

# The Critical Project Today

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As befits its title and heft, *The Domain of Reasons* is a magisterial work.<sup>1</sup> John Skorupski presents nothing less than a systematic account of the normative realm as a whole, which he interprets in terms of reasons to believe, to do, and to feel. Moreover, he situates his account within an illuminating discussion of developments in thinking about normativity from Kant's "Critical turn" onward—connecting his view dialectically not only with Kant, but with a series of important post-Kantian thinkers, including Hegel, the Intuitionists, the Logical Positivists, and the later Carnap and Wittgenstein. In so doing Skorupski makes a number of novel and important contributions to our understanding of these thinkers, and constructs a compelling philosophical narrative that leads to his own view, the "Normative view", a form of "irrealist cognitivism".

Skorupski takes from Kant's Critical project the idea of arguing that: (i) however opposed they might seem, skepticism and traditional responses to skepticism share certain assumptions; (ii) these assumptions are part of the problem, not of the solution, in systematic philosophy; and (iii) they can and should be rejected—opening up the way for new and more credible ways of thinking about reality and establishing the possibility of knowledge and morality. *The Domain of Reasons* does not shrink from any of these tasks.

The key defective assumption uniting skeptics and their adversaries, in Skorupski's view, is "global realism", the conjunction of two theses:

[i] factualism: to assert any proposition is to say that some fact obtains,

[ii] cognition independence: facts are cognition independent. [7]

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Skorupski writes, “the Critical standpoint says that if we accept both (i) and (ii) then no knowledge at all is possible” (7). Kant, Skorupski believes, clearly rejects (ii) in treating the facts of the empirical world as a “joint product of the forms of our sensibility and things in themselves” (10). This, however, leads to Kant’s two worlds and “transcendental idealism”—a metaphysical “stalemate”, in Skorupski’s view (13).

Instead, Skorupski argues, Kant should have seen that his account of principles of pure reason would enable him to reject (i), since “that there *are* requirements of reason is not made true by any fact” (11). This involves rejecting a “correspondence” picture of truth, but not (ii) or the idea of “substantial facts” that goes with it—it just means that not all truths should be understood as holding “in virtue of” such facts. Such a distinction is far from *ad hoc*, he claims, since the line demarcating these two classes of truths follows a “fundamental epistemological and ontological distinction”, between the normative and the non-normative (29), which remains even after we have taken into account thick concepts (97–98).

By retaining (ii), Skorupski reinstates within the Critical tradition the possibility of “often knowable cognition-independent facts”—enabling us to appeal to such facts in giving the epistemology and truth-conditions for descriptive propositions. For purely normative propositions, including those in the epistemology of the factual, no such appeal is possible—for them, inquiry is not to be understood in terms of more or less reliable interaction with facts, nor is the appearance/reality distinction to be explained in terms of “fitting” or “not fitting” the facts. Rather, a distinctive “epistemology of the normative”, of which more later, underwrites the difference between genuine vs. merely apparent normativity (94). The upshot is an irrealism or non-factualism about normative truths—strictly speaking, there are no facts about what reasons someone has, or what reasons there are.

This might seem to be seriously revisionary, but for Skorupski, factualism and the correspondence theory are not really part of common sense. Locutions like, ‘The fact that he had no reason to do it...’ involve only *nominal*, not substantive, factuality. By contrast, an implicit grasp of the *is/ought* distinction is part of our common sense, and irrealism about the normative preserves this. In neither intuition nor theory, Skorupski argues, do we have an intelligible picture of how purely normative claims could represent any sort of fact—natural or “non-natural”—for “no object of any kind can have *intrinsic* normativity” (451). This idea, that “*normativity is not picturable*”, that “the idea of a normative fact is inherently unintelligible”, Skorupski finds also in Wittgenstein’s “rule-following considerations” (451–52). And the “true

importance” of these considerations—“whether or not this was Wittgenstein’s conclusion (whether or not he *came* to any conclusion)” —is that they “refute global realism” (446) by refuting factualism *about the purely normative*, while leaving in place the possibility Skorupski favors, factualism about the purely descriptive. (Here Skorupski apparently rejects a global unraveling of factualism via the idea that *meaning is normative*, though I am not sure I understand his view on this question and so, apart from a brief comment at the end, will leave it aside.)

Still, a puzzle remains. If “reason relations”—the basic form of purely normative propositions—are unreal, no part either of the causal order or of a “rational order” intuited by a quasi-perceptual form of insight, how do we gain epistemic or semantic access to them? And even if we reject the “truth-maker” picture for normative claims, don’t we still need to understand under what conditions they are true?

