

Skorupski, John. *Ethical Explorations*.

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In this collection of essays, John Skorupski articulates connected views that span semantics, metaphysics, and epistemology in metaethics; well-being, morality, and autonomy in normative ethics; and liberalism and elitism in political philosophy. These are informed by, and shape, a reading both of the development of Anglo-American philosophy out of Hume, Mill, Green, Frege, and the Vienna Circle and of the influence of German thought, primarily Kant, Hegel, and Schiller, on this tradition. The collection has the relatively rare virtue of combining insights from the history of philosophy with an understanding of the subtleties of contemporary analytic philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology. The history highlights the pressures that shift us from a classical liberalism that took substantive ethical ideals for ways of being seriously to neutralist and populist liberalisms that avoid such ideals. This is reflected in their emphasis on the right over the good and in the hope of doing without an appeal to substantive normative claims.

Skorupski questions the feasibility of such thin justifications, but his primary worry is that related trends in liberal societies confirm a Nietzschean “worrying hypothesis” (238). The worrying hypothesis is that “liberal democracy has an inbuilt demotic drift which eventually cuts down all great ideals to a ‘tolerant’ equality of standing” (251–52): “The problem . . . is not the corruption of the right, . . . but the coarsening or diminution of the good” (251). The “ethical doctrine of equal respect” and tolerance are, however, self-reinforcing in contemporary societies and do not suffer from the lack of traditional religious and metaphysical bases (252).

For Skorupski, certain skeptical tendencies in naturalism are the cause. Technological successes reinforce the dominance of naturalism and undermine any justificatory worries about epistemic norms. What suffers instead are any substantive ethical or aesthetic ideals or norms. Skorupski has first-order, normative concerns about the “worrying hypothesis,” but he also thinks that naturalism correctly understood is not so radically skeptical. Thus, correctly assessing the consequences of naturalist metaethics is crucial to his project. This may seem surprising since contemporary metaethics usually claims that its theories—naturalist or otherwise—have no impact on practice. Skorupski expresses worries about the philosophical coherence of these theories, but he also seems to think that they undermine practice; for example, non-naturalist realism makes normative claims unbelievable and noncognitivism makes them seem arbitrary. We need instead a metaethics based on a “post-critical naturalism” (266). “Regenerating the liberal-naturalistic framework,” as he puts it (284), thus clearly requires a metaethical account that can compete both in the arena of philosophy and in the Weberian public “arena of ideas” (259).

The role post-critical naturalist metaethics has to play is thus quite demanding, but what Skorupski says about it is quite hard to follow. It comforts me somewhat, and reinforces my concerns about clarity, that two previous reviewers misunderstood him: David Brink describes the position as officially idealist when it is clearly not meant to be (*European Journal of Philosophy* 9 [2001]: 405–8, 405), and Stephen

Darwall's objection that, pace Skorupski, nothing in the "logic of the situation" of the unconditioned point of view—when I step back from my affects—requires impartial regard shows, as we shall see below, a related mistake (*Utilitas* 14 [2002]: 113–23, 119).

The metaethics is a form of irrealist cognitivism (28): "cognitivism" because we have beliefs about normative propositions that can be true or false, "irrealist" because there are no normative facts that make these propositions true. Indeed, they have no truth-makers (14). Instead, normative judgments are grounded in spontaneous normative dispositions or inclinations to think, do, or feel. They can be corrected by "reflection and discussion" (37)—they have their own "dialogical epistemology" (36). However, there is nothing in the logic of the situation of having the disposition that requires the response—thus, Darwall's mistake. That just is the response one is inclined to and that is all the (defeasible) ground one needs for the normative judgment. I can be mistaken if it turns out that my disposition wasn't spontaneous or that others do not converge on my normative disposition. There is no domain of queer normative facts to make trouble for naturalism.

