



## Weighing Reasons\*

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### Abstract

This paper is a response to two sets of published criticisms of the 'Reasons as Evidence' thesis concerning normative reasons, proposed and defended in earlier papers. According to this thesis, a fact is a normative reason for an agent to  $\Phi$  just in case this fact is evidence that this agent ought to  $\Phi$ . John Broome and John Brunero have presented a number of challenging criticisms of this thesis which focus, for the most part, on problems that it appears to confront when it comes to the topic of the weighing of reasons. Our paper responds to all of the criticisms that these critics have provided, shedding fresh light on this interesting topic in the process.

### Keywords

normative reasons, practical reasoning, ought, evidence

In two previous papers, we argued that a fact is a normative reason for one to do a particular act just in case this fact is evidence that one ought to do this act (and, similarly, a fact is a normative reason for one to believe a particular proposition just in case this fact is evidence that one ought to believe this proposition). This is intended to be a highly general and informative analysis of what it is for something to be a normative reason. In one

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of these papers, we considered a range of arguments for and against our analysis of what it is for a fact to be a normative reason, and came to the conclusion that the benefits of the analysis outweigh any costs (with respect to some of the objections we considered, it turns out that there are no real costs; with respect to others, we think the costs are not too high).<sup>1</sup> In the other paper, we contrasted our analysis of reasons in terms of evidence with John Broome's analysis of reasons in terms of parts of explanations, and came to the conclusion that ours is a better analysis of reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Broome immediately responded with three objections to our analysis of reasons, and John Brunero subsequently provided two additional objections in a paper solely dedicated to an attempt to show that not all reasons are evidence concerning what one ought to do, and that not all items of evidence concerning what one ought to do are reasons.<sup>3</sup> In the present paper, we respond to these two sets of criticisms. It turns out that one common theme of our opponents' objections is that the *reasons as evidence* thesis seriously misconstrues the weighing of reasons. Since an account of normative reasons needs to tell us what it is for reasons to have weights, and what is involved in weighing them against each other, we are very grateful to both Broome and Brunero for challenging us to think more carefully about these issues, amongst others. We remain committed to the view that it is desirable to analyze reasons in terms of evidence and oughts, in precisely the way we originally suggested. However, the objections that Broome and Brunero have raised are interesting and sophisticated, and to adequately respond to them we need to clarify our analysis in ways that hopefully will be of general interest to philosophers intent on thinking carefully about normative reasons.

## I. Evidential and Explanatory Properties

At the heart of our analysis of normative reasons is the following claim:

R: Necessarily, a fact  $F$  is a reason for an agent  $A$  to  $\Phi$  if  $F$  is evidence that  $A$  ought to  $F$  (where  $\Phi$  is either a belief or an action).

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, "Reasons as Evidence," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 215-42.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, "Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?" *Ethics* 119 (October 2008), 31-56.

<sup>3</sup> John Broome, "Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity," *Ethics* 119 (October 2008), 96-108 (see 100-103), and John Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," *Ethics* 119 (April 2009), 538-45.

John Broome adduces three objections to R.<sup>4</sup> The first proceeds from the following objection (we do not mean to say it is identical to the following objection, as will become clear). It follows from R that the fact (for let's just say it *is* a fact) that a reliable book says one ought to eat cabbage is a reason to eat cabbage just in case this fact is evidence that one ought to eat cabbage. Furthermore, the fact that a reliable book says that one ought to eat cabbage *is* evidence that one ought to eat cabbage. Therefore, according to our analysis, this fact is a reason to eat cabbage. However, one might object, this fact is *not* a reason to eat cabbage, as it is not part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage. It is not a right-maker.

We have addressed this style of objection in both of our previous papers. We admit that, at least initially, it is intuitive to believe that reasons are right-makers (roughly speaking). Indeed, Broome takes us to be committed to this view (or at least its contingent truth), although we are in fact not so committed. Our response to the above objection is that *either* (1) the fact that a reliable book says one ought to eat cabbage is part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage (given that one indeed ought to eat cabbage) *or* (2) it is not part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage, but it is still a reason.<sup>5</sup> We wish to remain neutral here as to which of (1) and (2) is true.

