

Epistemic Self-Audit and Warranted Reasons

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As John Skorupski notes in his marvellous new book there is an intuitive distinction between the reasons there are for a person to ψ and the reasons a person has to ψ . Consider epistemic reasons, that is, reasons to believe something. There are reasons for me to believe that the butler did it if there is conclusive evidence that the butler did it. But they are not reasons I have if I don't have access to the evidence or don't recognize it as evidence that the butler did it. The reasons a person has are what Skorupski calls 'warranted reasons'. If reasons are warranted reasons then 'actors can always in principle know what reasons they have, just by careful enough reflection' (2010: 107). Warranted reasons are, in this sense, self-accessible. If a person has such reasons 'he can know - recognize, tell - that he has them, solely by means of normative insight and self-examination, including attention to the way things seem to him' (2010: 108). The capacity to assess reflectively what one has reason to believe is epistemic self-audit. Self-audit 'must be completable by self-examination and reflection alone' (2010: 21), and Skorupski maintains that the concept of a warranted reason is shaped by the concept of self-audit. For 'what one has reason to believe, feel, or do is determined by one's epistemic state - the set of facts that one can be aware of by self-examination alone' (ibid.).¹

Skorupski notes that his concept of a warranted reason is doubly internalist. The facts that determine warranted reasons are 'facts of which the actor can be self-aware'. In addition, 'that they determine warranted reasons is something the actor can tell a priori' (2010: 23). My question is whether we should accept Skorupski's internalism.² To fix ideas, consider the following example: I see that there is a frog on the desk before me and believe that there is a

¹ In Skorupski's Kantian terminology the set of facts one can be aware of by self-examination alone is the set of facts one 'apperceives'.

² Skorupski describes himself as a 'cognitive internalist'. Cognitive internalism says that 'only considerations which an actor has the ability to recognize as reasons can be reasons for that actor.

frog on the desk. Warranted reasons are sufficient reasons, so let's begin by simply asking whether, in this case, I have sufficient reason to believe that there is a frog on my desk. It seems that I do. If I can see that there is a frog on my desk then I know that there is a frog on my desk. Seeing that P is a way of knowing that P, and if I know that P then I have sufficient reason to believe that P.³ What gives me sufficient reason to believe that there is a frog on my desk is not the mere fact that there is a frog on my desk (because that could be so even if I have no reason to believe that it is so) but rather my seeing, and thereby knowing, that there is a frog on my desk.⁴

Now consider, again, the claim that what one has reason to believe is determined by the set of facts that one can be aware of by self-examination alone. What gives me sufficient reason to believe that there is a frog on my desk is that fact that I can see that there is a frog on my desk but it seems that I cannot establish just by self-examination that I see that there is a frog on my desk. Seeing that there is a frog on my desk is a factive mental state and I can't establish solely by self-examination that I am in such a state. Notice also that if I see that there is a frog on my desk then it isn't just that there is a reason for me to believe that there is a frog on my desk. I also have a reason - a warranted reason- to believe there is a frog on my desk. So this looks like a case in which I have a warranted reason that is not determined by something that I can be aware of by self-examination alone.

What should we say about this case? One reaction would be to take it as showing that warranted reasons needn't be self-accessible; one can have sufficient reasons to believe

³ Skorupski argues that there can be cases in which one is able to see that P without being able to know that P. He adds, however, that 'there is indeed a broad range of normal cases in which seeing is knowing' (2010: 209).

⁴ The idea that it is knowing that P that gives one sufficient reason to believe that P goes against any attempt to give a reductive analysis of knowledge in term of truth, belief, and having sufficient reason to believe. The hypothesis that one has sufficient reason to believe that P if one knows that P is similar to, and partly motivated by the same considerations as, Timothy Williamson's hypothesis that 'knowledge, and only knowledge, justifies belief' (2000: 185).

that P even though we cannot tell solely by means of self-examination that one has them. Call this option A. A different reaction would be to argue that it is possible to establish just by self-examination and reflection that I see that P even if seeing that P is factive. So there is no need for an internalist to deny that I have sufficient reason to believe that P and that my sufficient reason is that I can see that P. Call this option B. Finally, there is the option of arguing that although I have sufficient reason to believe that there is a frog on my desk, what gives me sufficient reason to believe this is something other than, or additional to, my seeing that there is a frog on my desk. My warranted reason is my epistemic state, and seeing that P is not an epistemic state. Call this option C.

