being for* is not part of the semantic contribution of the predicate, 'wrong'; it is just what it is to believe, on this view.¹

references

- Schroeder, Mark [2008]. *Being For: Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skorupski, John [2012]. 'The Frege-Geach Objection to Expressivism: Still Unanswered.' *Analysis* 72(1): 9-18.

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