

Semantics for Reasons, by Bryan R. Weaver and Kevin Scharp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 166.

Reasons play a central role in recent philosophy related to normativity. A promising idea, then, is that attending to the semantic features of the expression ‘reason’ might help further our understanding of this important topic. And philosophers have begun exploring the semantics of ‘reason’. However, this term has received considerably less attention than terms such as ‘ought’ or ‘must’. Because of this, Bryan R. Weaver and Kevin Scharp’s recent monograph *Semantics for Reasons* is a welcome addition to the literature. I recommend it to those interested in the semantics of normative terms and those whose primary research concerns reasons. That said, some caution may be required when approaching this monograph: Those who are new to the literature on reasons or who have only a passing interest in reasons will not find this to be an especially helpful resource for learning about the literature. And those who defend views about reasons related to the topics in this book may find some of the discussion frustrating.

I will say much more about this below. But I begin with an overview.

The monograph is admirably concise, just 146 pages of main text. It begins (in the introduction) by making the case for the importance of the study of the semantics of ‘reason’. The authors then catalogue the startling number of distinctions among reasons that philosophers have made (Chapter 1). This sets the stage for one of the primary aims of the book—to develop a semantic theory that can provide a clearer sense of these distinctions. This theory is presented first by clarifying the logical form of ‘reason’-statements (Chapter 2) and second by providing a semantics for statements of this form (Chapter 3). The remainder of the monograph considers competing views (Chapter 4) and other implications of the semantics (Chapter 5).

The target of analysis for Weaver and Scharp is the count noun uses of ‘reason’. The logical form of such usage according to them (p. 26) is the following:

$$X \text{ is a reason for } A \text{ in } S \text{ to } \phi$$

where X is called the *consideration* slot, A the *agent* slot, S the *situation* slot, and ϕ the *object* slot. Though other uses of the count noun reason may have surface forms that differ from this, this is their logical form. Typically, surface forms that are missing certain arguments that appear in the logical form have these arguments supplied by context. (One exception to this may be expression of the form ‘ X is the reason that Y ’. These expressions fall within the scope of uses of ‘reason’ that the authors wish to

analyze. But I was not able to fully understand how their treatment of these expressions was related to their core proposals about the logical form and semantics. See their p. 26 and p. 54-5 for discussion.)

This account of the logical form allows Weaver and Scharp to provide a theory of the much discussed and contested distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons. They claim that agent-neutral reasons are reasons that involve universal quantification into the agent slot (or involve a suitably large ‘we’ in the agent slot). This may either be made explicit or be contextually understood when a ‘reason’-statement, for example, has a surface form that does not mention an agent at all. And agent-relative reasons are reasons that do not involve this kind of universal quantification. I found this theory to be plausible.

Weaver and Scharp are ecumenical in their treatment of the consideration slot. They allow expressions like “that spinach is a vegetable” (p. 101) as values of the consideration slot as most philosophers do. But they also allow, in the context of endorsing a quote from Mark Schroeder, that “The height of the Empire State Building” “Obesity”, “Bas van Fraassen”, and “Schrodinger’s wave equation” can all occupy the consideration slot (p. 102-3).

They go on to use this ecumenical account of the consideration slot later in the book to criticize views about the ontology of reasons (§5.1). But I am not sure that I see how closely connected these issues really are. On my reading, the primary concern of the literature on the ontology of reasons (and of the philosophers who work on it) is the nature of reasons that play certain important theoretical roles in epistemology and moral philosophy. This involves considering the way that these reasons are related to certain kinds of thoughts and reasoning and certain kinds of explanations. It is less central to that debate how natural language can be used to discuss the reasons that play these important roles. At times, Weaver and Scharp appear to be congenial to this way of understanding the debate about the ontology of reasons (p. 108) but the majority of their discussion struck me (perhaps, incorrectly) as rejecting this understanding of the debate. In any case, I agree with Weaver and Scharp that there is no easy argument from our talk involving ‘reason’ to conclusions about the ontology of reasons (a perhaps helpful reminder if we were tempted to think that there was one).

Weaver and Scharp also allow for a diversity of arguments in the object slot. Their view is that three different kinds of things can occupy this slot: “doings”, “contents”, and “properties”. Doings are “anything an agent might do” (p. 12-3). Contents are “what is conveyed” this includes “propositional contents”, “non-propositional, non-conceptual contents”, and “non-propositional, conceptual contents” (p. 13). And a property is “being someway” (p. 14). This, in turn, is used to characterize Joseph Raz’s distinction between practical, adaptive, and evaluative reasons. According to the authors, practical reasons have doings as their object, adaptive reasons have contents, and evaluative reasons have properties.