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<sup>4</sup> Broome sums up our view by saying, “They believe that the property of being a normative reason for *N* to *F* is the property of being evidence that *N* ought to *F*. I call this [the latter property] the evidential property.” (Broome, “Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity,” 101; note that *N* in this sentence corresponds to *A* in the above formulation of R, and *F* corresponds to  $\Phi$ ). This is a fair description of where we would like to end up, although we have stated that our main goal is to argue for the biconditional claim R, rather than a property identity claim, and that if R is true, then the best explanation of its truth would seem to be a property identity claim (to be fair, we stated this in “Reasons as Evidence,” rather than in the paper Broome responds to). We would be delighted if all we were able to establish is that the relevant properties are necessarily coextensive. It might be thought that we confuse motivating reasons and normative reasons. We do not believe that we make any such mistake, and Broome does not accuse us of doing so (although we believe that this is something that he has in the past been concerned that we might be doing). One could incorrectly take a fact to be evidence that one ought to act in a certain way, and act on one's cognizance of this fact, without this implying that the fact *is* evidence that one ought to act the way one acts. In such cases, one's motivating reason will clearly come apart from whatever normative reasons are in play.

<sup>5</sup> For our reasons for making this claim, see “Reasons as Evidence”, section 3.1 (233-4). Very roughly, we believe that either the fact that a reliable book says one ought to eat cabbage is part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage, *in virtue* of being evidence that one ought to eat cabbage, or many other seemingly paradigmatic reasons for eating cabbage are not parts of explanations of why one ought to eat cabbage, as they do not ultimately ground why one ought to do so. Facts about healthiness and tastiness, for instance, are not what

Broome's first objection develops the above criticism as follows. He contends that, although we claim that the fact that a reliable book says one ought to eat cabbage is part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage, and thus we can save the idea that it is (at least contingently) a right-maker, our account of reasons can be shown to be wrong by considering a *counterfactual* case in which this fact is *not* part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage.<sup>6</sup> Such a case, Broome asserts, is one in which this fact is *not* a normative reason to eat cabbage. It is, however, still evidence that one ought to eat cabbage. Therefore, R is false.

Our response should be clear given what we have already said. First, as we have mentioned, we are *not* committed to the idea that all reasons are right-makers. Thus even if the fact that a reliable book says one ought to eat cabbage is not part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage, we are still open to its being a reason.

Still, let us temporarily accept that all reasons are right-makers (and also, of course, that all reasons are evidence of oughts). If we were to accept this proposition, we would accept it as a necessary truth. It strikes us as simply *question-begging*, then, to claim that it is possible for the fact that a reliable book says one ought to eat cabbage to be evidence that one ought to eat cabbage, but not be part of an explanation of why one ought to eat cabbage. Broome gives us no reason at all to accept that this is possible. We could easily accept that it is possible for this fact to fail to be part of an explanation of the fact that one ought to eat cabbage. But then we would also think

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ultimately ground the truth of the fact that one ought to eat cabbage. What exactly *does* ground this fact is controversial, but we might plausibly suppose that it is fundamental facts about welfare (i.e. those facts referred to by the correct theory of welfare) that do so. If one is very demanding, even such obvious reasons to eat cabbage as healthiness or tastiness are not right-makers (or, to take a clearly moral case, the fact that I am helping an elderly person across the road is not a right-maker), absent some special explanation, which our opponents have yet to substantially defend, of how right-making can transmit from welfare considerations, say, to healthiness considerations. Of course, it *might* be claimed (as an anonymous referee reminded us) that the generic fact that cabbage is healthy can explain why a relevant ultimate reason *transmits* to a reason to eat cabbage, *and* also be claimed that the fact that a book says that I should eat cabbage does not permit transmission of an ultimate reason, but the burden is on our opponents to provide a fuller articulation and defense of *this* view about the transmission of reasons.

<sup>6</sup> Broome writes, "Kearns and Star believe that the explanatory property and the evidential property have the same extension. If that is so, no factual example will separate their account from mine. Still, we can separate our two accounts by using an example that they would consider counterfactual." (Broome, "Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity", 101). On the assumption that reasons are right-makers (which Broome himself associates with us), we believe his example is not so much *counterfactual*, as *counterpossible*.

that, were this to be the case, this fact would fail to be *evidence* that one ought to eat cabbage (perhaps in such a possible world it is generally known that this book, though very reliable in general, is *not* reliable concerning matters of diet).

Unless Broome can provide a more detailed case where it is clearly much harder to deny that the fact that a reliable book says one ought to eat cabbage is both evidence that one ought to eat cabbage and not part of an explanation why one ought to eat cabbage (perhaps substituting a set of claims that have the same form), his objection lacks any bite. To finish, we wish to point out that constructing such a case must face the argument that this fact may be a right-maker *in virtue* of its being evidence. Any world, then, in which this fact is evidence that one ought to eat cabbage will be a world in which this fact is a right-maker for the said normative truth (that one ought to eat cabbage). We conclude, then, that Broome's extension of the objection previously dealt with can also be dealt with satisfactorily.

