

**John Skorupski's *The Domain of Reasons***

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John Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xxii + 525 pp.

As in Helene Hanff's England,<sup>1</sup> one can find in John Skorupski's book, *The Domain of Reasons*, whatever one is looking for. And like Hanff's England, what one finds is as worth the search as one might have hoped. For example, if you are principally interested in practical reason, you need look no further. If traditional metaethics is your concern, you have the right book. If you are interested in normative epistemology, value, the will, moral theory, the emotions, the history of philosophy, or modality, then you will find ample discussion thereof within its pages. However, unlike Hanff's England, *The Domain of Reasons* is not for tourists. It is a book of surpassing philosophical erudition and tremendous range. It is a bold and stimulating work, simultaneously highly original and yet connected to a long tradition of philosophical thought. At the same time, it is in certain ways a careful and cautious work. Despite its daunting size, it rewards careful reading and amply rewards the investment of time and consideration.

There are two ways, at least, to frame Skorupski's *magnum opus*. One is as a book that defends a new version of Critical Philosophy, taking up what Skorupski sees as the well motivated, but not quite successful, project of Kant, and later on the logical positivists and Wittgenstein. The second is as a series of substantive and interconnected views about how particular topics or domains of discourse—value, normativity, and alethic modality to name but a few—can be understood as reducible to reasons, or reason sentences. The former way of framing *The Domain of Reasons* invites one to consider the foundations of philosophy and philosophical thought, both analytically and in its historical context. The latter way offers a rich variety of views on topics of interest in both normative and non-normative philosophy. In the book, these two frames are not easily separable, because it is Skorupski's particular way of addressing Critical Philosophy's earlier failures that motivates many of the substantive views on individual topics. At the core of his book, however framed, is the claim that all non-descriptive domains of discourse can be analyzed in terms of reasons discourse.

His metaethical view, or perhaps one should say 'metanormative', since it applies to reasons of all kinds, goes under the heading of 'cognitivist irrealism'. Like error theory, it is committed to the truth-aptness of normative judgements and to the non-existence of robust moral properties. Unlike error theory, cognitivist irrealism holds that there are true positive normative judgements. Skorupski departs from contemporary error theorists<sup>2</sup> because he, unlike they, rejects what he calls 'global realism' (5). Global realism is the view that all propositions are factual, where the sense of 'factual' is that of the world being thus and so. Instead, he proposes that non-descriptive propositions can be true without there being truth makers for them on account of the capacity of agents to have spontaneous normative insight. This insight is not to be confused with intuition about normative facts, but instead is a basic, non-perceptual faculty of rational cognizers. We can contrast our capacity for spontaneous normative insight with our capacity for receptivity, which allows us, under the right conditions at least, to grasp the empirical world as it is. Of course, it is not reasonable to accept things being as they seem to us in every circumstance, and thus we must be able to tell, at least under conditions suitable for reflection, whether or not we ought to do so. Consequently, one of the most in depth and interesting chapters in the book concerns warrant for both our non-normative beliefs and our normative ones.

The capacity for spontaneous insight into normative truths is the central innovation in Skorupski's revision to Critical Philosophy, which he calls 'the normative view' (18). Earlier efforts at Critical Philosophy, notably Kant's and that which came to be associated with Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle, failed to provide a sound connection between a rational cognizer's thought and the world. For Kant, the difficulty arose out of the unbridgeable gap between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms. For the positivists and Wittgenstein, it was the view of language as being bound up with itself rather than connected to the world. The normative view sees us as individuals situated in the world with the capacity to recognize when our beliefs about the world are warranted.

The ambition, and depth, of this central aspect of Skorupski's book is such that it is difficult to comment meaningfully on it in a short space. There is much to wonder at. The distinction between spontaneity and receptivity, critical to his psychology and epistemology, will sit more easily with some philosophers than with others. Naturalistically inclined normative realists, intuitionists, and expressivists are frequently motivated in their views by what, in Skorupski's terminology, might be described as the challenge of normative receptivity. Skorupski's distinction between receptivity and spontaneity is the foundation of his rejection of their approach to metaethical inquiry as the discovery of how, or whether, we are able to come into sound epistemic contact with substantive normative facts.

Metaethical foundations aside, the substantive claims about reasons, value, and modality all deserve more attention than they can be afforded here. One thing that is interesting to note is that despite the radical nature of the foundational project, the substantive views hew closely to more orthodox positions. For example, while one will find the perhaps surprising claim that alethic modal propositions can be analyzed in terms of and even reduced to epistemic reasons, the resulting logic is no more exotic than S5. Buck-passing about value follows from the sophisticated account of reasons to feel (evaluative reasons). And a nuanced, but mainstream version of externalism about reasons for action is a consequence of the apparatus that emerges from cognitivist irrealism.

This combination of highly original work on the foundations of normativity combined with substantive views that accord well with those arrived at from more conventional starting points is one of the particular appeals of *The Domain of Reasons*. It is also pleasingly congruent with one of the important thoughts behind cognitivist irrealism, that rational agents, upon suitable reflection under common epistemic circumstances will agree.

*The Domain of Reasons*, at over 500 pages, is a long book, but no longer than it needs to be. It is an important work, one that eschews faddishness and stakes out original ground with élan and a rare depth of learning. In many respects, the last 15 years have been something of a golden age for work on normativity. Skorupski's contribution ranks as among the most important written during this time. One need not agree with its fundamental approach, nor with the specific views for which it argues, to come away with a deeper understanding of normativity and of philosophy more generally.

<sup>1</sup> H. Hanff (1970), *The Duchess of Bloomsbury St.*, in *84 Charring Cross Road & The Duchess of Bloomsbury St.* New York City: Viking Press.

<sup>2</sup> See J.L. Mackie (1977), *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin Books: London. For a more recent discussion, see J. Olson (2010), 'In Defence of Moral Error Theory', in M. Brady (ed.), *New Waves in Metaethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 2-84.