I am unsure if I fully understand this proposal especially as it concerns adaptive reasons. Following Raz, the authors conceive of the theoretical role of adaptive reasons as reasons that “mark the appropriateness of an attitude in the agent independently of the value of having that attitude” (p. 13). This means that there is, for example, a distinction between adaptive reasons for belief and practical reasons for belief. An adaptive reason to believe that the US went to war in Iraq twice might be a newspaper saying that this is true. On the other hand, a practical reason might be an eccentric billionaire offering to pay you \$100,000 for believing this. The latter reason is not adaptive because it does not mark the appropriateness of attitude in the agent *independently of the value of having the attitude*. The authors’ theory of what the difference between adaptive and practical reasons consists in is that they have different objects. An adaptive reason for belief has the content of the belief as its object. The practical reason has the belief understood as a doing as its object (p. 13).

My concern is that adaptive reason cannot, it seems to me, be understood as simply supporting *the content* of the belief state (e.g, that the US went to war with Iraq twice). As Raz and the authors note, other attitudes can be supported by adaptive reasons. And it is clear that other attitudes can have the same kind of content as a belief state. But it need not be that just because I have sufficient adaptive reason to believe something (e.g, that the US went to war in Iraq twice), I have sufficient adaptive reason to have any other attitude with that content (e.g., the attitude of being glad that the US went to war with Iraq twice). Yet it is hard to see how we can distinguish the adaptive reasons for states or attitudes with the same content if adaptive reasons simply support a content as the authors suggest. Because of this, I wonder if the authors mean that adaptive reasons support contentful states or attitudes rather than simply contents. And if so, I wonder if the authors have in mind some distinction between belief as a doing and belief as a contentful state.

Notably, Weaver and Scharp do not include slots in the logical form for information states or for the weight or strength of reasons. Their ideas about information states will be discussed later. They give a variety of arguments against the existence of a slot for weight (§2.5). . While I do not find them fully convincing, I do think they are interesting and worth further thought. A consequence that they draw from this is that the distinction between contributory, conclusive, and sufficient reasons “is not semantically relevant” (p. 6). (Weaver and Scharp, of course, think the weight of reasons is relevant non-semantically. Their claim is only that it is not part of the logical form or semantic value of ‘reason’.) Those interested in the semantics of ‘reason’ would do well to think through the arguments and data presented in this portion of the book.

Having settled what the logical form of a ‘reason’-statement is, Weaver and Scharp turn to assigning semantic values. The basic idea of their approach is that fixing values for each item in the

logical form does not yet determine a semantic content. Rather, semantic contents are determined by a semantic character that takes a “question under discussion” as its chief argument. So once we have a particular kind of question, we can determine a semantic content.

According to Weaver and Scharp, there are a few key questions that come up for discussion:

There is a permissive and obligatory version of each of the following contexts of utterance:

- (i) *Objective Normative* contexts: where the question under discussion is whether or not the object in question is correct in light of the way the world is independently of the agent’s mental states.
- (ii) *Subjective Normative* contexts: where the question under discussion is whether or not the object in question is correct in light of the agent’s mental states
- (iii) *Motivating* contexts: where the question under discussion is what actually did or would motivate an agent to support the object in question
- (iv) *Explanatory* contexts: where the question under discussion is why or how some aspect of the world is the way it is.

In the permissive context, the question under discussion is the reasonableness of the object (e.g., whether or not the agent is irrational for ϕ ing) while in the obligatory contexts, the question under discussion is the unreasonableness of the lack of the object (e.g., whether or not the agent is rational for not ϕ ing). (p. 52).

As the names indicate these contexts allow Weaver and Scharp to characterize the objective/subject normative reasons distinction, the normative/motivating/explanatory reasons distinction, and the obligatory/permissive reasons distinction. This last distinction is perhaps better known to many readers as the distinction between requiring and justifying or enticing reasons or the distinction between reasons against and reason for (§1.4). (It is worth noting here that the book unfortunately fails to acknowledge or engage with Patricia Greensapn’s important work related to this distinction (e.g., her 2005, 2007, and 2010).) They spend some time walking the reader through examples to clarify this. Finally, they claim that the distinction between internal/external reasons concerns whether the arguments of ‘reason’ stand in certain relations to one another (e.g, do the consideration and the object stand in the right relation to the agent’s subjective motivational set).

