

Weaver, Bryan R., & Scharp, Kevin. *Semantics for Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 176. \$50.00 (cloth).

The word *reason* gets around. In language, it surfaces as a verb, mass noun, count noun, and even as an adjective after composing with suffixes like *-able*. In philosophy, it appears prominently in a wide range of debates. Understanding the semantics of *reason* and how its various uses are connected—if at all—is a daunting task. Gleaning philosophical lessons from how *reason* is used is harder still. In *Semantics for Reasons*, Weaver and Scharp partially take up this task by focusing on *reason* as a count noun. This more limited task remains difficult since *reason* as a count noun—henceforth, *reason(s)*—still displays considerable variety (to be discussed shortly), and figures prominently in important debates in ethics, epistemology, and elsewhere.

When facing a variety of uses, a common choice-point is whether to account for the variety as lexical ambiguity or context-sensitivity. Regarding *reason(s)*, Weaver and Scharp regard the first choice as a non-starter. That leaves context-sensitivity. Accordingly, their project is to develop a new univocal semantics for *reason(s)* with context-sensitivity accounting for its various uses, and to unpack the philosophical significance of that semantics. Chapters 1-3 motivate and develop their contextualist semantics, Chapter 4 argues for their semantics by contrasting it with rival proposals, and Chapter 5 explores the significance of their semantics to topics like normativity. In our review, we focus primarily on whether they achieve their semantic aim. We think they do not. The semantics they ultimately offer for *reason(s)* is neither univocal nor successful at having context-sensitivity account for the variety of uses in the way they propose. Without a successful semantics, the resulting philosophical upshots that are novel as opposed to old hat are difficult to secure.

Let's begin by considering what Weaver and Scharp set out to explain. They suggest there are three dimensions along which reasons differ that a semantics for *reason(s)* should explain. We reconstruct those dimensions as three parameters:

FUNCTION PARAMETER

Reasons are normative, motivating, or explanatory.

DEMANDINGNESS PARAMETER

Reasons are obligatory or permissive.

FACTIVITY PARAMETER

If a reason is normative, it is objective or subjective.

The setting of each parameter can then be combined to yield eight kinds of reasons:

- Permissive objective normative
- Obligatory objective normative
- Permissive subjective normative
- Obligatory subjective normative
- Permissive motivating
- Obligatory motivating
- Permissive explanatory
- Obligatory explanatory

The job before them, then, is to offer a unified semantics where *reasons(s)* is context-sensitive in a way that allows speakers to talk about eight different kinds of reasons.

The first step in unifying the uses is a proposal about what Weaver and Scharp call the “fundamental” *reason(s)*-locution, which they take to be:

- (1) X is a reason for A in S to ϕ .

In their terminology, ‘X’ is the consideration slot, ‘A’ is the agent slot, ‘S’ is the situation slot, and ‘ ϕ ’ is the object of consideration slot. What makes this locution fundamental is that it “incorporates all of the elements needed to assess the truth of any reasons sentence” (26). A speaker using a *reason(s)*-locution that does not overtly have the form of (1) either has salient elements in mind or is implicitly quantifying over one or more of the slots.

We are puzzled by their claim that (1) is fundamental in a semantic sense. The reader might interpret this as the proposal that (1) is the logical form of every statement featuring the count noun *reason(s)*. But this will not do. (1) is a predicational copular construction with *reason(s)* appearing in an indefinite description. Many *reason(s)*-locutions lack this syntactic structure. For example, *reason(s)*-locutions may be in specificational copular constructions (e.g. *The reason why Donald lied was to avoid impeachment*) and/or appear with different determiners (e.g. *Donald’s reason, the reason, two reasons*). Accordingly, (1) cannot be the logical form common to all *reason(s)*-locutions. A weaker claim is that every *reason(s)*-locution can somehow be paraphrased or analyzed as (1). But this still will not do. There are plausible differences in meaning between predicational and specificational copular constructions, for example, and there are differences in meaning between determiners. Paraphrasing every *reason(s)*-locution into a sentence like (1) would require changes in meaning. No such paraphrasing can rightfully be called “semantics.”

Our puzzlement is compounded by their admission that sentences like (2) are outliers that cannot be derived from (1):

(2) X is a reason that Y.

As they acknowledge in a footnote, Y in (2) needn't specify an agent, situation, or object. They provide *The clogged fuel line is a reason the tractor will not start* as an example. They then say they will "address these kinds of locutions explicitly below in this subsection" (26). Strangely they never do. This omission matters because locutions like (2), which are generally interchangeable with *reason(s)-why-locutions*, are extremely common. The lack of a plausible account about the relationship between sentences like (2) and sentences like (1) is a major lacuna. But Weaver and Scharp repeatedly paper over it, treating (2) as a "special case" that isn't explained in the chapter on logical form (26, ch. 2) and as involving a "wrinkle" that results in "somewhat idiosyncratic truth conditions" in the chapter on semantics (54, ch. 3). This should give the reader pause, given Weaver and Scharp's stated aim of offering a univocal semantics for the *reason(s)-locutions* of philosophical interest.

