Getting Things Right: Fittingness, Reasons, and Value, by Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp.

The Range of Reasons in Ethics and Epistemology, by Daniel Whiting. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp.

As luck would have it, the sleepy port city of Southampton is home to some of the leading younger *metanormative* theorists. This relatively novel label is a generalization of the more familiar 'metaethics'. It's motivated by the observation that ethics is not the only normative domain. For example, we say things like 'You shouldn't believe that!' or 'That the glaciers are melting is a reason for believing that the climate is changing', which seem to point to *epistemic* normativity. It's thus worth asking domain-neutral questions about basic normative concepts and properties and their relationships. That is the project of two exciting new monographs from Southampton philosophers, Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way's *Getting Things Right: Fittingness, Reasons, and Value* and Daniel Whiting's *The Range of Reasons in Ethics and Epistemology*.

Their common starting point is the observation that normative concepts come in many varieties. They include deontic ones like *ought*, *may*, and *must* (and arguably *right* and *wrong*), evaluative ones like *good* and *admirable*, and less easily characterizable notions like *reasons* and *fittingness*. While all these concepts appear to have something to do with guiding our responses, there are also significant differences among them. If we found a way to analyze everything else in terms of what comes "first", we could see what unifies the normative, and would have a clear target for the project of finding a place for normativity in a naturalistic worldview, whether by reduction or accommodation.

For quite some time, it has been popular to argue that the notion of a normative *reason* is the most fundamental (e.g. Dancy 1993; Scanlon 1998). Reasons, in the relevant

sense, are considerations that *favour* actions or attitudes to some extent. It's plausible that reasons pro and con together determine what we may, must, or ought to do (though factors that condition or modify the weight of reasons also play a role in this process). They can serve as premises of reasoning, and more generally guide the responses of rational creatures. We appeal to them to justify our behaviour and understand that of others. So it's clear that they're normatively central. But it doesn't follow that they're *fundamental*. The Southamptonites are united in rejecting the 'reasons first' ideology. Instead, they aim to account for reasons in terms of something more basic. In case of McHugh and Way (MHW) it is good reasoning and fittingness, while Whiting appeals to modal connections and rightness. In this review, I'll exclusively focus on their respective accounts of the central notion of a normative reason, setting aside other topics the books cover, such as value (MHW) and rationality (Whiting).

McHugh and Way: Fittingness, Good Reasoning, and Reasons

McHugh and Way's project is to give a constitutive account of reasons in terms of good reasoning, which in turn is explained in terms of preserving fittingness. Fittingness, of which more below, is roughly the kind of appropriateness or correctness involved in believing what it true and admiring what is admirable. So, what MHW say is that a reason for a response A is a fact which is a *premise of good reasoning* to A from fitting responses. I might reason (enthymemetically) as follows:

> The heater is broken.
>
> It's going to get cold in the house unless I get it fixed by an electrician.
>
> I'll get an electrician to fix it.

Supposing that my initial belief about the heater is fitting (that is to say, true), and that in the circumstances, the house will get cold without it, it will be good reasoning to conclude that

the house will get cold. Then, MHW say, <the heater is broken> is a reason to believe that the house will get cold. Similarly, if it's fitting for me to intend to prevent the house getting cold and that won't happen unless I get an electrician to fix the heater, it's good reasoning to form an intention to get an electrician on that basis. Then <It's going to get cold in the house unless I get it fixed by an electrician.> is a reason to intend to get an electrician.

What, then, makes a mental transition an instance of good reasoning? For MHW, individual pieces of reasoning are good in virtue of exemplifying good *patterns* that the subject can competently follow, like modus ponens and means-end reasoning. And what makes a pattern good, roughly speaking, is that it *preserves fittingness*, other things being equal. Paradigmatically, modus ponens is a good pattern, because beliefs are fitting if and only if they are true, and reasoning in accordance with modus ponens guarantees that the conclusion is true if the premises are true. Similarly, if it's fitting to intend an end, it is fitting to intend the necessary means, as the simplest means-end principle says. The examples above exemplify these patterns.

