

***Weighing Reasons*, edited by Errol Lord and Barry Maguire. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, xi + 301pp. ISBN: 9780199315192, hb £34.99**

Jonathan Way

University of Southampton

In the past half century, the notion of a normative reason – a consideration which counts in favour, or against, some response – has become central to much normative philosophy. It's not too hard to see why, for such reasons seem ubiquitous. In many of the choices we face, there are competing considerations – reasons – on both sides. In these cases, we often try to figure out what to do by considering the comparative significance of these considerations – that is, by weighing reasons. Plausibly, we do this because we take it that what we ought to do is determined by how the competing reasons weigh up. Reasons are important, then, because of the role they play in our reasoning, and because of how they weigh up to determine what we ought, overall, to do.

It is therefore surprising that, for all the recent attention paid to reasons, there have been few extended discussions of *how* reasons weigh up to determine what we ought to do – or, more broadly, of how different considerations bear on what we ought to do. This volume, which consists of new essays on this topic, is therefore very welcome. In general, the standard of papers is high. The best papers are extremely interesting and can be expected to help shape future work on the topic. The volume also covers a lot of ground – those interested in a variety of questions about reasons will find much of interest here. I'll focus on what I take to be some of the central

issues about weighing reasons, and the contributions which bear most directly on them.

Many authors, either implicitly or explicitly, work with a simple model of how reasons determine oughts. On this model, the considerations that bear on whether you ought to ϕ are all reasons for or against ϕ -ing. Each of these reasons has a weight. To determine the total weight of the reasons in favour of ϕ -ing, we add up the weights of all the reasons in favour of ϕ -ing. We do the same with the reasons against ϕ -ing. You ought to ϕ iff the reasons in favour of ϕ -ing together outweigh the reasons against ϕ -ing. If the reasons in favour of ϕ -ing are together at least as weighty as the reasons against, you may ϕ . If the reasons in favour of ϕ -ing are together less weighty than the reasons against ϕ -ing, then you ought not ϕ . We can call this (following Alida Liberman and Mark Schroeder's contribution), the simple weighing model.

Many of the papers in the volume, either explicitly or implicitly, consider challenges to this model. A first challenge concerns the assumption that only reasons for and against A-ing bear on whether you ought to A. Jonathan Dancy (2004) has prominently argued that other considerations can play different roles bearing on what you ought to do. For instance, the fact that you *can* help Annie, might 'enable' the fact that Annie needs help to be a reason for you to help her. The fact that you are the only person around might make the fact that Annie needs a help a stronger reason – it 'intensifies' this reason. Ralf Bader's contribution argues that these distinctions between roles are metaphysically robust, and not merely pragmatic. His strategy is to appeal to general metaphysical principles. For instance, he argues that 'enablers' cannot be reasons because many putative enablers are absences, and absences, unlike reasons, cannot be grounds. Insofar as much previous discussion of this topic has been largely intuition-driven, this is an original approach which moves the debate forward,

and it is executed with great sophistication. I wasn't always convinced that the strategy succeeded – in some cases it seemed to me that we couldn't properly assess Bader's abstract claims without going back to considering cases. Two examples are his claim that R1 might enable R2 to be a reason while R2 enables R1 to be a reason, and his claim that we need a distinction between non-reasons and reasons with zero weight. Nonetheless, the paper is essential reading for those interested in the topic.

Daniel Fogal's rich and illuminating paper addresses some related issues. The first half of the paper highlights the distinction between the use of 'reason' as a count-noun ('there are many reasons to read this book') and a mass noun ('there is good reason to read this book'). Fogal argues that the latter use is prior: reasons are considerations which help explain why there is reason. The second half of the paper argues that which considerations are appropriately counted as reasons is highly context-sensitive. For instance, it can be fine to say 'The fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Billy to attend' and 'The fact that Billy loves to dance is a reason for him to attend'. But it would not ordinarily be fine to say 'The fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Billy to attend, and so is the fact that Billy loves to dance'. These arguments might seem to point to the opposite conclusion to Bader's – that the distinctions between reasons, enablers, and the rest are merely pragmatic. Interestingly though, Fogal resists this conclusion: he takes his arguments to be compatible with robust metaphysical distinctions between normative roles. His thought, I take it, is rather that these roles cannot be automatically read off the language of reasons. In this way, Fogal's conclusions harmonise with Bader's approach.