These, I think, are the main accomplishments of the book. It makes explicit claims about the logical form of ‘reason’-statements and provides the outline of a contextualist semantics that is related to questions under discussion. And it gives examples of how this semantics might help us understand a whole host of distinctions. While none of this is uncontestable, it is a worthwhile and an interesting contribution to the literature.

I also note in passing that the book contains some interesting suggestions about explanatory reasons that are worth further discussion. First, there is an argument (p. 37-8) that motivating reasons and explanatory reasons for an agent's acts are distinct because the latter are extensional in the consideration slot, but the former are not. Second, the authors claim that there are "permissive" explanatory questions and "obligatory" explanatory questions (p. 52-3, 60-62). Both of these ideas deserve further discussion.

The remainder of the book tries to fill in this outline of a contextualist semantics with a formal semantic theory, offers a variety of critical comments about competing approaches, and develops some applications to topics in the literature. I think that these parts of the book (the formal semantics, criticism of other work, and applications to other topics) are less successful.

I begin with a concern about the formal semantics. Here is the proposed formal semantics that they discuss in the greatest detail:

First, we walk through the content for obligatory objective normative reasons step by step [...] We begin with our fundamental reasons operator, and we use the standard $[[p]]^w$ notation to designate the semantic value of 'p' evaluated at world w.

$[[\text{That } p \text{ is an obligatory objective normative reason for } A \text{ in } S \text{ to } \phi]]^w = 1.$

Semantic value 1 is for truth and 0 is for falsity. Because this is an obligatory normative reason, we treat it as the following:

$[[\text{Ought } A \text{ in } S \text{ to } \phi \text{ because } p]]^w = 1.$

Based on our semantics for 'because', we treat it as factive for both prejacentes and as a counterfactual with negated antecedent and consequent.

$[[p]]^w = 1$ and $[[\text{Ought } A \text{ in } S \text{ to } \phi]]^w = 1$ and $[[\text{Not Ought } A \text{ in } S \text{ to } \phi > \text{not } p]]^w = 1$
(p. 73)

where '>' is the symbol that they use for the counterfactual. So their basic claim is that p is an obligatory objective normative reason for A in S to ϕ exactly if (1) p, (2) A ought in S to ϕ , and (3) if it weren't the case that A ought in S to ϕ , then it would not be the case that p. They go on from here to discuss the formal semantics of each of these three claims.

But just at this level of detail, I think we can see that this proposal can't be right or at least can't be right if we want to capture certain core platitudes about reasons. Here is one such platitude: an agent can have a reason to ϕ when it is not the case that she ought to ϕ (where 'reason' and 'ought' are understood relative to the same contextual parameters of information, norms, etc). This platitude more or less follows from the idea that reasons are genuinely contributory notions.

An example of a case that illustrates this platitude might be one in which I promise to meet my friend for lunch at noon but I encounter a child drowning on the way to lunch. Here plausibly, it is not the case that I ought to meet my friend for lunch at noon (because I ought instead to save the child) even though the promise provides me with a reason to meet my friend at noon. Weaver and Scharp's analysis rules this kind of case out. Their analysis claims that I cannot have a reason to meet my friend at noon because it is not true that I ought to meet my friend at noon.

Perhaps Weaver and Scharp can respond to this challenge by simply removing the second conjunct from the analysis and keeping the other two. So according to the revised proposal p is an obligatory objective normative reason for A in S to ϕ exactly if (1) p and (2) if it weren't the case that A ought in S to ϕ , then it would not be the case that p .

For this analysis to get the right result in the case above, the following counterfactual must be true:

if it weren't the case that I ought to meet my friend at noon, it would not be the case that I promised to meet my friend at noon

But plausibly, this counterfactual is false. After all, the way things actually are is that (i) it is not the case that I ought to meet my friend at noon and (ii) I promised to meet them at noon.

Indeed, this problem for the analysis really only relies on certain standard assumptions about the logic of counterfactuals. In the semantic mode, the assumption is known as Weak Centering (roughly, the claim that if p is true at w , then one of the nearest p -worlds to w is w itself). In the syntactic mode, it corresponds to the idea that modus ponens is valid for the counterfactual (roughly that p and $p > q$ entail q). So the particular example that I am discussing is only an illustration of this structural problem for Weaver and Scharp's proposal.