Importantly, many patterns of good reasoning are *defeasible*. One of MHW's favourite examples is the Testimony Pattern, according to which if somebody said that *p*, *p.* While this obviously doesn't always hold, MHW maintain that *normally* when someone testifies to something, it is true. Here 'normality' doesn't mean 'with high probability', but is rather based on the function of testimony as a social practice of sharing information. MHW note that it's obviously not the case that an inveterate liar's testimony is normally true, but that just means that someone's being an inveterate liar is defeater for reasoning to the truth of what they say (47). One question that arises here concerns just how internalist or externalist the account is. Suppose that fishermen are as a matter of fact unreliable about the size of their catch. Jock, a fisherman, says "I caught one this big". Is it good reasoning for me to conclude that Jock caught one that big, given that he said so and he's a fisherman, if I don't know that

fishermen normally exaggerate? If we think it is, whether something is in the relevant sense normally fittingness-preserving seems to be relative to the subject's beliefs. But then it seems that for someone paranoid enough, the Testimony Pattern isn't a pattern of good reasoning, even if as a matter of fact normally when someone testifies to something, it is the case.

Setting this issue aside, MHW make use of the notion of defeasible reasoning to offer an ingenious account of the *weights* of reasons. Their idea is to start from *outweighing*, understood in terms of *defeat* (125). Suppose it's good reasoning on its own to conclude that we won on the basis of the fact that Seán said that we won, and likewise to conclude that we lost on the basis of the fact that John said that we lost. What if Seán said that we won *and* John said that we lost? Given their relative reliability, it might be good reasoning to conclude that we won. If so, MHW say, < Seán said that we won> is a weightier reason to believe that we won than <John said we lost> is to believe that we lost.

More generally, in part to account for the relative weights of reasons for non-conflicting responses, MHW appeal again to patterns. To take their example, suppose I've both promised to go and I would enjoy going. Which is weightier? Well, let's consider the following general pattern of reasoning:

I would enjoy F-ing.

I've promised to G.

I can't both F and G.

So, I will G.

If this pattern is normally fittingness-preserving (while drawing the opposite conclusion isn't), <I've promised to go> is a stronger reason for me to go than <I would enjoy going>, since promising in general defeats enjoyment.

Once MHW have their account of the weights of reasons, they go on to explain deontic facts in terms of good reasoning. Simplifying a little, for them, you *ought* to go to the

concert, for example, if and only if the only conclusion to which you can reason well from the admissible facts – which includes all the facts if you're an objectivist, while only epistemically accessible ones count if you're a perspectivist – is the intention to go to the concert (161).

McHugh and Way's story is appealing and inventive. It offers neat solutions to many puzzles and problems. For example, it explains why there can't be reasons for headaches: headaches can't be conclusion-responses of reasoning. It also explains why incentives for having attitudes – that is, good things that would follow from having them – are not reasons for them. Suppose it's true that I'd be happy if I believed in God. Even so, since 'Believing in God would make me happy; So, God exists' is not fittingness-preserving reasoning, such happiness isn't a reason to believe in God.

I do have reservations about the core idea that fittingness is more basic than reasons, however. First, MHW note that some people argue that good reasoning is to be understood in terms of reasons rather than vice versa: maybe reasoning is good when it takes us from reasons to the response that those reasons support (Dancy 2018). They raise two main objections to this Reasons View. The problem of bad starting points is that we can reason well from premises that are not, in fact, reasons for the conclusion. In Williams's (1981) classic case, if you believe there is gin in the glass though it is in fact petrol, you can reason well to the conclusion that you'll take a sip. But as things are, you don't have a reason to take a sip. MHW consider various ways to modify the Reasons View to accommodate this and reject them, in part because they face the second main problem of making sense of the point of engaging in reasoning, if it isn't simply to 'get things right'.

I'm not so confident that the Reasons View is problematic. Here's a generic formulation of the most natural modification:

The Good Case Reasons View

> For reasoning to be good is for its premises together to provide sufficient reason for the conclusion-response in the good case.