## II. Weighing Reasons and the Weights of Reasons

In the section of Broome's paper entitled "Weighing,"<sup>7</sup> we believe there are two separate objections to our account of reasons. The first may be dealt with rather swiftly. The second is of considerable interest. In this section we will look at the former. It should be noted that these two objections are to our claim that the weighing of reasons is the weighing of evidence, not to our main claim that reasons to  $\Phi$  are evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  (and vice versa).

Broome says that we confuse epistemology with determination.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, we disagree. Broome rightly points out that we conceive of the weighing of reasons as the weighing of evidence. He is also right to say that the weighing of evidence is an epistemological process. Broome then claims that the weight of reasons determines what ought to be done. Furthermore, according to Broome, *this* is not an epistemological process. The weighing of evidence is thus not the weighing of reasons.

We have two replies to this worry. First, it seems to us that Broome is tacitly comparing the *weighing* of evidence with the *weight* of reasons. In so doing, he is not comparing like with like. While the weighing of evidence is

<sup>7</sup> Broome, "Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity," 102-3.

<sup>8</sup> "They confuse epistemology with the determination of facts." (Broome, "Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity", 102.)

indeed an epistemological process, so, we contend, is the weighing of reasons. In both cases, weighing is something we agents do. This is not a point that we accept due to theoretical commitments (although our commitment to R leads to the same view). Indeed, we believe that everyone, including Broome, should accept that the *weighing* of reasons is something people do when working out what they ought to do. Some may prefer to think of this as a non-epistemological *psychological* process (at which point we would wish to raise various objections), but all should agree that the *weight* of reasons is not something people *do*, but neither is the *weight* of evidence. Evidence has its strength independently of anything we do (although what counts as evidence may depend on background knowledge).

Second, Broome's assertion that the weight of reasons determines what one ought to do strikes us as taking for granted Broome's own account of reasons, or at least some type of right-making account of reasons. As we have made clear above, however, we are not committed to such an account of reasons. In fact, Broome's claim that the weight of reasons *determines* what ought to be done assumes more than a right-making account of reasons. It also assumes that reasons are the *only* relevant facts that determine what we ought to do. We see little reason to accept this. We argue in the next section that neither should Broome.

### III. Weighing Reasons and Weighing Evidence

We take Broome's final objection to be very interesting, and by far the most powerful of his objections. It is worth quoting in full:

The epistemological process is a matter of weighing evidence for the proposition that you ought to eat cabbage against evidence for its negation: that it is not the case that you ought to eat cabbage. On the other hand, whether or not you ought to eat cabbage is determined by the weight of reasons for you to eat cabbage against the weight of reasons for you not to eat cabbage. If Kearns and Star were right, and all these reasons were evidence (and if the weight they have as reasons were the same as the weight they have as evidence), it would be determined by the weight of evidence for the proposition that you ought to eat cabbage against the weight of evidence for the proposition that you ought not to eat cabbage. But the proposition that you ought not to eat cabbage is not the same as the proposition that it is not the case that you ought to eat cabbage. Evidence for the latter need not be evidence for the former.

For instance, in judging whether or not you ought to eat cabbage, we might weigh the assertion in Professor Brassica's book that everyone ought to eat cabbage against the assertion in Professor Arnica's book that Professor

Brassica's experimental methods are flawed. But Professor Arnica's assertion is no evidence that you ought not to eat cabbage.

So the weighing of reasons is not the weighing of evidence.<sup>9</sup>

Broome makes his point in terms of determination. Broome claims that the weight of reasons to  $\Phi$  and the weight of reasons not to  $\Phi$  together determine what ought to be done. According to our picture, reasons to  $\Phi$  are evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  and reasons not to  $\Phi$  are evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$ . Thus, Broome claims, whether one ought to  $\Phi$  is, according to R, determined by the weight of evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  and weight of evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$ . However, the evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  is *not* weighed against evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$ , but rather against evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$ . The propositions that one ought not to  $\Phi$  and that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$  are not identical and evidence for one is by no means always evidence for the other. Therefore, identifying the weighing of evidence with the weighing of reasons is a mistake.

As we made clear in our reply to Broome's previous objection, we think Broome's appeal to reasons' determining what ought to be done is problematic. This does not, however, affect the thrust of Broome's objection. A version of Broome's argument, free of talk of determination, can be put like this:<sup>10</sup>

- 1) Evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  is weighed against (only) evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$ .
- 2) Reasons to  $\Phi$  are weighed against (only) reasons not to  $\Phi$ .
- 3) Therefore, if weighing evidence is the same as weighing reasons, evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$ , is (always) a reason not to  $\Phi$ . (from 1 and 2)
- 4) Evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$  is not (always) a reason not to  $\Phi$ .
- 5) Therefore, weighing evidence is not the same as weighing reasons. (from 3 and 4)

There are three premises in the above argument. We accept premise 4. For us, a reason not to  $\Phi$  is evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$ . Evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$  is not (always) evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$  (perhaps as illustrated by the example Broome provides in the

<sup>9</sup> Broome, "Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity," 102-3.