Be that as it may, Weaver and Scharp next turn to how the slots interact. *Reason(s)-locutions* akin to (1) are analyzed as four-place predicates: $R(X, A, S, \phi)$. But they make another exception for *reason(s)-locutions* like (3) where the consideration slot hosts a *that*-clause:

(3) That p is a reason for A in S to ϕ .

On the basis of the exception, they proceed to offer an analysis of *reason(s)-locutions* with *that*-clauses according to which *reason(s)* functions as an operator as opposed to a predicate.

Note that this exception incidentally commits them to *reason(s)* being ambiguous between a predicate and an operator meaning. The ambiguity is easy to see with how they paraphrase (3). Weaver and Scharp are explicit that (3) is to be analysed as (4):

(4) It may/ought to be that A in S ϕ s because p .

Reason(s)-locutions with *that*-clauses are therefore analyzed as *because*-statements containing a covert modal. But this analysis cannot apply to a *reason(s)-locution* without a *that*-clause in the consideration slot. The kinds of phrases that can occupy that slot are very diverse (e.g. verb phrase, determiner phrase, noun phrase, infinitival). Not all of these can be an argument to *because*. For example, sentences like *It may be that Donald lied because to avoid impeachment* are ungrammatical. As a result, sentences like (1) cannot be paraphrased as (4). This failure of paraphrase shows that their truth-conditions for (3) differ from those for (1).

It might be objected that what makes the *reason(s)*-locution in (3) an operator as opposed to a predicate is the *that*-clause. As such, the locution remains unambiguous because the meaning change is due to the clause's presence. But note that this could be so only if Weaver and Scharp developed a view of *that*-clauses where they somehow transform predicates into operators during semantic composition. They do not develop such a view. Nor are we aware of any who do in linguistics or philosophy.

Fortunately, the ambiguity can be avoided. The *that*-clause in (3) is a SENTENTIAL SUBJECT. Though the underlying syntax of sentential subjects is contested, consensus holds that they are not arguments to operators. Many linguists even take them to be a part of a truncated determiner phrase, the same kind of grammatical category to which the phrases *The reason* and *Every reason* belong. So Weaver and Scharp's accidental commitment to ambiguity is based on a syntactic mistake. They analyze *reason(s)*-locutions like (3) as an operator on the assumption that the *that*-clause is an argument to something. But a sentential subject is an instance where a *that*-clause is not mandatorily an argument to an operator. Recognizing as much would enable Weaver and Scharp to maintain that *reason(s)*-locutions only have a predicative meaning. However, correcting the syntactic mistake to undo the commitment to ambiguity requires giving up some of the philosophical upshots they take an operator meaning to secure. For example, they repeatedly stress that operators do not have the same ontological commitments as predicates.

In any case, Weaver and Scharp proceed to offer an analysis for the *reason(s)* operator but not for the *reason(s)* predicate. They claim "There is not much more to say about how such a predicate would work... that would be relevant to philosophical discussions of reasons" (67). We disagree. The predicative meaning fails to capture the eight interpretations they set out to explain. To see why, note that the *reason(s)*-predicate can admit of different interpretations according to the different values that X, A, S, and ϕ receive. But none of the slots correspond to what we called the factivity, function, and demandingness parameters. Consider a predicative *reason(s)*-locution like *Avoiding impeachment is a reason for Trump to lie in replying to Mueller*, where all four slots are filled by overt expressions. It contains nothing for context to change. We can envision a few ways to introduce context-sensitivity back into a locution by supplementing their theory with additional hypotheses about the semantics/pragmatics interface, but, as is, a predicative *reason(s)*-locution in its fundamental form is invariant in meaning.

The *reasons(s)* operator fares better. The operator is analyzed as involving a modal that is independently context-sensitive. In the pioneering work of Angelika Kratzer, a modal statement consists of a quantifier, a set of possibilities (MODAL BASE), a ranking of those possibilities (ORDERING SOURCE), and a proposition (PREJACENT). Accordingly, a modal statement specifies that the prejacent is true in a quantity of the ranked possibilities. A key part of this proposal is that the modal

base and ordering source are context-sensitive. Weaver and Scharp follow suit and propose further that the quantifier strength is determined by context too. The logical form of the *reason(s)* operator thus contains three extra elements that are context-sensitive.

These extra elements can be altered in a context to deliver interpretations corresponding to the three parameters. Consider the factivity parameter. A *reason(s)*-locution is objective if the modal base consists of true propositions and subjective when it consists of propositions about the speaker's beliefs. With regards to the function parameter, Weaver and Scharp suggest this is accomplished by the context-sensitive ordering source. Finally, the demandingness of a *reason(s)*-locution is specified by whether the quantifier provided by context is universal or existential.