What makes for a good case, then? Well, reasoning can have different sorts of premises. In the good case, the mind-to-world premises will be *true*, and there will be *sufficient reason* for the world-to-mind premises, such as intentions. We need this bifurcated definition of the ideal starting point, because different kinds of premise-states can be involved. The Williams reasoning is good, because you will have a sufficient reason to take a sip if you have sufficient reason to drink gin in the first place and your belief is true. The point of reasoning, on this view, is to extend the assumed fact-based reason-responsiveness of your attitudes. An account along these lines seems to me to be at least as appealing as fittingness-preservation and worth developing (see Kauppinen 2018).

The only one of MHW's challenges that seems to apply to the Good Case Reasons View concerns defeasible reasoning. They hold that it is good reasoning to go from <I promised to meet her> to the intention to meet her (36), though having promised to meet someone is not a sufficient reason to meet them. One might, of course, suspect that such reasoning is not good, unless there's some further unstated premise or the reason *is* sufficient in context (even if it *would not* be sufficient in the presence of some further considerations). Alternatively, if we grant that the reasoning is good although the reason is insufficient, we might weaken the criterion and say, for example, that in good reasoning, the premises together provide *more reason* for the response than for salient alternatives, or more generally make a better case for it. Either way, we get the result that there can be good defeasible reasoning understood in terms of the premises being contextually sufficient or strongest reasons for the conclusion-response.

This takes us to questions about the fundamentality of fittingness. It's an obvious and familiar challenge to fittingness first accounts that they try to explain the familiar, like reasons or good reasoning, in terms of the obscure. It's easy enough to give examples of fittingness: it's fitting to believe the truth, admire the admirable, intend to do what's choiceworthy, and so on. MHW say that all these attitudes 'get things right' when they're fitting. But what does that amount to? In Chapter 3, they reject accounts that appeal to correct or accurate representation. But that leaves us with a hodgepodge of different relations. Some people *merit* admiration, but truths don't merit belief – for belief, accuracy seems to be the right characterization. And fitting intentions are neither accurate nor merited by actions – indeed, to say that an intention 'gets things right' stretches the metaphor. Let me emphasize that the issue isn't that many different sorts of things can make attitudes fitting. It's rather that there seem to be many different relations between attitudes and their objects that amount to 'fittingness'. It may be that some of them are at the end of the day analyzable in terms of reasons, while others may amount to non-normative representational correctness. If so, it's doubtful that we have a fundamental normative category here.

Whiting: Reasons and Modal Robustness

Let me then turn to Whiting's alternative proposal. The overall strategy of his ambitious book is to develop a modal account of objective practical reasons and then methodically extend it to possessed and subjective practical reasons and then to the epistemic domain. Along the way, he derives analyses of rationality, justification, knowledge, and epistemic worth. Here, I will have to focus on just some of the key moves.

Whiting takes *rightness* to be the basic notion in terms of which we can analyse reasons, together with modal relations among actual and possible facts. His use of the term is somewhat unusual, at least to my ear. In the case of actions, Whiting focuses on what he calls

rightness 'in a respect' – eating your cake may be wrong, but in his sense it can simultaneously be right in the respect that it gives me pleasure. In the case of beliefs, it matches what many think of as fittingness: a belief is 'right' if and only if it is true (indeed, he indicates in correspondence that he regards 'rightness' and 'fittingness' as interchangeable). In his sense, then, rightness isn't deontic: something may be right without its being the case that you ought to or may do it. I'll soon come to some doubts about whether this sort of correctness is an appealing starting point for understanding the normative domain.

Whiting begins his account of objective practical reasons with a tentative defense of the view according to which reasons are *evidence* for rightness in a respect. That your cake looks delicious is evidence that it would give me pleasure, and thus evidence that it is *de re* 'right' in a respect for me to eat it. (I don't need to *think* that it's evidence of rightness under that description, or *de dicto*.) Perhaps this is why the fact that your cake looks delicious is a reason to eat it. But what kind of reason? Unlike MHW, Whiting is very much concerned with the distinction between reasons that only *justify* something and those that *demand* a response. On his initial account, justifying reasons are considerations that are evidence that acting in some way is right in some respect, and demanding reasons are considerations that are evidence that it is *wrong* in some respect *not* to act.