What is an epistemic state? Skorupski distinguishes between an epistemic field and an epistemic state. A person's epistemic field consists of the set of facts that are epistemically accessible to her by skill or luck. Epistemic states are subsets of epistemic fields. For a fact to belong to your epistemic state 'it must itself constitute sufficient reason for you to believe that it obtains' and 'you must be able to know that it obtains solely by attending to it' (2010: 113). With this in mind, consider the following passage:

[S]suppose.... that there is a frog on the desk before me. I have sufficient reason to believe that there is because I can see it. The fact that there is is in my epistemic field. But it's not true that what gives me sufficient reason to believe that there is a frog on my desk is the fact that there is. I have sufficient reason to believe there is a frog on the desk because I have sufficient reason to believe that I see there is; what gives me sufficient reason to believe that I see there is, is that I seem to see there is (...). Finally, what gives me sufficient reason to believe that I seem to see there is just is that I seem to see there is. That fact in itself constitutes sufficient reason for the belief that it obtains. Hence the facts that there is a frog on my desk and that I see that there is are not in my epistemic state, though they are in my epistemic field, whereas the fact that

I seem to see a frog on the desk is in my epistemic state, as is the fact that I have a sick feeling (2010: 112).

It is not in dispute here that I have sufficient reason to believe that there is a frog on the desk before me. The question is: what gives me sufficient reason to believe this? According to Skorupski I have sufficient reason to believe there is a frog on the desk because I have sufficient reason to believe I see that there is. On this account, it is not just seeing that P that gives me sufficient reason to believe that P but having sufficient reason to believe that I see that P. My sufficient reason for believing that I see that P is that I seem to see that P, and what gives me sufficient reason to believe that I seem to see that P is just the fact that I seem to see that P.

This looks like a defence of option C. Option A is out of the question for Skorupski because it amounts to a rejection of his conception of a warranted reason. Option B might appear to rely on a perverse conception of what one can know just by self-examination. That leaves option C, which has foundationalist overtones. The implication is that the ultimate source of my warrant for believing there is a frog on my desk is that I seem to see one, and seeming to see a frog is a subjective, sensory state, just like a sick feeling. One question, therefore, is whether option C is defensible. The other is whether there are good reasons for rejecting the other two options. I want to suggest that option C has much less going for it than Skorupski's discussion implies, and that both options A and B have much more going for them.

The fact that option A amounts to a rejection of internalism about warranted reasons is not an argument against this option. A proponent of option A might argue as follows: in the good case in which I see that P I have sufficient reason to believe that P. In the bad case in which I merely seem to see that P but don't actually see that P (say because P is false) I don't have sufficient reason to believe that P. In the bad case there is no reason for me to believe

that P even if I take myself to have such a reason. I can't tell just by self-examination and reflection whether I am in the good case or the bad case, and this supports the idea that warranted reasons needn't be self-accessible. In the good case I have sufficient reason to believe that P even though I can't tell just by self-examination and reflection that I have sufficient reason to believe that P. And in the bad case I lack a sufficient reason to believe that P even though I can't tell just by self-examination and reflection that I lack such a reason.

This goes against the idea that 'we can always work out, simply by careful reflection on our warranted reasons, whether we have sufficient reason for a belief or need to enquire further' (2010: 110). Whether I have sufficient reason to believe that P depends in part on whether there is sufficient reason to believe that P, and that is something that cannot always be established simply by careful reflection. In contrast, Skorupski denies that you only have a reason if there is a reason, and this denial does important work in his discussion. Here is an example:

Suppose someone in the security office emails you that there is a primed bomb in the basement. You have reason to leave fast. But, though you have no reason to believe it's a hoax, it is: there is no bomb in the basement, as you would easily discover if – unreasonably sceptical- you went down there to check. You have a reason to leave even though there is no reason to leave. So your warranted reasons, the reasons you have to ψ , are not a subset of the reasons there are for you to ψ (2010: 112).

There is a better way of thinking about this case. The alternative is to say that in case of a hoax you don't have a genuine reason to leave even though – reasonably enough- you take yourself to have such a reason. If, after the event, you discover that you were the victim of a hoax you would be entitled to say "I didn't realize it at the time but I had no reason to leave. How could I have had a reason when there was no reason?" Similarly, even if I have

sufficient reason to believe that I see that P I don't have sufficient reason to believe that P if it is false that I see that P. In the good case I have sufficient reason to believe that P. In the bad case I only have sufficient reason to believe that I see that P.