<sup>10</sup> This argument focuses on *weighing*, but a parallel argument that focuses on *weights* can easily be constructed.



quotation above). Therefore, even by our own lights, evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$  is not (always) a reason not to  $\Phi$ . Premise 4 is true. Further, we accept that the argument is valid (or can be made valid without affecting its point).

What of the other two premises? Appropriately understood, we accept premise 1. We believe that evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  *can* be weighed against evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$ , but only when the evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$  is also evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$  (or when the evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  is also evidence that it is not the case that one ought not to  $\Phi$ ).

This leaves us either accepting that weighing reasons is not weighing evidence, or claiming that premise 2 is false. Accordingly, we reject premise 2. That is, we believe that reasons to  $\Phi$  are not merely weighed against reasons not to  $\Phi$ . This is not to say that reasons to  $\Phi$  are *never* weighed against reasons not to  $\Phi$ . Indeed, this occurs, according to us, on just those (frequent) occasions when either the reason to  $\Phi$  is evidence that it is not the case that one ought not to  $\Phi$  (as well as being simply evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$ ) or the reason not to  $\Phi$  is evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$  (as well as being simply evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$ ). Still, there are occasions when a reason to  $\Phi$  is weighed against a fact that is not a reason not to  $\Phi$ . We shall illustrate this with various cases. Consider the following case:

*Indifference:* Stephen is in pain and Daniel has an unlimited supply of easily accessible pain-killers that he could give to Stephen. Daniel knows this and thus has a reason to give Stephen the pain-killers. However, Stephen is indifferent to his pain. Daniel knows this.

In this case, it strikes us that, while the fact that Stephen is in pain is a reason for Daniel to give him pain-killers, the fact that Stephen is indifferent to his pain weighs against this reason. However, this latter fact is *not* a reason not to give Stephen pain-killers. Thus reasons to  $\Phi$  are sometimes weighed against facts that are not reasons not to  $\Phi$ . We think this general observation also applies in the following cases:

*Apology:* Stephen has broken Daniel's arm (and Daniel knows this). This fact is a reason for Daniel to press criminal charges against him. However, Stephen has since sincerely apologized for doing so and is clearly regretful of his actions.

In this case, while the fact that Stephen has broken Daniel's arm is a reason for Daniel to press charges, the fact that Stephen has apologized weighs against this reason. This latter fact is *not*, however, a reason not to press



charges. Thus reasons to  $\Phi$  are sometimes weighed against facts that are not reasons not to  $\Phi$ .

*Inefficiency:* Daniel is contemplating giving to Stephen's charity, to assist poor and able philosophers who don't yet have jobs. There are no other charities of this kind. This charity is an extremely worthwhile cause (and Daniel knows this). This fact is a reason for Daniel to give to Stephen's charity. However, the charity blamelessly uses an inefficient and difficult method of delivering its goods to the people who need it (and Daniel knows all this).

In this case, while the fact that Stephen's charity is an extremely worthwhile cause is a reason for Daniel to give to it, the fact that the charity is inefficient weighs against this reason. However, this latter fact is not a reason not to give to the charity.<sup>11</sup> Thus reasons to  $\Phi$  are sometimes weighed against facts that are not reasons not to  $\Phi$ .

*Stephen's Ass:* A free, and very tasty and healthy meal (meal A) has been offered to Stephen (and Stephen knows this). This is a reason for Stephen to eat meal A. However, Stephen has also been offered another qualitatively identical meal (meal B) (and Stephen knows this). Stephen is not allowed to eat both meals, but even if he were, he wouldn't be able to eat more than one, because he would be completely full by the time he finished the first meal.

In this case, while the fact that Stephen has been offered meal A (and meal A is tasty and healthy) is a reason to eat meal A, the fact that he has been offered meal B weighs against this reason. However, this latter fact is not a reason not to eat meal A.<sup>12</sup> Thus reasons to  $\Phi$  are sometimes weighed against facts that are not reasons not to  $\Phi$ .

*Demanding Promise:* Stephen has promised Daniel that he will show him around Tallahassee when he visits (that'll be fun!). Stephen finds out that fulfilling this promise will be a little difficult to do (as Stephen lacks access to a car).