What's more, given that we can find cases where p is a reason for A in S to ϕ but 'Ought A in S to ϕ ' is false and ' p ' is true even when 'reason' is used in senses other than the objectively normative sense, the same problems will occur for those senses too. So this problem affects the formal semantics for all the 'reason' locutions that they propose to analyze. Of course, there are ways of tinkering with this semantics. But since we are not given a sense of how this might go, the picture as it stands is inadequate.

A related issue arises for one of the applications that the authors suggest. They claim to provide an analysis of what it is to be a *moral* reason (§5.4). But according to this analysis one can have a moral reason to ϕ only if ϕ -ing is morally obligatory. This is a false prediction about the standard theoretical usage of moral reasons (because one can have a moral reason to ϕ when ϕ is merely morally permissible

as well as when ϕ is morally prohibited). And this conflicts with the core platitude that one can have a moral reason to do something even if it is not the case that one morally ought to do it (though see their reply to a related concern on p. 124-5).

The final substantive issue that I wish to discuss is the issue of whether the logical form of ‘reason’-statements includes a slot for a body of information. The authors do not believe that there is a slot for a body of information. But the authors do allow for information-sensitivity through their question under discussion framework: they allow that there is a question relative to the facts and a different question relative to the agent’s mental states that each can determine the semantic content of ‘reason’ in a context. They discuss this issue in the contexts of criticizing Tim Henning’s contextualist semantics of ‘reason’ (§4.3).

I will not comment on these details here (though I note that the data that the authors present about so-called “mixed” information states (p. 89-90) might intrigue semantics enthusiasts). But I will observe that the authors suggest that their account only allows sensitivity to two types of bodies of information—the agent’s information and the total set of facts—and claim that ‘reason’ is only sensitive to these two types of bodies of information. But it is not clear that this is the only information-sensitivity allowed by their framework. In their question under discussion framework, further information-sensitivity only requires that there be further questions under discussion (e.g., questions relative to the information of someone other than the agent). I do not understand what prevents such a further question from being under discussion. More generally, it is never made clear why the possible questions under discussions are limited to the ones that the authors list (and I quoted above). Indeed, the formal semantics that they adopt allows for sensitivity to arbitrary bodies of information. It is, therefore, unclear to me what basis the authors have for claiming that their view only allows for sensitivity to two sorts of bodies of information. (Similar issues are relevant to the plausibility of the authors’ criticism of Niko Kolodny’s relativist semantics.)

Next let me turn to two matters of form. This monograph is, to this reader, at best overly critical of opposing views and at worst needlessly hostile to them. Here is representative passage about John Broome:

As we have stressed, the evidence that ‘ought’ in English behaves like an operator, not a predicate. This fact has been ignored by people like Broome, and their ignorance about the way these words function leads them to construct elaborate research projects based on nothing more than a blunder. While Broome is off fighting windmills, we can think about

the right way of understanding these words and how their semantics pertains to prominent issues in the philosophy of normativity. (p. 70)

Saying Broome has confused distinct things and it has led to mistakes is one thing; going on and on in the way they do in this passage is quite another. And I at least do not find reading things like this enjoyable or helpful.

This is especially unfortunate because the formal semantics that the authors propose involves claiming that p is a reason to do something when an 'ought' holds because p . This is similar to Broome's view that reasons are explanations of 'ought's.

Perhaps, the authors in trying to distinguish the methodology that supports their view from Broome's ideas felt the need to use this kind of harsh language. I do not believe, however, that this is warranted. And this is made all the more jarring by the fact that the authors' formal semantics has the problems that I described above while Broome's view does not. This is precisely because Broome developed a view of explanation (the notion of a weighing explanation and the different roles a fact can play in a weighing explanation) that was designed to avoid the problem that the authors' formal semantics suffers from.

Indeed, Broome's treatment suggests a way to modify Weaver and Scharp's formal semantics to avoid the problem that I raised earlier. Broome's theory recognizes the explanatory role a reason to ϕ can play in cases where it is not the case that the agent ought to ϕ . The following disjunctive account is a first pass at implementing Broome's insights in something like Weaver and Scharp's preferred terminology:

That p is an obligatory objective normative reason for A in S to ϕ iff

(1) p is true and *either*

(2a) A ought in S to ϕ and if it were not the case that A ought in S to ϕ , then it would be the case that not p

or

(2b) it is not the case that A ought in S to ϕ and if it were the case that A ought in S to ϕ , then it would be the case that p .