As Skorupski notes, his notion of a warranted reason is very strong. Your warranted reasons right now are 'those you could recognize now without further factual inquiry' (201: 111); a warranted reason for ψ -ing 'consists in sufficient reasons for believing that there are reasons to ψ ' (2010: 113). This conception of a warranted reason is underpinned by his conception of autonomy:

Autonomy, as understood in this book, is personal insight into and self-determination by reasons.... As the term is understood here, a person who acts autonomously grasps reasons by first-person insight and believes, feels or acts "from" or "out of" the reasons he grasps. Thus autonomy requires the power of assessing for oneself, by one's own reflection, what one has sufficient reason to believe or to feel or to do. In particular autonomous actors must be able to assess whether they have sufficient reason to believe something, or whether they need to do some further investigating.... Call this process of assessing what reasons one has in one's epistemic state epistemic self-audit.... Furthermore, self-audit must be completable by self-examination and reflection alone. The question whether further empirical investigation is required cannot always require further empirical investigation (2010: 21).

The thought, presumably, is this: if I am an autonomous, self-determining actor then I must act from reasons and not merely for reasons. To do that I must know what reasons I have. I know what reasons I have by self-audit, which must be completable by self-examination and reflection. Thus, autonomy requires that I act from reasons which I can know I have by self-examination and reflection alone, and such reasons are warranted reasons.

No doubt I do often know what reasons I have, and am able to act from those reasons. But I cannot always know just by careful enough reflection what reasons I have. I cannot know just by careful reflection whether I have reason to leave the building. If the email telling me that there is a bomb in the basement is not a hoax then I have a reason to leave the building in a hurry but I cannot tell just by careful reflection that the email is not a hoax. So my reason for leaving the building when the email is genuine is not, in Skorupski's sense, a warranted reason. But it is still a reason I have, and when I act from this reason I am acting autonomously. If I lack autonomy in Skorupski's sense then one might wonder whether autonomy in this sense is something which we possess.

Now consider again the case of the frog on the desk. According to option A, I have sufficient reason to believe that there is a frog on my desk if I can see that there is a frog on the desk. I have sufficient reason for this belief in virtue of what I can see, and this is so whether or not it is possible for me to establish just by careful reflection that I can see a frog on my desk. So far, there are no convincing reasons for rejecting this option in favour of option C. But it would be worth pausing to consider whether, in general, it is possible for one to establish solely by careful reflection that one sees that P. The intuitive worry about this suggestion is that seeing that P is a factive mental state and therefore not neutral in respect of the external environment. Does this mean that I cannot know merely by careful reflection that I see that P? Timothy Williamson raises a similar question about the scope of introspection, and comments that 'pretheoretically, it is natural enough to say that I can introspect that I am occurrently aware that this computer screen is before me, or that I occurrently remember that Trincomalee is in Sri Lanka. Since "aware" and "remember" are factive, the deliverances of introspection would not then be neutral in respect of the external environment' (2010: 113).⁵

⁵ See McDowell 2006 for a related discussion. He asks: 'Why should it seem to follow that when I know that I see that things are thus and so, my knowledge cannot have the distinctive character of self-knowledge?' (2006: 92). What is special about self-knowledge is that it isn't

What Skorupski means by “reflection” might be different from what Williamson means by “introspection” but the question raised by Williamson’s suggestion is this: why can’t I know by reflection and self-examination that I see that P, even though ‘sees that P’ is factive? This would allow seeing that P to count as a warranted reason for believing that P even if warranted reasons must be recognizable solely by self-examination.

If this is right then option B is not a non-starter, but it is important not to exaggerate the significance of this possibility. The worry to which this option is a response is if I see that P then I have sufficient reason to believe that P despite the fact that I cannot establish by self-examination and reflection alone that I see that P. Option B raises the possibility that I can know by self-examination that I see that P, but the deeper point is that I can have sufficient reasons to believe that P even though I can’t tell solely by means of self-examination that I have them. I have sufficient reason to believe that there is a link between cigarette smoking and cancer because I have read studies which propose such a link. However, I cannot tell by reflection alone that I have sufficient reason to believe that cigarette smoking causes cancer because I cannot tell by reflection alone that the studies proposing such a link are reliable. I have a warranted reason for leaving the building in a hurry if the email telling me that there is a primed bomb in the basement is not a hoax but I can’t tell by reflection alone that the email is not a hoax. And so on.

These examples suggest that the point at which we should part company with Skorupski is the point at which he insists that the warranted reasons a person has to ψ must be self-accessible. We can argue about what is and what is not self-accessible, but the fundamental objection is that the reasons a person has to ψ needn’t be self-accessible in the

mediated by behavioural evidence and doesn’t need a basis. My knowledge that I see that P is fallible but this doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have the distinctive character of self-knowledge. Its having this distinctive character is in no way undermined by that fact that ‘S sees that P’ is factive.

manner proposed by Skorupski. The crucial distinction is between having a genuine reason to ψ and merely (but mistakenly) taking oneself to have a reason to ψ . One has a genuine reason to ψ only if there is a reason to ψ , and whether there is a reason to ψ may well depend on facts about the world which cannot be known to obtain by self-examination or reflection.

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