One way of reducing puzzlement would be to adopt a form of non-cognitivism, constructivism, or fictionalism about normative claims, but Skorupski rejects these possibilities. Non-cognitivism gets its appeal from (i), which he has already found reason to reject, and from controversial views about mind and language. And constructions and fictions exist only thanks to actual operations of human thought and invention, whereas “What there is reason to believe, feel, or do is in no way mind-dependent” (457).

Skorupski’s solution to the puzzle follows the ambitious Critical path first explored by Kant. Do not pronounce directly about truth and existence, but ask instead about the very conditions for knowledge to be possible. In so doing, Skorupski also follows Kant in distinguishing between *receptivity* and *spontaneity*. The key example of receptivity is sensation—sensory input arrives “from without”, originating from objects that owe nothing to our perception of them. Of course, raw sensory input is not yet cognition—for that, on the Kantian view, concepts must be applied, and this is the work of a different kind of faculty, *understanding*, “whose distinctive power is that of applying concepts to the materials provided by sensibility” (12). But what guides this power of judgment? A concept can be thought of as involving a rule, but then, as Kant argued, to avoid regress judgment must operate other than by following a rule itself. It must be a form of free but order-imposing activity, a *spontaneity*, akin to autonomy in the practical sphere.

Skorupski seeks to demystify spontaneity, excising the Kantian idea of freedom as “uncaused causation” and replacing it with the idea that spontaneity is a “response or disposition...that *comes in the right way from, is genuinely that of, the actor*” (406, emphasis added). This is not a matter of being “uncaused”, but of coming “from the actor’s nature” with no “alien” influence—as a disposition would if it were “accepted

uncritically into one's thinking from others" or the ill-considered result of fatigue or spleen. A spontaneous response need not be "intuitive" or "innate" or arise "immediately" (406–07). Indeed, it can be the result of prolonged reflection and discussion with others. Spontaneity thus also contrasts with *conventional* or *artificial*, and is akin to what Wittgenstein had in mind "when he invokes 'natural ways of going on'" in his discussion of rule-following (407). Although it is not easy to tell whether a response on one's part is genuinely spontaneous, this is, for Skorupski, the question I must ask myself when I reflect upon any matter—alone or with others—right down to the bottom: "Is that what I *really* think?"

What typically marks such a response as spontaneous is "a certain experienced or felt normative harmony"—not only does it seem to me as if I really *do* think this way, but it also feels as though I have *reason* to do so, even if I cannot articulate what this reason might be (407). When this felt normative harmony breaks down, when, for example, I am spontaneously disposed to accept someone's testimony, but then feel an unaccountable hesitancy in relying upon it—as if there were not adequate reason to do so—then I am in a normative fix. "Where there is disharmony I'm not warranted in trusting to the spontaneity of my responses" until I find some way of achieving harmony or of explaining the disharmony away (408–09).

Thus we see that Skorupski's view concretely embodies the essential Kantian link between self-determination and judgment. Indeed, Skorupski goes further—all the way to metaphysics—speaking of the "indissoluble Critical tie between *autonomy*, *knowledge*, and cognitivist irrationalism about reasons" (23). Why is this so?

...if autonomy and knowledge are possible there must be norms knowable a priori; if there are such norms, knowledge of them must be a product not of receptivity but of pure spontaneity; if that is possible, norms cannot be factual propositions. [23]

What pure spontaneity can deliver by way of reasons is for Skorupski much more expansive than Kant allowed, since Skorupski allows spontaneous *feeling* to enter self-determination alongside spontaneous belief and will; it is equally an "epistemological basis" for normative truths—in this case, for *reasons to feel* (27). In Skorupski's view, Kant's failure to recognize the possibility of *sui generis*, irreducible reasons for feeling—reasons to desire, admire, appreciate, be grateful, etc., which Skorupski calls "evaluative reasons"—led him to "distor[t] the content of morality" (27) in ways long familiar to those who have criticized Kant for his excessive formalism.

Moreover, Skorupski takes as a starting point not full-blown Kantian autonomy, but *self-determination*, guidance by what one *takes* to be reasons, whether they are or not (388). Further, the process of taking something to be a reason carries us beyond pure self-scrutiny to include the attempt to share reasons with others. In taking myself to have a reason, I must, on Skorupski's view, take myself to have a warrant other rational beings could in principle acknowledge. I might begin with a clear sense that the parallels postulate is true and self-evident, that I "understand why it must be so" (408). But when I attempt to share my understanding with mathematicians, who point out possibilities I had missed, I lose the "felt" normative assurance I had in the postulate and its self-evidence (cf. 159). "Dialogic" convergence of spontaneous responses among inquirers—based upon a commitment to the universality of reasons rather than being brought together by interacting with a realm of facts—lies at the basis of normative knowledge. "Self-evidence is a property only of norms" and "Normative propositions can be known through self-evidence because their epistemic basis lies solely in spontaneity and convergence" (415).