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this latter fact would be a reason not to give to the charity if one were able to instead donate one's money to a more efficient charity with the same end, or if the charity was to be blamed for the inefficiency, but we have ruled out the presence of such factors.

<sup>12</sup> With respect to an earlier version of this example, an anonymous referee suggested that the fact that by eating A Stephen makes it the case that he cannot eat B constitutes a reason not to eat A. To respond to this criticism, we think it sufficient to indicate that the meals are qualitatively identical, and that Stephen would have no reason to eat more than one meal, even if he could (since he would be full).

In this case, while the fact that Stephen promised to show Daniel around is a reason to do so, the fact that it will be difficult to do so weighs against this reason. However, this latter fact is not a reason not to show Daniel around, because it is not a consideration that can be weighed against the reasons provided by the promise.<sup>13</sup> Thus reasons to  $\Phi$  are sometimes weighed against facts that are not reasons not to  $\Phi$ .

These examples do not rely for their plausibility on identifying reasons with evidence of oughts, although they do (to our mind) help confirm R, as they are phenomena that R predicts. Indeed, Broome's objection has prompted what we take (especially in the light of R) to be a philosophical discovery.<sup>14</sup> Reasons to  $\Phi$  are not only weighed against reasons to not  $\Phi$ . According to us, these are all cases where reasons to  $\Phi$  are weighed against evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$ . Of course, we will not be too concerned if the reader is not convinced that *all* of these cases can be accurately described in this way, as long as he or she appreciates that some of them can.

It seems to us that Broome should consider accepting this discovery and modifying his account in the light of it. According to his account as it stands, facts either play a *for- $\Phi$ ing* role or a *for-not- $\Phi$ ing* role in explaining whether one ought to  $\Phi$ , or ought not to  $\Phi$ , or neither. This account leaves no room for the role played by many of the facts mentioned above. The fact, for instance, that Stephen is indifferent to his pain plays neither a *for-giving-him-pain-killers* role, nor a *for-not-giving-him-pain-killers* role, yet it still clearly can contribute to an explanation of what Daniel ought to do. We suggest then that Broome introduce an additional role for such facts to play in explanations of oughts.

Indeed, this suggestion is quite general. Such facts, and the relation they bear to reasons, need to be acknowledged and accommodated by any satisfactory account of reasons. The *reasons as evidence* thesis very naturally accommodates them – they are evidence that it is not the case that one ought to  $\Phi$ , while failing to be evidence that one ought not to  $\Phi$  (and thus

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Stephen has promised to show Daniel around, then discovers that the only way he could do so would involve leaving an extremely sick person by him or herself. It is essential to our original example that we are talking about a promise, and that there is no other significant demand on Stephen's time.

<sup>14</sup> At least, a discovery in the present context. We have been considering one class of what epistemologists sometimes call *undercutting defeaters*, i.e. *partial* undercutting defeaters (as compared to *complete* undercutting defeaters). For further discussion of the place of defeaters in ethics see Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. Ch. 3, as well as Mark Schroeder, "Holism, Weight, and Undercutting," *Noûs* 45:2 (2011), 328–344.

failing to be reasons not to  $\Phi$ ). Thus, while Broome's third objection to R is of considerable philosophical interest, we believe that a thorough consideration of it leads to increasing the plausibility of R. We conclude that none of Broome's objections to the *reasons as evidence* thesis hits their target.

#### IV. Do Some Reasons Fail to Be Evidence?

So far we have been focusing on the claim that is most central to the *reasons as evidence* thesis, i.e. R (Necessarily, a fact  $F$  is a reason for an agent  $A$  to  $\Phi$  iff  $F$  is evidence that  $A$  ought to  $\Phi$ ). John Brunero does not begin by directly attacking R. He attacks a more specific claim of ours that he articulates and labels as follows.

R\*: Necessarily, a fact  $F$  is a reason for an agent  $A$  to  $\Phi$  if and only if  $\Pr(A \text{ ought to } \Phi \mid F) > \Pr(A \text{ ought to } \Phi)$ .<sup>15</sup>

R\* says a fact is a reason for an agent to do a particular act just in case the fact raises the epistemic probability that the agent ought to do the act. Before focusing on Brunero's criticisms, we would like to underline the significance of the fact that the target of Brunero's first main objection is not the most fundamental claim that we set out to defend in our papers, R, but a more specific claim instead. R is a claim that connects reasons and evidence, enabling us to proffer an explanation of what normative reasons are by relying on the concept of *evidence* and the concept of *ought*. R does not say anything at all about epistemic probability or the weight of reasons, while R\* does. We do not ourselves mention R\*, but we do indeed make *some* claims that lead straightforwardly to R\* when we are arguing that our account of reasons can explain what it is to weigh practical reasons, something that other accounts of reasons, such as Broome's, seem to leave obscure.<sup>16</sup> As Brunero himself acknowledges, some philosophers working on evidence reject probability-raising accounts of evidence, and that would certainly be an option for us if we wanted to reject R\* and make R impervious to the criticisms Brunero initially provides (however, his second main objection, to which we respond in the next section of this paper, does not rely on R\*).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," 540.