This disjunctive account has its own difficulties (which I won't delve into here). But it is compatible with the core platitude that caused a problem for Weaver and Scharp's view so is, in this way, more promising.

Unfortunately, this kind of tone in criticizing others (and the perhaps related tendency to miss opportunities for productive interaction) is not limited to the above passage about Broome. It occurs with regularity when the authors criticize other philosophers—it's pretty unpleasant.

A final note of caution is in order. Some of their discussion of the work of other philosophers involves important misunderstandings and misrepresentations due to a lack of interpretive charity or perhaps simply due to troublingly poor judgment. Because of this, I would not recommend this book to a graduate student or colleague trying to learn about the important contributions these other philosophers have made to our understanding of reasons and normativity.

My personal preference is to leave the matter at this so that the review primarily focuses on the positives and substantial critical engagement and so that the review does not strike an overly negative tone. That said, due to requests from Weaver and Scharp and from the editors at *Mind*, I include the following examples to substantiate my claim: First, though I already mentioned some issues regarding their treatment of Broome above, the authors' treatment of the work of Broome and Niko Kolodny on rational requirements is also troubling. Broome (1999) has emphasized that rational requirements are strict in the sense that failure to abide by them signals a kind of important normative failing or lack of coherence. While there is some unclarity about how exactly to understand strictness (see, e.g., Shpall 2014 for discussion), it is widely agreed by partisans of the debate that merely failing to do something that there is *a* reason to do does not signal this kind of important normative failing or lack of coherence. (e.g., if I forgo saving one minute on my commute in order to save a life, this does not signal the relevant sort of normative failing or lack of coherence involved in being irrational). Nonetheless, the authors claim (based on a reasonable but controversial conservatism of the sort advocated by Harman 1986) that there is at least *a* reason to satisfy each rational requirement and appear to take this to have resolved the dispute about rational requirements. They then seem to offer as a diagnosis of our failure to see the plausibility of their solution that we have failed to notice that 'reason' expresses a contributory notion. Relatedly, the authors believe that failure to understand that 'reason' expresses a contributory notion is also at the heart of why people have failed to see an easy solution to the so-called miner's puzzle that is famously discussed by Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane (2010). In the face of comments like this, it is hard to decide if the authors are being uncharitable in assuming that participants in these debates do not know that 'reason' expresses a contributory notion or if they are exhibiting poor judgment in thinking that this observation leads to an easy resolution of these debates. Second, Joshua Gert's important work bringing the distinction between justifying/requiring reasons to the attention of philosophers is dismissed in a footnote as "misrepresent[ing]" a related distinction that Weaver and Scharp draw "to the point of making it almost unrecognizable" (p. 17). (And recall Paricia Greespan's work on a similar distinction is simply ignored.)

Third, Justin Snedegar, who advocates for a contrastivist view of reasons, is criticized by the authors because he “overlooks” (p. 41) the possibility of giving a different treatment of contrastive and non-contrastive ‘reason’-locutions or analyzing contrastive locutions as expressing claims about the strengths of reasons. Yet these are literally the first two proposals that Snedegar considers in his paper.

I end the list here for the sake of brevity (though there are other examples related to the work of Blackburn, Finlay, Fogal, Schroeder, and others). Let me, however, make one qualification. The list of examples is not intended to be an evaluation of Weaver and Scharp’s arguments against these authors. (Perhaps, suitably modified and elaborated in light of some of the omissions that I mention, some of Weaver and Scharp’s criticisms can be shown to be sound.) Rather the point of the examples is to illustrate how Weaver and Scharp omit or severely downplay central ideas and arguments of the theorists that they are criticizing. This is why the book is not a good resource to learn about the views of other philosophers.

To sum up, the book has certain substantive problems and, to me, has an unpleasant tone and is uncharitable in parts. But if the reader can see their way clear of these issues, the book contains interesting observations about explanatory reasons and about reasons in the contexts of so-called “mixed” information states. And the book develops a theory about the logical form of ‘reason’-statements and outlines an accompanying question-dependent contextualist semantics that allows us to make some important distinctions among reasons. Overall, then, I recommend this monograph to specialists who work on reasons with the caveat that they might find themselves in need of a friend to vent to or a stiff drink by the time they are done reading it.¹

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