It is difficult to know whether one's response in a given instance represents genuine spontaneity—even when a judgment "seems right" we still need to submit our judgments to the perspectives and thoughts of others, and the discipline of trying to make one's views clear and convincing to them. This is no threat to autonomy, no "transfer" of epistemic self-determination to an "alien" source, because the authority of others—the mathematicians, in my case—was itself "conferred" by me on the strength of my sense of their greater credibility: "what we freely accepted and trusted would still be the contribution *we* made" (388). My own, seemingly spontaneous dispositions are the inevitable starting point of my normative thought. Were I to accord no default epistemic authority to these "default" dispositions to trust my own eyes or memory or thoughts, or to trust others, I would have nowhere to go epistemically—no capacity for learning, no way to climb out of the normative hole I would have dug for myself. But once these seemingly spontaneous dispositions get learning underway, they also provide the stuff for self-scrutiny and shared scrutiny—defaults are defeasible and revisable as we together seek reflective normative harmony.

Spontaneity in the practical sphere is "dialogical" as well. Skorupski sides with Hegel, not Kant, in accepting the importance of *Sittlichkeit* in understanding right and wrong, "We cannot construct morality either from the purely individual standpoint of conscience or from that of abstract theory" (389). At the same time, however, community standards are not in themselves determinative—if I defer to them, then, absent coercion, that is my doing. I can criticize my community's moral

judgments immanently, as civil rights advocates did by holding white citizens to a standard equality to which they gave lip service, or I can adopt a more radical standpoint—after reflection and dialogue I might simply find self-evident on reflection a principle of justice deeply at odds with common sense and practices: “Here I stand, I can do no other.” As in theoretical reason, we must recognize this limiting case: there would be nowhere for me to go normatively if I somehow withdrew all authority from my own seemingly spontaneous dispositions to believe or defer or feel or act. Whether my idiosyncratic stance will turn out to be an example of moral “insight”, or mere dogmatism on my part, is for Skorupski a normative question—one which his meta-theory of the normative leaves open. “Moral common sense can get it wrong” (389).

What his meta-theory *does* say, however, is that, even though we would frame this as a question of who is “getting it right or wrong”, there is no real fact about this—for we are in normative territory. “[S]ince moral wrongness is relative to warrant, the judgment of a moral community might be right relative to its epistemic warrants, but wrong relative to [mine]” (389).<sup>2</sup>

Here we find the “crucial lack of parallelism between the epistemology of factual judgments and the epistemology of reasons” (415). Based on their experience, let us say, the Ancient Greeks converged upon the idea that water is a basic substance, and had the warrant that comes from harmony with their considered, reflective higher-order views about what they have reason to believe. We moderns have converged upon the idea that water is not a basic substance, and let us suppose that we, too, have this sort of harmonious reflective justification. But, assuming away complexities of translation, Skorupski would not have us say that they were “right relative to their warrants” while we are “right relative to ours”. There are substantial facts to be right or wrong *about*, facts to which our claims are answerable, and which afford a robust, mind-independent notion of *reliability* for methods of inquiry.

But in the case of normative beliefs, it seems, warrant is all there is, and while spontaneous reflection and dialogic convergence can produce higher and wider levels of warrant, there appears to be no place for the idea of fully warranted but mistaken normative beliefs.

The process leading to [their] a priori warrant is...: spontaneous normative dispositions, the search, where necessary[,] for reflective normative harmony, and discussion with others with a view to

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of basic differences in spontaneous willing, see Jonas Olson’s contribution to this symposium,

checking for convergence. There is no other check on reliability beyond these. [414]

In the case of the parallels postulate, by contrast, it was possible for an entire community of inquirers—the Ancient Greeks, say—to find a proposition self-evident under normatively harmonious dialogic reflection, and still be wrong.

But now suppose that we humans are at “the end of inquiry”, and there is a fundamental principle of geometry or mathematics that spontaneously seems to our finest minds to be true, and self-evidently so, after the most thorough dialogical discussion. Still, we humans have no choice but to work with the particular spontaneous dispositions to believe or find credible we have, and these might be limited in various ways. It seems coherent to imagine that possibilities beyond our cognitive and imaginative limits show that this principle fails. But what about normative propositions, including the proposition that this geometric or mathematical claim is self-evident?