<sup>16</sup> However, we should point out that we could deny R\* while still maintaining our views on the strength of reasons. This is because it is possible to deny that what it is to be a reason (or evidence) is to be probability-raising, yet claim that one reason (or piece of evidence) is stronger than another if it increases the probability of a proposition to a greater degree.

<sup>17</sup> Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," 539 (footnote 6).

If we chose to give up on our ambition to explain weighing evidence in terms of probability-raising then *most* of the arguments in our previous papers would remain unscathed. We would admittedly lose one of the attractive features of our account of reasons, i.e. the way in which we flesh out an explanation of weighing reasons in terms of a particular account of weighing evidence. However, we would still be able to contend that to weigh reasons is to weigh evidence, and this might still turn out to be very helpful if an alternative account of weighing evidence became available to us (in particular, if this alternative account of weighing evidence was more attractive or informative, when it comes to understanding what it is to weigh reasons, than any of the extant accounts of weighing practical reasons that do not refer to evidence).

In fact, we have not changed our views about either the core *reasons as evidence* thesis, or the usefulness of the probability-raising account of evidence for making sense of what it is for either a practical or theoretical reason to have a certain *strength*. We do not believe Brunero has given us good reasons to change our minds. However, Brunero's response has been very helpful to us in forcing us to get clearer about some of the details of our account of normative reasons, and our present understanding of evidence.

Brunero first provides an objection to the claim that all reasons to  $\Phi$  are evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  that consists of a purported counterexample to that claim. In the next and final section of our paper, we will discuss his objection to the claim that all items of evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  are reasons to  $\Phi$ . Now to the purported counterexample. We are asked to imagine that Mother's Day is coming up, and that one must decide on a gift for Mom. I am to imagine that the following information ( $e_1$ ) and background knowledge ( $b_1$ ) is available to me:

- $e_1$  Dad would be happy were I to get Mom some specific gift he found featured in the Sears Catalog.
- $b_1$  Whenever Dad would be happy with Mom getting some gift, there is always some competing, weightier reason(s) against getting that gift for Mom.

Reflecting on this situation, Brunero claims that:

- 1)  $e_1$  decreases the probability that I ought to get this gift, given that part of my evidence is  $b_1$ .
- 2) Therefore,  $e_1$  isn't evidence that I ought to get the gift.

- 3)  $e_1$  is a reason to get this gift.  
 4) Therefore, not all reasons to  $\Phi$  are evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$ .<sup>18</sup>

Our response to this has three parts. First, Brunero concedes that  $e_1$  need not *always* count as a reason to get this gift, and so it is firstly open to us to deny that in this case it is such a reason. For example, if the explanation of why there is a reason to get some other gift than Dad suggests is that he is insensitive to Mom's desires, then it is unclear that there is a reason to make him happy, given his insensitivity.<sup>19</sup>

Also, it is unclear that it is possible for a fact to be a reason if it is *always* outweighed. Given that this is what  $b_1$  claims (it does not simply say that on this occasion it is outweighed), it is unclear that  $e_1$  is a reason. If it is true that *on every possible occasion* Dad would be happy with Mom getting some gift, Dad ought not to get the gift he is considering, it seems that it might be best to say he *never* has a reason to get gifts for Mom that he would be happy with. We have already used this type of response in one of the papers Brunero is responding to.<sup>20</sup> Things get more complicated if Brunero relaxes the universal scope of  $b_1$  (more complicated both for him and for us).

Here is our second response. For this response, let us concede that  $e_1$  is a reason to get Mom this gift (we suspect it can be, given certain ways of spelling out the above scenario). The first thing to point out is that  $e_1$  is, intuitively-speaking, also *evidence* that I ought to get Mom this gift. Thus there is no *prima facie* tension between this case and our account of reasons.

To accommodate the fact that  $e_1$  decreases the probability of the proposition that I ought to get Mom this gift, given  $b_1$ , we may say that  $e_1$  increases the probability of it given a certain salient subset of our evidence that does not include  $b_1$ . This move is already in place in our earlier papers, where it arises from reflection on other examples.<sup>21</sup> And it is important to note that probability-raising accounts of evidence in general may need to make moves like this one, i.e. they may need to introduce talk of salient subsets of evidence, if they are to be plausible.