Making this distinction allows for distinguishing between what we ought to do and what we must do. While we *ought* to do something when the balance of demanding reasons favours it, it's not necessarily the case that we *must* do it, since the demanding reasons in favour may be outweighed by demanding *and* justifying reasons *not* to do it. For example, if something is supererogatory, we ought to do it, but we don't have to, because some consideration justifies not doing it.

However, Whiting is ultimately unhappy with appealing to evidence, and wants to find a deeper explanation. That's in part because it is tempting to understand evidential

strength in terms of probability, which Whiting argues isn't how reasons work. To modify his example, suppose I'm offered a bet with 1000:1 odds of getting a pleasant massage versus harm to someone. For Whiting, such odds don't *at all* give a reason to take the bet, because doing so could easily harm someone. (Incidentally, I don't agree with this verdict – a good chance of a pleasure seems like a pro-reason to take the bet, while the small chance of harming someone is a stronger con-reason.) That is to say that while the harm is unlikely, the world in which it happens is very *similar* to the actual world.

Considering such cases motivates Whiting to move to a *modal* account of reasons. What he says is that a fact F is a justifying (objective) reason for S to A if and only if R is a respect in which it is right for S to A and R obtains in every nearby (metaphysically possible) F-world (64). Similarly, F is a demanding reason for S to A if and only if W is a respect in which it is wrong for S not to A and W obtains in some nearby F-world. So, the fact that you promised to give Lana a banana is a demanding reason for you to give Lana a banana if and only if breaking a promise is a respect in which it is wrong for you not to give Lana a banana and you'll be breaking a promise by not giving Lana a banana in some nearby world in which you promised to give her a banana. (Yes, that's quite a mouthful, and I don't mean the banana.) As Whiting himself glosses it, 'If there is a demanding reason for a person to act, they could easily do something wrong in some way by not acting.' (68) For him, how *weighty* a demanding reason is depends both on the robustness of the modal relationship between the reason and the respect in which the act is wrong – that is to say, how large the proportion of nearby F-worlds is in which W obtains – and the degree of wrongness of W. If you could *very* easily do something wrong by not A-ing, your reason to A is weightier.

Let me pause here to register some deep worries about this account. First, the contributory notion of rightness or wrongness 'in a respect' is obviously crucial to Whiting's analysis. I must register that I'm very skeptical of it as a foundational notion. To put it

bluntly, I think all that we can mean by this kind of talk is that there is some reason for or against actions or attitudes. Saying that eating your cake is right in the respect that it gives me pleasure just is to say that though eating your cake isn't right, that it gives me pleasure is a reason for me to eat it. Reasons are indeed contributory, and plausibly determine what the right thing to do is, together with other factors that bear on the deontic status of actions and attitudes. But 'respects' or 'ways in which' something is right have no place in this story – it's not as if there's *two* factors that contribute to making something right, reasons and 'respects'. (Whiting does disavow reductive ambitions, so he is in principle happy even if it turns out that the notions of rightness in a respect and a reason simply mutually elucidate one another.) Whiting, to be sure, thinks of 'rightness' as a non-deontic fact akin to fittingness of attitudes, and as such something that is potentially not determined by reasons. But that's of little help here, since there is no *contributory* sense of fittingness (see also MHW, 83). It might be fitting to admire the ingenuity of a criminal without admiring the criminal himself – but that's a matter of it being fitting *tout court* to admire the ingenuity, not something that weighs in favour of admiring the *criminal* and is outweighed by his other features.

But even if we set this aside, the other key aspect of the account, the reliance on the modal link, is suspect as well. Suppose that contributing to the climate crisis is a respect in which it is wrong for you not to stop driving a gas-guzzling SUV, and that in a large proportion of nearby possible worlds in which Helsinki is the capital of Finland, your driving contributes to the climate crisis. Whiting acknowledges that in such scenarios, the fact that Helsinki is the capital of Finland is a rather weighty demanding reason for you to stop driving an SUV (69). He's happy with this, because given the modal connection, the fact about Helsinki 'indicates' that by driving an SUV you contribute to the climate crisis, and insists that once we look at what the fact does rather than what it is, the implication isn't implausible. I beg to differ. At this point, we've lost sight of the fundamental fact that reasons

count for (or *against*) actions, since your reasons to stop driving an SUV have nothing to do with which city happens to be the capital of Finland. This is not an accident, since for Whiting, the reason-relationship is just a modal correlation between a non-normative fact and (the suspect notion of) contributory rightness or wrongness. But such correlations can obtain in the absence of any favouring, justifying, or rationalizing relationship.