To think a proposition self-evident is to be spontaneously disposed to judge it true just in virtue of understanding it. It *is* self-evident if that judgement, made on that basis, perhaps through added reflection, is warranted. [414]

At the end of inquiry, humans are wrong about the mathematical or geometric principle, but, it seems, not about it being self-evident, or certain, or rationally required. That seems to me an uncomfortable result—weren't we wrong both about the fact and about its epistemic status? And given the tight connections between which principles of mathematics, geometry, and logic hold true and which relations of evidential support or inferential relevance obtain, won't it in general be difficult to prise apart the possibility of ideally-justified error in former case from the possibility of ideally-justified error in the latter? The two would seem joined at the hip, even if each has its separate head. (Here, too, is a place to insert the question of what the impact would be on his realism-about-the-factual/irrealism-about-the-normative if meaning is normative.)

Skorupski writes that, beyond the many arguments he makes,

...there is an underlying, stage-setting thought that I myself find very persuasive: ‘normativity’ can be nothing more than a way of talking about that by which self-determining—reason-sensitive—agents steer. It must come down to their reasons for belief, feeling, and action, to the normative relation between facts, on the one hand, and those reason-responsive actions or states, on the other. [5]

This beautifully-crafted image leads naturally to the thought that the facts are out there, while how we are to steer among the facts is not a further fact—it must somehow come from us. That is the idea of “the common source in spontaneity of all propositions about reasons” (23). But does this support the conclusion that being the best-charted course—the course ideal dialogical spontaneity would be disposed to plot—is all there is to being the right course, to being fully “reason-sensitive”? Factual hazards to navigation can exist that outstrip our capacity to know them—mightn’t there also be normative hazards of this kind?

Skorupski discusses the intriguing case of Tom, “who is subject to a psychological syndrome that makes him incapable of experiencing or understanding feelings like gratitude. Can we,” Skoupski asks, “say there is nonetheless *reason* for Tom to be grateful to Mary [for doing him a good turn]...even though he can’t see it”<sup>3</sup> (254) To sharpen this doubt, he asks the reader to consider whether “there’s reason for the cat not to torture the mouse, if only it could see it” (254).

A tough question! But I have no similar doubts about whether it is a *bad thing* that the mouse is painfully tormented by the cat. And in a similar way, I have no doubt that Tom is *missing out on*, failing to be sensitive to, an important value in human relations—and that his life and his relations with others would be *better* if he could come to feel gratitude. Even if *he* can’t see this. Skorupski reminds us that not all lives must follow the same ideals, it “depends, at least within limits, on what matters to a person—what comes home to that person as worthy of pursuit” (256). This is true, but what matters to a person (or a mouse) can “come home to” him whether or not he, or anyone, can acquire warranted belief about it or the reasons it gives. And if Skorupski is right about “buck-passing” (82ff), wherever there is value or disvalue, there will be reasons.

It is typical of Skorupski’s thoroughness and depth that he provides an extended discussion of questions about the possibility of errors in the normative realm in the closing sections of *The Domain of Reasons*. In the course of that discussion he broaches the question of ultimate normative disagreement:

To defend a norm one must argue that those who disagree with it have misunderstood it, or that their judgment is not genuinely spontaneous...or that their spontaneity is in some way faulty, as in the case of gratitude-blind Tom. [499]

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<sup>3</sup> It is a separate question whether *Tom* could “have” this reason. On the important distinction between *there is a reason* (say, to believe that *p*) and *x has a reason* (to believe that *p*), see Quassim Cassam’s contribution to this symposium.

My question is whether we mightn't all, even under ideal normative harmony and convergence, have faults like Tom's—limits in our spontaneity that render us unable to grasp reasons that really are there, and that could affect the quality of our lives or inquiries.

Certainly there exist reasons that *I* can't grasp, and so my comment here is meant as an invitation to the author to render clearer to me how his irrealism about the normative handles such worries. My worry is a version of the familiar worry about irrealism—that there can be truths that go beyond our epistemic reach, even in an ideal limit. At least, so long as that epistemology is not of the “whatever it takes” sort, but rather is grounded in something real, something within our grasp—such as our spontaneous dispositions and dialogue with epistemic peers. Skorupski's position is that this thought about truth exceeding our reach makes perfect sense applied to objects inhabiting the causal realm, but not when applied to reasons or values. I'm not sure about this synthesis, or its stability.

Skorupski's *Domain of Reasons* is a remarkable achievement, one of the very few most powerful, systematic, and well-pondered books on normativity to emerge in the 20 or so years since that topic has taken center stage in philosophy. It breathes new life into the Critical project initiated by Kant. We are fortunate indeed to have it.