Their proposed operator meaning enables *reason(s)*-locutions to be context-sensitive in a way that yields the eight uses. But their proposal is strikingly undermotivated. They never provide empirical evidence why sentences like (3) should be analyzed as (4) with the *reason(s)* operator being covertly modal. Nor is the contemporary literature on covert modality or connectives engaged with. For example, important diagnostics for identifying covert modality owed to Klecha (2014) go undiscussed. Setting aside the meaning sketched, we are puzzled how their analysis could be derived compositionally, a key requirement of contemporary semantics. They admit that their semantics is “overly simplistic” and urge readers to treat their proposal as “a conversation starter, not the last word” (71 & 77). But, as we have already shown for their predicative meaning, the details crucially matter.

The final component of their proposal is an explanation of how *reason(s)*-locutions interact with context. They adopt the hypothesis that every conversation contains a question under discussion, or QUD, that participants are trying to answer. Let's call this the Q-HYPOTHESIS. They then suggest that it is the QUD which ensures that *reason(s)*-locutions have the eight interpretations generated by the factivity, function, and demandingness parameters. Weaver and Scharp regard this component of their proposal as essential. They consistently leverage it while arguing that their contextualism is preferable to other contextualist views about *reasons(s)* (ch. 4).

A key component of the Q-hypothesis is that the QUD can be changed under certain conditions. The most basic way to do so is asking a question. It is also widely thought that intonation, *it*-clefts, and other constructions can change the QUD. Since the QUD can be changed, the alleged usefulness of the Q-hypothesis can be empirically motivated. This is done by constructing a question-reply exchange where the question changes the QUD and it is clear that the interpretation of the reply partially depends on that QUD. To illustrate, consider the proposal of Schoubye and Stokke (2016). They hypothesize that what *ready* means in a sentence like *Donald is ready* will depend on what QUD is operative. They motivate this hypothesis by providing a question-reply exchange

where the reply contains an instance of *ready* that is interpreted relative to the QUD. We can easily construct our own examples like the discourses below.

- (5) Is Donald ready to tell the truth?
- (6) Donald is ready.

- (7) Is Donald ready to lie?
- (8) Donald is ready.

In each exchange, the reply is the same. It is an instance of the sentence *Donald is ready*. But the meaning of that sentence clearly changes according to what QUD is set by the prior question.

Weaver and Scharp claim that a *reason(s)*-locution has one of the eight interpretations depending on what the QUD is. And yet, none of the mechanics are specified for how the changing QUD determines or constrains the interpretation of a *reason(s)*-locution. Nor do they provide even one question-reply exchange to motivate that the QUD does in fact determine the interpretation of a *reason(s)*-locution in a reply. Like many other places in the book, the reader is left without enough details to fully understand the proposal and not enough evidence to see its motivation.

Both complaints give way to more serious problems. Remember that Weaver and Scharp analyze the *reason(s)* operator modally. That covert modal is context-sensitive with respect to its quantificational strength, modal base, and ordering source. It is the QUD which is tasked with ensuring that the elements receive the right value. But the QUD cannot perform all of these jobs. To illustrate, consider the first job. Determining quantificational strength is essential to accommodate the demandingness parameter. A *reason(s)*-locution concerns a permissive reason when the quantifier is existential and an obligatory reason when it is universal. But it is difficult to see how the QUD could do as much. A question is standardly analyzed as a set of propositions (Hamblin 1973). On every implementation of the Q-hypothesis of which we are aware where the QUD resolves context-sensitivity for a particular expression like *know*, *only*, or *ready*, it does so by supplying a set of propositions. But supposing that every context contains a set of propositions is of no use in determining whether the modal hosts a universal or existential quantifier.

The problem, then, is not just that Weaver and Scharp fail to specify how the QUD performs the three jobs they task it with—it is that we do not see how the QUD *could* perform all of the jobs. One final point should be made. We noted that they never provide evidence that *reason(s)*-locutions are sensitive to the QUD. It turns out the QUD is a traitor to their cause. When one attempts to construct question-reply exchanges where the question changes the QUD and it is clear that the interpretation of *reason(s)* in the reply partially depends on that

QUD, failure results. Far from displaying interpretive dependency, the discourses constructed strike us as bordering on incoherence. Consider these two:

- (9) What is Thomas's turning left based on?
- (10) ??? The gods' desire that Thomas turn left is a reason for Thomas to turn left.

- (11) What would make Thomas's kicking the ground correct?
- (12) ??? Frustration is a reason for Thomas to kick the ground.