The papers by Alida Liberman and Mark Schroeder, and by Joshua Gert, offer a different kind of challenge to the assumption that only reasons bear on what you

ought to do. Liberman and Schroeder argue for a distinction between reasons, obligations, and commitments. All three are contributory considerations which can be weighed: for instance, my obligation to my employer might outweigh my obligation to my five-a-side football team. But they are nonetheless distinct: for instance, reasons are considerations, whereas obligations and commitments are not. Moreover, they argue, the analogue of the simple weighing picture fails for obligations and commitments. The paper is suggestive and interesting; it takes some important first steps on a topic which requires more attention.

Gert's paper defends a distinction between the role that reasons play in *justifying* action and the role they play in *requiring* action. Gert has defended this distinction – and the challenge it poses to the simple weighing picture – in detail elsewhere. The main goal of his contribution to this volume is to show how the distinction can be accommodated by several prominent views of reasons, in particular, those defended by Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, T.M.Scanlon, and Joseph Raz. It is a helpful and clarifying paper.

A second challenge to the simple weighing model concerns the assumption that all reasons carry a 'weight' which we can then 'add up'. Shyam Nair's paper contests this assumption. He begins with a counter-example from John Horty. Heat might count against going for a run, and rain might count against going for a run. It doesn't follow that heat and rain together make for a stronger case against running – intuitively, they might cancel each other out. Nair shows with great clarity and precision that this problem is a general one which cannot easily be put aside. He also proposes a solution. Reasons add up, Nair suggests, just when they are non-derivative. As Nair concedes, this suggestion faces some problems and needs more development, not least because there are cases where derivative reasons do seem to add up. To take

an example Nair discusses, that paying the toll fare allows me to go to the restaurant and also to the movie gives me stronger reason to pay than if paying the fare just allowed me to go the restaurant. Still, Nair's paper is important for clearly bringing out a significant issue for future work.

A third challenge to the model targets the assumption that we ought to do what the balance of reasons favours. Errol Lord and Barry Maguire, in their very useful introduction, note some challenges to this assumption – for instance, that it is not clear how it allows for supererogation. Ruth Chang's interesting paper also addresses this challenge. She defends a version of this assumption from objections concerning the possibility of exclusionary reasons, incomparability, and the idea that there is sometimes just a 'thing to do' which doesn't depend on comparative facts about the underlying reasons.

If we reject the simple weighing model, then an alternative is needed. John Harty's work modeling reasons as default rules offers one such alternative. His contribution to the volume illustrates this approach by showing how it can be extended to model reasoning with precedent in the common law. As well as those with interests in philosophy of law, the paper will be useful to those looking for a brief introduction to Harty's approach.

Of course, not all questions about the weights of reasons concern the weighing model. One very important question concerns the grounds of weights – what makes a reason have a certain weight? What makes one reason weightier than another? Kate Manne's elegant and original paper takes up these questions. She defends a novel Humean account of reasons. On her 'democratic Humean' view, all of your reasons depend on desires – but not necessarily on your desires. Rather, anyone's desires can in principle provide reasons for you. The first half of her paper elaborates on this

view, the second outlines an account of the weights of reasons on which the weight of a reason is proportional to the depth of a desire, rather than its phenomenological intensity. Manne's paper is another of the volume's highlights. One important question which I would have liked to have heard more about is whether democratic Humeanism can capture what for many is the central attraction of Humeanism – namely, that it establishes a strong connection between our reasons and our motivations. In a note, Manne suggests that her view does respect this connection, on the grounds that we can be motivated by facts about other people's desires – e.g. I might do something because you want me to. But I wasn't convinced this established a special connection between reasons and motivation, since in just the same way we can be motivated by facts about the location of coffee shops, among many other things.

