

wronged him or her. He or she may “hang onto” the grievance or relinquish it. It is often assumed that the primary victim of a wrongful act has an absolute prerogative to forgive (or not to forgive) the perpetrator who committed that act. But some victims may be unscrupulous, abusive, unkind, or manipulative; for this reason there are valid moral grounds for criticizing victims’ responses to perpetrators. MacLachlan suggests that the prerogative to forgive may be better understood by thinking of it as a moral power. It may be more helpful to value agents’ capacities to choose or not choose forgiveness, rather than to value forgiveness itself. If we cease to think of the victim’s prerogative as absolute, we open the door to persons other than the primary victim of a wrong having the moral capacity to forgive its perpetrator.

Schott seeks to bring out the political dimensions of the concept of evil by considering war rape and enforced impregnation in times of war. These are attacks on the human reproductive capacity and on the very principles of political life. Supported, incited, and contextualized by intense group conflict, such evils are inflicted by individuals on others as members of collectivities. Schott quotes Susan Brownmiller’s statement that “rape is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear” (81). Rapes and forced impregnation in Bosnia in the 1990s were genocidal in intent. Schott says that these acts force social identities into chaos, because the next generation will be a reminder of torture: on her account, victims will lose all rights and lose their polity. At this point, I would welcome empirical evidence, because the matter strikes me as not entirely evident *a priori*. My own highly preliminary inquiries suggest that women’s responses vary. Some kill unwanted infants; others abandon them; others bring them up fondly with deceptive stories about their origin. Still, Schott is clearly right to insist that we explore the political aspects of this kind of evil.

This book deserves attention and careful study.

**The Moral Skeptic.** By ANITA SUPERSON. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

*Lisa Tessman*

When I first saw Anita Superson’s *The Moral Skeptic*, I was excited to read it in part because I had not seen any sustained feminist treatments of the topic. The idea of the moral skeptic, I thought, is so ill-conceived in mainstream analytic philosophical discussions of moral skepticism that a feminist revision was long overdue; I was curious to learn what shape Superson’s feminist engagement

with the topic might take. When Superson pointed out in her opening paragraph that the “practical skeptic” has been understood as a skeptic who “doubts whether we should follow morality, whatever its content—that is, he doubts the existence of moral reasons” and announced that she would be offering a critical revision of the picture of this skeptic because she believes that “the traditional picture of the . . . skeptic . . . has limited the kind of response that philosophers can offer by way of defeating the skeptic” (3), I thought: yes, this is exactly what feminists must do to engage with the traditional discourse on moral skepticism. Feminists must reject the traditional goal of *justifying* (that is, offering justifying reasons for) morality to the (traditional) skeptic, and instead worry about those real, live people who reject (particular) practices of morality, and who do so out of the complex mixture of apparent reasons, fears, desires, habits of bad faith, thoughtlessness, and so on that are developed and reinforced through widespread social support for immoral practices. I have never—outside of a professional philosophy context or a philosophy classroom where the hypothetical moral skeptic is invoked—met anyone who fits the description of the skeptic given in the traditional discourse, namely someone who both refuses morality and claims that he/she would accept morality if only he/she were provided with justifying reasons for it. I have, however, met many people who question or reject morality or pieces of morality and whose stance is impervious to justifying reasons because it is backed by something other than (just) their rationality. Finally, I thought, in this book I would find an analysis of possible responses to the “why be moral?” or “why be good?” question that would address actual questioners, not the idealized skeptic who seeks—and would be transformed by—justifying reasons.

My disappointment came in Superson’s next paragraph where she reveals that she has no intention of moving away from the project of justification because she understands this project as defining the limits of philosophy proper: “A significant part of the entire enterprise of philosophy is justification: if we give up the project of justification, we give up doing philosophy, or the heart of it, anyway. Thus jettisoning the project of defeating the moral skeptic, perhaps because it is too difficult to do so or even because we do not care about the challenge the skeptic poses, would not be a satisfactory response” (3). Superson believes that the philosophical project of demonstrating that it is rational to be moral can have the effect of making actual people become morally good, and she indicates that this is an important part of her goal. However, she also suggests that in response to cases where someone (whom Superson calls the amoralist) who is provided with moral reasons still fails to be motivated by them to act morally, philosophers have nothing more to say: “whether one is motivated by the reasons one has is a psychological, not a philosophical, issue” (10). The *skepticism* of the amoralist can be successfully rebutted by the philosopher; but the amoralist’s failure to be moral is not only left unchanged, it also must, according to Superson, be left untheorized by the philosopher. This conception of philos-

ophy as narrow in scope and isolated from other disciplines is what I was surprised (and disappointed) to find in a work in feminist ethics; it restricts the philosopher from engaging in the practical work of feminism, work that, in my view, must critically address the way that *actual* people—not rational agents—live.