<sup>18</sup> Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," 540-1.

<sup>19</sup> In order to make his example compelling, Brunero himself says "Suppose Dad has a long history of being inclined toward gifts that are either tasteless, tacky, overly expensive, insensitive, or bad in some other way" (Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," 541).

<sup>20</sup> Kearns and Star, "Reasons as Evidence," 241.

<sup>21</sup> Kearns and Star, "Reasons as Evidence," 232 (footnote 10).

Brunero anticipates this response and says that it will not work. He claims that R is false because:

- i) There is no reason to drive to Sears Plaza (to get the gift). (This is true because, all things considered, I ought not to get the gift.)
- ii) There is evidence that I ought to drive to Sears Plaza. (Given that we are limiting ourselves to a subset of our evidence that does not include  $b_1$ ).<sup>22</sup>

Our reply to this is to deny i). The *evidence* that I ought to drive to Sears Plaza is presumably that doing so facilitates buying the gift. As Brunero so emphatically points out, I *do* have a reason to buy the gift. Thus if I have a reason to buy the gift, and driving to Sears Plaza is a (reasonable) way of facilitating buying the gift, it is extremely natural to say I *do* have a reason to drive to Sears Plaza. This reason is outweighed, of course, but it is still present. Brunero may think this case does not speak clearly in favor of our view, but insofar as this isn't clear, it isn't clear that it causes trouble for our account. We admit that it would be good to be able to say more about what gets included in the salient subset of evidence but we still think this second response is reasonably effective.<sup>23</sup>

The third response available to us is perhaps the best of all: it is to simply deny premise 1) of the main argument. Perhaps the fact that Dad would be happy to get this particular gift not only does not decrease the probability that I ought to get the gift, it positively increases it, even given  $b_1$ ! After all, buying the gift would make Dad happy. If this seems like an implausible response, bear in mind that, at the very same time,  $e_1$  can more substantially increase the probability that one ought not to buy the gift. It cannot also increase the probability that it is not the case that one ought to buy the gift, but that is a different proposition. We suspect that this case appears credible only when these propositions are conflated. Once these are clearly distinguished, it is obviously possible for the fact that Dad would be happy to increase both the probability that I ought to buy the gift and the probability that I ought not to buy the gift. In so doing, it decreases the probability that buying the gift is merely permissible.

<sup>22</sup> Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," 543.

<sup>23</sup> An anonymous referee has pointed out that a potential problem with the salient subset strategy we employ here is that the reason to go to Sears Plaza appears, intuitively, to be a lightweight reason; however, if the salient subset excludes  $b_1$ , then it would seem that this reason is going to be a heavyweight reason. We are not sure how problematic this worry is, but we acknowledge that this is an issue that is worth thinking more about. It is, perhaps, a good reason to accept our third response to the case.

## V. Does Some Evidence Fail to Provide Reasons?

Brunero next attempts to show that not all items of evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  are reasons to  $\Phi$ . Here is Brunero's purported counterexample:

- $e_2$  I've promised to  $\Phi$ ; and
- $e_3$  There is no reason for me not to  $\Phi$ .

Brunero claims that:

- 1)  $e_3$  is evidence that I ought to  $\Phi$  (given  $e_2$ ).
- 2)  $e_3$  is not a reason for me to  $\Phi$ .
- 3) Therefore, not all evidence that I ought to  $\Phi$  is a reason to  $\Phi$ .<sup>24</sup>

Premise 1) is thought to be true because  $e_3$  is said to increase the probability that I ought to  $\Phi$ . Premise 2) is thought to be true because the idea that not having a reason not to  $\Phi$  is a reason seems to run into trouble when considering cases in which I have no reason to  $\Phi$  and no reason not to  $\Phi$ .

Let us now consider how best to respond to this objection. We *might* accept premise 1), although we wish to note that it is open to us to say that  $e_3$  does *not* increase the probability of the proposition that I ought to  $\Phi$  relative to some salient subset of my evidence, and thus does not count as evidence that I ought to  $\Phi$ . Perhaps  $e_2$  should not count as part of my evidence when assessing whether  $e_3$  is evidence.

Premise 2), however, strikes us as quite possibly false. In any case, Brunero's argument for it is misguided. It might be thought to be false because there are standard cases in which the fact that there are no reasons not to  $\Phi$  counts as a reason to  $\Phi$ .