I'm thus not hopeful about the prospects of Whiting's account of practical reasons. But could his view work for epistemic reasons? Unlike in the practical case, Whiting holds that there's just one way in which beliefs are right or wrong: by being true or false. The upside of this is that it means there's no need to talk about 'being right in a respect', which gives the account a fighting chance. Plugging in his general account of reasons, he first argues that some fact F is a justifying objective epistemic reason to believe that *p* if and only if in every nearby possible world in which F obtains, *p* is true (132). (It may be worth noting that it follows that <the streets are wet> is *no* reason to believe it is raining if there is even one nearby possibility in which the rain has recently stopped but they're still wet, and that there can only be a justifying reason to believe what is true.) Similarly, F is a demanding epistemic reason *not* to believe that *p* if and only if in some nearby F-world, *p* is false.

Whiting admirably points out that this account has counterintuitive consequences, such as that if *Boris Johnson is the Prime Minister* is false, every fact, say the fact that ducks can swim, is a reason not to believe it (137). He tries to soften the bullet by saying that the strength of this reason depends on the proportion of nearby possible worlds in which ducks can swim and Johnson isn't PM. Well, say that's 90%. Since the weight of reasons not to believe is equivalent to this proportion, that ducks can swim is a pretty strong reason not to believe that Johnson is PM. It may well be more strongly associated with his not being PM than the fact that he hasn't been seen in Downing Street in the last week (maybe he's traveling in Ukraine in many of the worlds in which he's PM). Given these assumptions, that

ducks can swim is, on Whiting's account, a stronger reason not to believe that Johnson is PM than his absence from Downing Street in the last week. Contrary to Whiting, I find this highly implausible. It seems that epistemic reasons, too, are more than modally robust indicators of truth.

Whiting might object that *objective* epistemic reasons are just such indicators. But what we *should* believe in a perspectival or deliberative sense depends on the reasons we *possess*, since only they can guide our beliefs. To possess an epistemic reason, he says, the agent must know the reason-fact, the proposition it's a reason for must be true in a nearby *epistemically* possible world as well as a metaphysically possible one, and they must have the general ability to believe for that reason. Take Whiting's example: the butler's prints are on the gun, so that it could not easily be false that he did (in all nearby fingerprint-possibilities, he's the culprit). If a detective knows that the prints are on the gun, can believe that the butler did it for that reason, and the butler did it in all the nearby worlds with his fingerprints on the gun that the detective can't a priori rule out (that is to say, all her nearby epistemic possibilities), she possesses a justifying reason for believing that the butler did it.

In terms more familiar to epistemologists, possessed justifying epistemic reasons thus consist in *safe evidence.* If the detective does form a justified belief on this basis, Whiting says she *knows* that the butler did it – she has a true belief that could not easily be false, either as a matter of fact or from her perspective (155). We could also put this by saying that possessing epistemic justification puts us in a position to know. Since we must not believe what we lack justification for, it follows that we (perspectivally) may only believe what we're in a position to know (165). Insofar as criticizability is linked with perspectival oughts, we're thus criticizable even if we believe something we objectively ought to believe, if we don't possess the justification. Here we come to a position that is familiar from recent, post-

Williamsonian debates in epistemology. It is to Whiting's credit that he systematically derives it from an overarching account of reasons.

Summing Up

The 'reasons first' programme initiated in the 1990s has lately become the favourite target of a new generation of metanormative theorists. I think it is fair to say that these two books from Southampton represent by far the most systematic efforts to give the pride of place in the structure of normative concepts and properties to some kind of fittingness or correctness. They are both tightly argued and far more wide-ranging than I've had the space to cover here. I've raised some doubts about whether there really is a notion of fittingness that can do all the jobs that would need to be done, but there's no denying that these are impressive efforts.

ANTTI KAUPPINEN

University of Helsinki, Finland

antti.kauppinen@helsinki.fi

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