Importantly, the questions and the replies in the exchanges above are provided entirely by Weaver and Scharp (59-62). Though they never empirically motivate QUD sensitivity, that doesn't stop them from stipulating which questions produce which interpretations of a *reason(s)*-locution in a number of examples. The above exchanges were formed by pairing their stipulated questions and *reason(s)*-locutions. By their lights, the QUD established by (9) is supposed to determine that (10) is about an obligatory motivating reason, and the QUD fixed by (11) is supposed to settle that (12) is about a reason that is permissive, objective, and normative.

The stiltedness also afflicts their paraphrase for the *reason(s)* operator. We can rephrase the configuration slot into a *that*-clause and then convert the entire *reason(s)*-locution into the *ought/because*-locution they treat as equivalent:

- (13) What is Thomas's turning left based on?
- (14) ??? It ought to be that Thomas turns left because the gods' desire Thomas to turn left.

- (15) What would make Thomas's kicking the ground correct?
- (16) ??? It ought to be that Thomas kicks the ground because Thomas is frustrated.

The results are not better. For contrast, recall the exchanges illustrating Schoubye and Stokke's (2016) idea that incomplete predicates are completed by the QUD in a context. The interpretive influence of the QUD was impossible to miss. For these exchanges, the opposite is the case. The presence of the QUD does not determine what kind of reason the *reason(s)*-locution concerns. Instead, the presence of the QUD creates discord.

Let's step back. Weaver and Scharp's aim was to motivate and develop a univocal contextualist semantics for *reason* as a count noun where the QUD determines which of the eight interpretations a *reason(s)*-locution has. What they actually offer is a view where *reason(s)* is ambiguous between a predicate and an operator meaning. It is perhaps even more ambiguous once *reason(s)-why*-locutions are considered. So they failed to offer a univocal

semantics. On the predicate meaning, *reason(s)*-locutions are not context-sensitive in a way that can account for any of the eight interpretations. So they failed to offer a suitable contextualist semantics for the predicative meaning. On the operator meaning, *reason(s)*-locutions are context-sensitive in a way that accounts for the eight interpretations. But the QUD cannot be what determines these interpretations, and it furnishes evidence against their proposal. So they failed to develop a suitable QUD contextualism for the operator meaning.

By itself, failing to develop a semantics that does what one wants is not a serious fault. It is the risk all philosophers and linguists take in trying to make sense of natural language. Context-sensitivity in particular is not easily tamed. As noted at the outset, *reason* compounds the difficulty with its striking variety of uses. That Weaver and Scharp so thoroughly miss the mark is worth highlighting, however, given the overly triumphant tone with which they write.

Consider their discussion of John Broome. We are told that the fact “that ‘ought’ in English behaves like [a] operator, not [a] predicate” has been “ignored by [philosophers 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”, and that “[w]hile Broome is off fighting windmills” it is Weaver and Scharp who are “think[ing] about the right way of understanding these words and how their semantics pertains to prominent issues in the philosophy of normativity” (70). Such criticism is harsh. It is also mistaken. As Broome’s 2013 monograph makes clear, he is fully aware that *ought* is regularly analyzed as a propositional operator. Broome is also fully aware that *ought* is context-sensitive (Broome, 8). However, as Broome repeatedly emphasizes, he’s only interested in one particular use of *ought*—what he calls the “central” normative ought. He then spends two whole chapters (ch. 2 & ch. 3) making it precise and distinguishing it from other possible uses of *ought*. Although Broome realizes that the kinds of normative facts he is interested in can be expressed in more than one way, for the sake of clarity and consistency he intentionally inflicts “some violence on English grammar” by stipulatively treating *ought* in the central, normative sense as a lexical verb expressing a relation between a person and a proposition (Broome, 13.). In doing so, Broome is clearly *not* doing natural language semantics. Instead, he is departing from it by introducing an artificial grammar for a particular theoretical purpose: to more perspicuously express the relevant normative facts, properties, and relations that he’s interested in. Perhaps Broome’s positive project is misguided. But, if so, that’s primarily a philosophical issue, not a semantic one.

We wish we could say this was an isolated incident. It’s not. Many other philosophers are interpreted uncharitably and criticized harshly. We lack the space to detail additional transgressions, but for substantiation we direct interested readers to the reviews by Nair (forthcoming) and Schroeder (2020).

The two of us approached this book with different hopes. One of us approached the book as a complete stranger to the literature on reasons with the hope that *Semantics for Reasons* would introduce it by means of semantics and pragmatics. The one who is not a stranger hoped to see the literature advanced. We both walked away disappointed with the content and tone. We wager other readers will feel similarly. To be fair, some disappointment is inevitable given the difficulty of Weaver and Scharp's project, and we admire their ambition to systematically engage with such a large swath of topics related to reasons. There is nonetheless a lot of room for improvement, and we hope this book encourages more work with similar ambition.¹

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