An alternative that I, and I think some other feminist ethicists, find attractive is to deny that the scope of philosophy is so narrow and to insist instead that the traditional bounds of philosophy must be changed and expanded; psychology and other empirical sciences are important areas for philosophers to become familiar with precisely so that we can understand how morality may or may not work in actual rather than idealized people. I read Superson as not being interested in going in this direction. I take it that she would reject, for instance, Margaret Urban Walker's call for theorizing about ethics in an "empirically obligated" way (Walker 2003, 104). Superson's revisions of the traditional skeptic—although sophisticated and meticulously argued—are not, in my view, powerful enough for what feminist ethicists are after: critical understandings of actual moral practices and insight into how such practices might be changed so as not to support unjust or oppressive workings of power. Superson does seem to want this—after all, she wants to show that oppression is not only immoral but also irrational *in order to* stop people from acting in oppressive ways—but she either denies or is untroubled by the fact that people commonly act irrationally and may be unmoved by her arguments.

Her arguments about how best to conceive of the moral skeptic in order to subsequently be in a position to defeat (that is, provide justifying reasons to) her/him, however, are still valuable and interesting, though at times quite repetitive. The book includes a convincing challenge to the assumption that, in defining the moral skeptic as a rational agent who takes morality to be at odds with rationality, rational choice and action should be equated with the maximization of the agent's own expected utility or the promotion of her/his self-interest (which in turn is typically understood in terms of the satisfaction of desires/preferences). Superson demonstrates the flaws in this assumption by pointing out that conceiving of rational choice in terms of expected utility or self-interest is problematic because it leaves aside both 1) the ways that people tend to benefit immorally from privilege (including social group privilege such as male privilege or white privilege) where such privileging is not captured by the expected utility- or self-interest-based model and thus is not shown to be irrational by an argument that defeats the traditional skeptic, and 2) the fact that preferences may be deformed (for instance, by oppression), and thus that a model of rational choice based on preferences should not consider acting on such preferences to be rational. Recognizing these problems with existing responses to the traditional skeptic, Superson shows that defeating the skeptic must involve showing that it is irrational to privilege oneself, and that if one defeats the skeptic by arguing that acting morally is rational because it maxi-

mizes the satisfaction of desires (including deformed desires), one leaves these desires—that reinforce oppressive relations—unchallenged. The failure to challenge deformed desires, Superson believes, plagues care ethicists' response to the skeptic, a response that Superson classifies as an internalist argument because it assumes that moral reasons are intrinsically tied to motives, in this case to the motive of care (which, as Superson points out, is likely to be problematically adapted or distorted for women). Although these are solid—and in some senses feminist—arguments in support of revising the traditional picture of the skeptic, I think that Superson's engagements with other feminist thinkers could have gone much deeper: the treatment of care ethics, for instance, draws on older and widely criticized works in feminist care ethics, leaving out more recent and stronger versions.

Superson reconstructs the picture of the skeptic in other ways as well, believing that employing a more inclusive picture of the skeptic will make the accompanying defeat of the skeptic more thorough. Thus she takes pains to consider both the *action skeptic* (who denies that when a particular moral action conflicts with self-interest, it is rational to act morally), and the *disposition skeptic* (who denies that there are reasons to be disposed to act morally), proposing her view that the rationality of actions and the rationality of dispositions can be determined only interdependently; she also addresses the *motive skeptic* (who thinks it is enough to “go through the motions” of morality, denying that it is rational also to have a moral motive). Superson extends her examination of motives into a careful and detailed discussion of internalism/externalism. Rejecting the internalist claim that one cannot even conceive of someone who accepts moral reasons and yet is immoral (since for the internalist, moral reasons are necessarily tied to moral motives), Superson endorses a “weak externalism” according to which a moral reason may or may not motivate; however, as mentioned above, Superson does not pursue cases in which moral reasons fail to motivate, believing them to be outside of the scope of philosophy.

At the core of Superson's theory is the importance of a Kantian respect for humanity, one's own and that of others: Superson relies on the (rational) requirement that one recognize one's own worth when she identifies the satisfaction of deformed desires as irrational; furthermore, Superson supports her claim that exercising social privilege is irrational by pointing to the inconsistency (and thus irrationality) of elevating one's own worth over that of others. Most importantly, Superson conceives of rationality in terms of coherence or “practical consistency,” which she describes along Kantian lines: it is inconsistent to recognize one's own rationality as making one a source of ends while denying that other rational beings are equally a source of their own ends; one may not consistently respect humanity in oneself but not in others. This equips her to make her most noteworthy point in the book: the skeptic, Superson argues, should indeed be shown that it is rational to be moral, but it is rational to be

moral not because it maximizes one's expected utility, but rather because immorality is inconsistent (and hence irrational if rationality is conceived in terms of consistency). Superson is thus able to suggest that one can defeat the skeptic without ever having to show something that, in her view, is implausible, namely that it is always in one's self-interest to be moral. Had I been wanting to know how best to demonstrate to an idealized, rational agent that rationality requires morality, Superson's strategy would have been more enticing—and much more palatable—than the traditional routine of showing that it is in one's self-interest to be moral. However, I am still not sure what to say to actual people (including myself sometimes) who find myriad ways to shrug off moral concerns.

#### REFERENCE

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