

Lord, Errol and Maguire, Barry, eds. *Weighing Reasons*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 301. \$65.00 (Hardcover).

As the editors point out in their introduction, contributory notions, and in particular reasons, have become central to normative theorizing. Besides the overall, all things considered notions like ought, requirement, permission, right, wrong, and rational, we need the notion of a consideration that speaks in favor of or against some option, without settling whether the option is one we ought, are required, etc., to take. W.D. Ross recognized the need for this kind of contributory notion in *The Right and the Good*, developing his theory of *prima facie* duties. Since then, most of the work on contributory notions has focused on *pro tanto* or contributory reasons.

Though contributory notions like reasons are of central importance to normative theory, what we ultimately want out of such a theory is some account of the overall status of our options. The basic idea is that the contributory notions, taken together, determine the overall status of the options by competing with one another. This competition is generally put in terms of weight: reasons have weights, some more than others, and the option that has the weightiest reasons in its favor is the one you ought to do. More generally, we can say how the contributory reasons determine the overall status of the option by saying how the weights of the reasons for and against the option and its alternatives interact and compete.

This is all close to orthodoxy, at least for many people working in normative theory. But at this point things get more complicated and controversial, because there is as yet no widely agreed upon theory of the weight of reasons or of the competition between reasons. The chapters in this volume cover many different issues at several different levels of theorizing, from the abstract mechanics of how reasons interact, to whether desires can ground reasons, to the ways in which moral reasons compete with non-moral reasons, to applications of a theory of reasons in legal reasoning. This makes the volume a very useful introduction to thinking about this topic. But it also makes the volume tricky to review, since the questions addressed vary so widely. Instead of detailing each paper, I will discuss a couple of broad themes and point out ways in which various chapters address them. I unfortunately will not be able to cover all of the chapters, and I will not have space for much critical discussion.

First, though, I'll mention a couple of chapters that may make good starting points. The first, obviously enough, is the editors' introduction, which is very well done. Besides laying out in a clear way the motivations for theorizing about contributory reasons and their

weights, the introduction also highlights some choice points for a theory of the weight of reasons that have not been discussed much previously. Though it appears in the middle of the book, Stephen Kearns's contribution may be a helpful place to start, as well. Kearns's main goal is to argue in support of his view (developed in collaboration with Daniel Star—see “Reasons as Evidence”, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 4, [2009]: 215-242), that what it is to be a reason for one to *A* is to be evidence that one ought to *A*. Along the way, though, Kearns introduces several desiderata for a theory of reasons, especially involving their weight and interactions, that are helpful in formulating and evaluating such theories. Kearns's suggestion is that we should not expect any one notion to play all of the roles that have been assigned to reasons, so that the best we can do is find a notion that plays the most central roles better than others. He argues that his own view that reasons are evidence does just this.

The first broad theme that I'll discuss involves limitations of what I will call the *balancing* view of the competition between reasons. Options correspond to pans on a scale and reasons for the options correspond to marbles of different weights that we can put on the relevant pan. Once we know what the reasons are and how weighty they are—both questions for substantive normative theory—we combine the reasons for each option in a straightforward way, and see which option is most strongly supported, once all the reasons are taken into account.

This view is oversimplified in many well-known ways, some of which show up in the volume. For example, Ruth Chang's contribution offers a new defense of *comparativism* about rational choice—the view that the rational choice is the one that compares favorably with the alternatives—from some familiar problems, including the possibility that some reasons are incomparable. Insofar as the balancing view presupposes comparativism about rational choice (balances are for *comparing* weights, after all), Chang's arguments can be marshaled in defense of the balancing view.

One way to view the first three chapters (leaving aside the introduction) by Ralf Bader, Shyam Nair, and Daniel Fogal is as addressing some less familiar limitations of the balancing view. The problems concern aspects of the competition between reasons that are sometimes taken for granted, about how to identify the reasons—the things that have weights—in the first place, and relatedly, which considerations should be involved in the competition, and how they should be involved.