Can we wonder whether a normative proposition is true even if I am spontaneously disposed to make the judgment and it withstands reflection and discussion? This question, Skorupski claims, would involve taking the God's-eye perspective (20–21). Asking such a question no longer makes sense once we adopt "an epistemic conception of *concepts* (a conception of them as patterns of epistemic norms)" (21 n. 6). Grasping the relevant concepts, here presumably the concept of a reason, just is to grasp the relevant epistemic norms, which, I think, just is (i) to be disposed to see the relevant considerations as reasons and (ii) to see (to be disposed to believe) that being disposed is grounds enough for the normative proposition that states which considerations are reasons for what. "Our mastery of the norms of evidence, can be, in a certain sense, 'a priori' even though it is not analytic" (21).

This is hard going. It would help if Skorupski would clearly map out precisely which dispositions ground which normative judgments and which epistemic norms constitute the possession of a concept of a reason. If there is a single concept of a reason, including reason to do and feel, then can grasp of it be constituted purely by epistemic norms? What happens if I use the term 'reason' to express a slightly different concept "reason*," which is different from every one else's concept of a reason because my normative dispositions are slightly different? Instead of being disposed toward impartial regard, I find myself disposed toward regard for the good of the smart, beautiful, and interesting. What makes my dispositions "uneducated," as Skorupski puts it, rather than just different? Why should discussion matter? Wouldn't we be talking past each other?

Part of the difficulty here is that Skorupski's views about concepts and semantics have been changing. Some of the changes are marked here in footnotes and references. Moreover, articles published since suggest that Skorupski's views continue to change. All of this makes it inevitably harder to figure out the view. More painstaking statements of the theory at each stage might help. It is easy therefore to be worried about the details and to wonder whether all the answers will be forthcoming and whether it will all fit together.

I'll conclude with a brief sampling of such worries. The crucial dispositions

are to be spontaneous as opposed to “artificial.” Skorupski grants that there are defeating conditions like brainwashing. His lists have the inevitable “and so on” at the end of them. He claims that, in the absence of any such condition, we have grounding. The lack of a detailed positive story though is, I think, a real problem, given his own insightful reading of what we are up against in trying to resurrect liberal-naturalism. As he himself puts it, his opponents are those who think that “there is no *point d’appui*, in historically evolving human nature” (203). There may be no such positive story possible, but then we are in trouble in the public arena of ideas.

Furthermore, these spontaneous normative dispositions are not obviously easy additions to a naturalistic, causal picture of the world and our place in it. They are normative because, I take it, they both ground (a normative relation) normative thoughts and are dispositions to normative thoughts. Skorupski finds the idea of either self-interpreting, intrinsic meaning entities or intrinsically normative facts in the world metaphysically queer (18), but I do not quite see how an intrinsically normative disposition is not queer. Before the dialogic epistemology kicks in, the epistemology is that of finding oneself with a disposition which one should take as intrinsically normative (though defeasible). But how is this so different from recognizing a normative fact? After all, isn’t it the fact that I have this normative disposition that I am recognizing?

How does the normative level of description—the hermeneutic level, as he calls it—fit into naturalistic, causal descriptions of humans? There is a vast literature that is not engaged with, and it would be nice to know why not. Similarly, in order for these dispositions to be spontaneous, they must be “mine” in a strong sense that is reminiscent of the “identification” literature. As that literature shows, it is not easy to fit identification into naturalism. A sense of the crudity of belief-desire models (155) is no reason to ignore these discussions since, as they show, the problems are independent of such models.

The primary focus of these essays was not meant to be metaethics (3), and so the focus of my worries may seem unfair. However, the central theme is the regeneration of “liberal-naturalism,” and the success of that project turns, self-avowedly, on developing a post-critical naturalist metaethics. One cannot help but think that more emphasis should have been placed on developing the details of the metaethics and presenting it in a clearer and more compelling manner. There is, instead, a certain tendency toward “negative theology” that is unhelpful. That said, the project is a fascinating one, and the worries about contemporary society that it responds to are genuine. It is also crucially important, and relatively rare, to have the discussion framed by the larger context of the history of naturalism and liberalism viewed both as intellectual movements and as ideas shaping social institutions and structures.

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