Consider this case. Bob gets depressed by various facts. In particular, Bob gets very depressed by the fact that he has no reason not to take anti-depressants. Given that Bob gets very depressed by the fact (when it is a fact) that he has no reason not to take anti-depressants, the fact that Bob has no reason not to take anti-depressants (when it is a fact) is a reason for Bob to take anti-depressants. Notice how in this case, which should be non-controversial, the fact that Bob gets very depressed when he has no reasons not to take anti-depressants (and gets depressed in virtue of being aware of that very fact) *explains* why the fact that Bob has no reason not to take anti-depressants *is* a reason for him to take anti-depressants. Similarly, we would suggest that the fact that I have no reason not to  $\Phi$  can be a reason to  $\Phi$  *in virtue of* the fact that I have promised to  $\Phi$ .

<sup>24</sup> Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," 544-5.



Indeed, many people cite something like  $e_3$  as a reason to do something. Why do you think you should dance (in so spontaneous a fashion)? *Why not?* Why climb over that hill? *There's no reason not to.* Why are you acting strangely? *Because, at last, I'm allowed to!* The examples proliferate.<sup>25</sup>

Brunero's argument for 2) rests on a case he considers in which someone has no reason to  $\Phi$  and no reason not to  $\Phi$  (they are idly considering whether to scratch their finger lightly on a table).<sup>26</sup> If the fact that one has no reason not to  $\Phi$  were *always* a reason to  $\Phi$  we would be in trouble here. But Brunero's case *commits us to no such thing*. All Brunero has shown is that, in a *totally different case* to that with which he started, the fact that there is no reason not to  $\Phi$  is not a reason to  $\Phi$ . But nor is it *evidence* that one ought to  $\Phi$ . We are able to accept this completely. As we have said, in the cases where the fact that there is no reason not to  $\Phi$  *is* a reason to  $\Phi$ , this will always be *because* of some other fact that is a reason (e.g. *because* I have promised to  $\Phi$ , or *because* I enjoy spontaneous dancing).

Of course, to cause trouble for our account, Brunero needs only one case in which the fact that an agent has no reason not to  $\Phi$  is not a reason to  $\Phi$  but still increases the probability that she ought to  $\Phi$ . Furthermore, the case involving Bob above might strike some as too unusual for us to use as part of a defense for the claim that, in many other cases, having no reason not to  $\Phi$  is a reason to  $\Phi$ . However, our aim in replying to Brunero is modest. Bob's case is designed to show that, even given a standard right-making account of reasons, it is quite possible for the fact that there is no reason not to  $\Phi$  to be a reason to  $\Phi$ . Once this is admitted, it is harder to object to the idea that, in the promising case Brunero describes, the fact that there is no reason not to  $\Phi$  is also a reason to  $\Phi$ . If you think reasons must be right-makers, you may naturally conclude that such a fact makes it right to  $\Phi$  *precisely by* providing evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$ . Given this plausible idea, it will be difficult to describe a case in which an agent has no reason not to  $\Phi$ , and this fact is not a reason to  $\Phi$ , yet it still increases the probability that she ought to  $\Phi$ .<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, one may dispute whether people who answer in this way really are stating their reasons, instead of implying the existence of other reasons, or refusing to answer the question. Our point is just that one simple interpretation of these people is that they are indeed offering reasons to  $\Phi$ , reasons which amount to something like the claim that there is no reason not to  $\Phi$ . We do not wish to prove this is what is going on, but rather show that Brunero's case against us is far from conclusive.

<sup>26</sup> Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," 544.

<sup>27</sup> We take it that, if one rejects the idea that reasons must be right-makers, one will be even more likely to accept that having no reason not to  $\Phi$  can be a reason to  $\Phi$  in those cases in which it is also evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$ .

We conclude that each of Broome's and Brunero's arguments against the *reasons as evidence* thesis, as summed up in R, fails to establish its conclusion. We have shown: (1) that this thesis is *not* undermined by a concern that evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  is the wrong kind of thing to explain why  $\Phi$  ought to be done; (2) that this thesis does *not* misconstrue the nature of the process of weighing reasons insofar as it views that process as epistemological in nature; (3) that this thesis does *not* misconstrue the nature of the process of weighing reasons and evidence insofar as it entails that reasons to  $\Phi$  can be weighed against more than just reasons not to  $\Phi$ ; (4) that this thesis, in the specification of it that includes a probability-raising account of evidence, does not run afoul of a purported counterexample carefully constructed in an attempt to establish that not all reasons to  $\Phi$  are evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$ ; and (5) that this thesis does not run afoul of another purported counterexample carefully constructed in an attempt to establish that not all items of evidence that I ought to  $\Phi$  are reasons to  $\Phi$ . We do not pretend to have answered all possible objections to our favored analysis of reasons by combating these published objections, but we do hope that in the process of answering our critics here we have helped shed some light on the nature of normative reasons, and what it means to weigh them.