

John Skorupski

The Domain of Reasons.

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2010.

496 pages

US\$99.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-958763-6)

The Domain of Reasons is about ‘normativity and reasons’ (1), two topics of great interest to philosophers. As if this wasn’t enticing enough, John Skorupski suggests that if we get our account of normativity and reasons right, we will have an edifice in terms of which we can understand the interplay of self, thought and the world (1). These are broad horizons and the ground covered in the book (as well as the book itself) is substantial. Skorupski navigates a clear path ably, making good use of examples throughout.

The most fundamental claim of the book is the ‘Reason Thesis’: all normative concepts (or, in the case of thick concepts, the normative part of the concept) are reducible to the notion of a reason. Consequently, normative propositions can be regarded as propositions about reasons (77). This thesis is especially bold given how Skorupski demarcates the normative domain. The normative contrasts simply with the descriptive, and so includes epistemology as much as ethics. Indeed, of the ‘normative’ concepts discussed, many of them, such as a prioricity, necessity and evidence, are not uncontroversibly normative at all. If this expansive notion of the normative is taken in conjunction with the Reason Thesis, the concept of a reason must be an extremely pervasive one. ‘Thinking is sensitivity to reasons’ (1). It does not follow from this that Skorupski has a narrow ‘rationalist’ view of thought. Sentiments too fall under the concept of reason. One of the main aims of the book is to provide ‘a unified account of all three kinds of reasons—reasons for belief, reasons for action, and reasons for feeling’ (2). These three types of reasons are primitive and irreducible.

Skorupski also advances a meta-normative position in *The Domain of Reasons* (though, of course, thanks to the Reason Thesis this essentially amounts to a second order position about the nature of reasons). Against non-cognitivists, he argues that normative claims and judgments really are assertions of truth-apt propositions. However, these are a special class of ‘normative propositions’, distinct from factual propositions, and which do not represent states of affairs. Hence, there is no need for ‘substantial’ or real normative facts. This meta-normative niche, ‘Cognitive Irrealism’, seems plausible only insofar as the semantics of normative discourse is suitably deflated, as Skorupski is well aware. The semantic condition, that whatever can be thought and talked about is real, is said to be ‘no part of semantics’ (421). We can carry out a Davidsonian semantic program and talk of semantic values without ever postulating the existence of truth makers (421-2). In other words, it is possible to be a cognitivist without needing to fit (substantial) normative facts into the world.

The Reason Thesis and Cognitive Irrealism are logically distinct, though Skorupski does think that they ‘hang together’ (4). The book is divided into four parts.

Part 1 outlines and defends the Reason Thesis. Parts 2 and 3 then develop this thesis with respect to belief, sentiment and action. Part 4 propounds Cognitive Irrealism.

One interesting aspect of *The Domain of Reasons* is how it attempts to close the gulf between reason and sentiment. We can have reasons to feel guilty or pleased just as surely as we can have reasons to think or act in particular ways. This is contrasted sharply with the Kantian separation of reason and sentiment and the claim that ‘propensities of feeling’ and inclinations cannot be commanded (Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc. 1993, 12). According to Skorupski, reasons to feel are a source of practical reason:

Bridge Principle: Whatever facts give x reason to feel Φ give x reason to do the Φ prompted action, in virtue of being a reason to feel Φ (267).

An example Skorupski offers of this principle involves gratitude. If someone does me a good turn, I have reason to feel grateful. Because I have reason to so feel, I have reason to act from that gratitude, e.g., by thanking the benefactor, etc. Skorupski is not a sentimentalist about practical reason: the Bridge Principle is a source of practical reason, not *the* source. Crucially, it cannot account for the role of impartiality in our practical reasoning (264). Nevertheless, I have some reservations about the Bridge Principle, despite Skorupski’s claim that it is obvious (267).

Firstly, the notion of a feeling ‘prompting’ an action is not properly explained. Skorupski qualifies the Bridge Principle, limiting it to only those feelings which prompt characteristic actions—some feelings, such as joy, evidently do not (265). However, one might wonder in what sense *any* feeling prompts a characteristic action. Clearly, the same feeling can prompt different actions from different agents. Are there any constraints upon the kind of actions that can be prompted by a feeling? If there are, these need to be specified in a non-arbitrary manner. If there are not, the Bridge Principle looks less plausible. Imagine a man who has just lost his job and is about to have his house repossessed. In such a case, it seems correct to say that the man has good reason to feel harassed and panicked. However, these feelings prompt the man to drive across the country bare-footed, eating nothing but Toblerone. Would we say in such a case that he has reason to act in this way? I think not.

Secondly, even where the prompting relation between a feeling and action is less extraordinary, it is disputable whether a reason for the former necessarily means an agent has a reason for the latter. For example, if Bill discovers that Fred has been slandering him mercilessly behind his back, he may well have reason to feel angry. However, it does not follow that Bill has reason to physically lash out at Fred at their next encounter, even though this is the prompted action. Indeed, this divide between a reason to feel and a reason to act in the prompted respect is, I think, quite a pervasive one. ‘It is understandable that you feel that way’, one might say, ‘but that is no reason to behave in the way that you did.’

Perhaps Skorupski could reply that I am conflating sufficient reasons to act (which reasons to feel need not supply) with prima facie reasons. However, there is a danger that the reason to feel drops out of the picture altogether in this case. Maybe Bill does have a reason (though not a sufficient one) to physically lash out at Fred in light of the slandering, but does this have anything to do with a reason to feel? The Bridge Principle states that there is reason for the Φ prompted action precisely because there is reason for Φ . It seems to me that if we insist that Bill really does have a reason to lash out at Fred, it does not depend upon there being a reason for Bill to feel angry, but links the fact of slandering and the act directly.

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