

In Response to the Editorial Entitled “On the Use of the Concept of “Fairness” in Ethics”

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I found the recent editorial “On the Use of the Concept of ‘Fairness’ in Ethics” (Spier 2012) amusing and perplexing—amusing insofar as it demonstrated that editors’ prerogatives (and autonomy) are not dead, and perplexing insofar as it was difficult—nay, for me, just about impossible—to figure out why it had been published. What, other than relatively unsophisticated musings and well meaning ramblings—was it supposed to add to our wisdom about ethics in science and engineering?

I might be being too harsh. In the second half of the editorial Spier does begin to talk about the need for laws administered for all—here I would say what he does not, that this is the notion of equal justice under the law. Earlier Spier has said that talk of fairness and justice is tautological, but I don’t think so. (See John Rawls.) Additionally, Spier wants to subsume the merits of justice under species survival. I’m not sure of that, nor has he argued for it. Justice may be a social virtue even for people who can’t work; where families or societies cannot fulfill basic needs for all, some will go without care, but isn’t that a far cry from subsuming justice to survivability?

And why does he spend so much time in this editorial on fairness and market rewards? If the point is that reward hierarchies should be subsumed to criteria about justice, Spier should have alerted us to this at the outset, and spent some time developing the argument further. I would still be at something of a loss to understand the editorial’s relationship to ethics in science and engineering, but I might have been more willing to grant the author his prerogative—particularly given his fondness for markets and private enterprise.

Reference

Spier, R. E. (2012). On the use of the concept of “fairness” in ethics. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 18, 601–603.

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