Both Bader and Fogal address problems that arise at the very first stage, of identifying the reasons. Fogal observes that which considerations we can appropriately cite as reasons in a given case seems to depend on features of the conversation, including our interests and

what we're taking for granted, that are not of any deep normative significance. In listing the reasons for Billy to go to the party, I may cite either the fact that there will be dancing at the party or the fact that Billy loves to dance, but in many cases it would be inappropriate to cite *both* of these as reasons in the same context. But surely the normative facts about what is or isn't a reason don't depend on which other reasons I've cited in the conversation. Fogal draws a parallel with causal and explanatory talk, and suggests that what is really of fundamental normative significance are normative *clusters*. Depending on features of the conversation, we can cite various parts of this cluster as a representative of the whole. Once we've cited one part, it is generally inappropriate to cite other parts. But if the considerations we cite as reasons are only normatively significant, if at all, derivatively as *parts* of the cluster that's of fundamental normative significance, then the project of taking reasons to be normatively fundamental, and the project of coming up with a rigorous theory of the weight of these individual reasons, may be misguided.

Bader's chapter does not directly engage with Fogal's, but it does engage with a related issue about identifying the reasons in a given situation. It is common to distinguish different kinds of contributory considerations—in addition to reasons, there are *conditions* and *modifiers*. (For those familiar with Jonathan Dancy's work on holism about reasons (see Chapter 3 of *Ethics Without Principles* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]), these are basically what Dancy calls 'enablers/disablers' and 'intensifiers/attenuators', respectively.) Neither conditions nor modifiers are reasons themselves: conditions are things which must be met in order for some consideration to be a reason, while modifiers are things that make a reason stronger or weaker than it would otherwise be.

These distinctions will clearly have implications for the correct weighing of reasons in a given situation. We need to be sure what we're identifying are the reasons, and not the conditions or modifiers, since the reasons are what have weights. But there are two related issues here, which relate back to some of Fogal's observations. First, it seems that whether some particular consideration is a reason, a condition, a modifier, or some combination can depend on features of the conversational context. Second, these distinctions are often justified by pointing to intuitive examples. But if whether something is a reason, a condition, or a modifier can shift with features of the context, then that raises the question of whether there are any deep distinctions here, or if, instead, there are just (for example) clusters of normatively relevant facts, from which we pick out representatives, depending on the context. Bader develops a metaphysical framework that makes robust distinctions between these different kinds of contributory considerations, which should increase our confidence (insofar

as we find the framework plausible) that there really are deep distinctions in normative role at work. Moreover, the framework gives us a way to think about these issues, and other issues in the metaphysics of reasons, in a rigorous way, rather than by merely citing intuitive examples.

Suppose we can identify the reasons in a principled way and (taking conditions and modifiers into account) assign weight to all of them. The next step is to see which option the reasons, taken together, most strongly support. An important fact about reasons is that multiple reasons for the same option can *accrue* to support the option more strongly than either does individually. The balancing view suggests that this will be straightforward: the weight of two reasons to perform action *A* will be the weight of the first plus the weight of the second, just like the weight of marbles. But as Nair points out in his contribution, there are many cases in which this is not true. For example, the heat and the rain may each be reasons to exercise indoors rather than outdoors, but taken together, they may actually support exercising outdoors, since exercising in the heat when it's raining can be very refreshing (Nair borrows this example from John Horty, *Reasons as Defaults* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 61). Nair suggests the right way to approach this problem is to identify a class of reasons that do accrue in a straightforward way, and that these will be reasons that are suitably *independent* of one another. To return to one of Fogal's examples, that Billy loves dancing and that there will be dancing at the party plausibly do not add up, and this is plausibly because they are not independent of one another. But Nair also points out some challenges for this solution. The question of reasons accrual is a central one for a theory of the competition between reasons, and one that has proven very difficult to resolve.

Several other chapters also address issues related to the balancing view. For example, Alida Liberman and Mark Schroeder make the case that there are contributory, or weighted, normative notions other than reasons, focusing on weighted but strict *obligations*, and in particular on *commitments*—obligations you imposed on yourself by having certain beliefs (e.g., believing that *p* and that *p* entails *q* commits you to believing *q*) or performing certain actions (e.g., promising to do *A* commits you to doing *A*). They argue that commitments, like reasons, compete, but that they plausibly do so in a way that is not well captured by the balancing view. In particular, there seem to be cases in which you have a commitment to *A* and no commitment not to, but in which we'd resist saying that you ought to *A*, all things considered, because you ought not to have been committed to *A*-ing in the first place. So the balancing view seems wrong for commitments. This raises the question of whether it might be wrong for reasons, as well.