Another important question concerns the analysis of weights – what is it for a reason to have a weight, or for one reason to be weightier than another? Stephen Kearns' paper addresses this question, as part of a defence of a general analysis of reasons. Kearns' paper develops the analysis of reasons he has defended elsewhere in collaboration with Daniel Star, on which reasons are evidence. But his position in this paper departs from previous work in some important ways. First, he suggests that reasons need not be evidence of what you *ought* to do – they may instead be evidence of what you may (or may not) do or of what is good and bad. Second, he helpfully distinguishes several roles that reasons are often taken to play and argues that while no single concept may play all of these roles, the concept of evidence of what one ought to do (or may do or...) comes close. The paper is thus worth a look even for those well-acquainted with Kearns and Star's previous work on the topic.

A final interesting question about the weight of reasons which the book addresses concerns whether anything can be said about the weights of certain classes of reasons. The most famous instance of this issue is whether *moral* reasons are always overriding. Karl Schafer's interesting paper explores a way of developing the idea that morality is itself *modest* about the weights of moral reasons – that morality itself does not tell us to treat moral reasons as overriding. Schafer's discussion treats this thesis as an analogue of the idea that a belief-forming method may not recommend itself. He argues that this approach offers ways to resist concerns about 'self-effacing' moral theories and about demandingness. Most intriguingly, he also suggests that the idea that morality is modest in this sense is compatible with another sense in which morality is fundamental: it determines the weights of both moral and non-moral reasons.

The other papers in the volume cover a range of topics and are generally less closely tied to its central theme. Joseph Raz argues against some putative connections between reasons and values – e.g. that there is always reason to choose the best. As Raz notes, his argument implies that the weights of reasons should not be understood in terms of the promotion of value, though he neither focuses on this point nor offers an alternative. Stephen Darwall argues, developing previous work, that it is conceptually necessary that there is reason to fulfill one's moral obligations, on the grounds that unexcused violations of moral obligations are blameworthy and that you can be blameworthy only if you do something there is reason not to do. Darwall's interesting argument concerns only the existence of reasons to fulfill one's moral obligations; it would have been nice to have heard about whether related considerations have any upshot for the weights of these reasons. Finally, Frank Jackson and Michael Smith argue, also developing earlier work, that deontologists

cannot provide plausible ‘implementation rules’ – i.e. rules that would allow us to use deontologist principles (e.g. ‘don’t kill the innocent’) in cases where we’re not certain, but rather just have some degree of credence, that the principle applies.

Overall then, the book contains some excellent papers and is generally well-worth reading. Let me mention a couple of reservations. First, I would have liked to see more papers focusing more fully on the analysis of weights, and on the grounds of weights. These seem central and underexplored questions, but, with the exceptions noted, are not taken up in detail by the contributors. Second, I would have liked to see more discussion of the (related) issue of the relationship between the weights of reasons and the standards of good reasoning. As I began by noting, there seems a close parallel between the metaphysical role that weights play and the ways in which we use reasons in reasoning; it would have been nice to see this apparent parallel explored or put under scrutiny. Nevertheless, and as I hope I have indicated, this is an important volume which contains much that is worth thinking about. Let me end by singling out for praise the editors’ introductory essay. This seemed to me exemplary, both in introducing and orienting the reader to the terrain, and raising new questions, issues, and problems along the way. It will be invaluable to those beginning to think about these issues.

Jonathan Way *Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities*

University of Southampton

j.way@soton.ac.uk

REFERENCES

Dancy, Jonathan. (2004), *Ethics without Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.