Joshua Gert also addresses the balancing view. He defends his own view, developed in several other places, that reasons have two very different dimensions of strength—requiring and justifying. On this view, reasons don't compete by weighing against each other such that what you ought to do is what you have *most* reason to do. Rather, the competition between reasons is better captured by thinking about how *criticisms* of an option, which require you not to do it, compete with *answers* to those criticisms, which justify you in doing it, even given the criticisms.

Finally, John Harty applies his view of reasons as defaults—also developed elsewhere—to the case of legal reasoning with precedent. What's most interesting about Harty's view, for this review, is that it also rejects the balancing view as an account of how reasons compete. Reasons do not weigh against each other like marbles on a scale. Rather, they are default rules (or the premises of such rules) that have a priority ranking—which, interestingly, is determined by *other* default rules. So though the balancing view is probably the standard view of how reasons compete, the volume brings out several problems, and also introduces us to two very different ways—Gert's and Harty's—of thinking about this competition.

The second broad theme that I'll discuss is the nature of moral reasons. In my view the two most interesting chapters on this theme are by Kate Manne and Karl Schafer. Other contributions on this theme are the chapters by Darwall, Raz, and Smith and Jackson, but I will have to pass over those chapters for this review.

Manne's chapter develops a view she calls *Democratic Humeanism*. Traditionally, Humeans about reasons, or desire-based theorists, have argued for their view by drawing on the connection between reasons and motivation, relying on the claim that motivation requires desire. But Humeans (e.g., Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]) have also pointed out that their view gives us (i) a unified analysis of reasons that (ii) offers hope for naturalistic reduction, since desires are natural. The problem facing Humeans is to account for reasons that do *not* seem to depend on the relevant agent's desires—perhaps most importantly, *moral* reasons to treat others well. Manne observes that by freeing Humeanism from the classic motivation-based arguments for the view, there is no longer any particular reason why the Humean should focus only on the desires of the agent in question. The unifying and naturalizing ambitions of Humeanism would be as well captured by a view that explains reasons in terms of desires, no matter whose desires they are—this is Manne's Democratic Humeanism. For you to have a reason to do *A* is for it to be the case that your *A*-ing would promote someone's (yours or someone else's) desire. This is at least a start

toward capturing moral reasons, at least the moral reasons to treat others well, on a Humean view. Manne's actual view is more sophisticated than this, building in plausible, independently motivated restrictions on exactly which desires, from exactly which people, can actually provide you with reasons. And most importantly, given the theme of the volume, she begins to develop an attractive theory of the *weight* of reasons, according to which features of the relevant desire explain the weight of a given reason.

Karl Schafer's chapter explores the idea that morality might be *modest*, in the sense that morality itself might recommend doing something other than what you have most moral reason to do. A moral theory that recognizes that non-moral reasons—for example, those reasons to pursue your own interests—can nevertheless be morally relevant, by factoring into what you are morally required to do, will generally be modest in this way. Schafer gives us a clear way to think about such theories, and defends them from charges of being inconsistent or problematically self-effacing. Rather, such theories simply do not claim to be the full story about practical rationality.

As should be clear, questions about contributory considerations, their weights, and how they compete are of central importance across normative philosophy. As this volume shows, there are many research projects to pursue, each of which could no doubt fill its own volume. As a result, the volume does, to a certain extent, lack cohesion. But I believe this just speaks to the fact that, as Liberman and Schroeder put it, “we are still in only the very earliest stages of normative inquiry” (104). Both new questions about, and new applications for, a theory of reasons and their weights are just being discovered. This volume is essential reading for anyone interested in careful thinking about reasons, because it serves as both a report on what we've learned so far and an agenda for where we should look next.

Justin Snedegar

University of St Andrews