WEIGHING REASONS

ABSTRACTS

Section One: Machinery in the Theory of Weight

Chapter One: An Opinionated Guide to the Weight of Reasons
Errol Lord & Barry Maguire

Abstract:
This chapter begins by arguing that any plausible ethical theory needs some weighted notions. Reasons are the paradigmatic weighted notions. Other weighted notions include modifiers, commitments, and thresholds. Normative notions are taxonomised by two cross-cutting distinctions: weighted and non-weighted, and strict and non-strict. A variety of interactions between different normative notions are critically addressed. Finally the essay critiques several substantive theories of weight, including the ‘higher-order reasons’ view, the value-based view, the desire-based view, Scanlon’s strict-first view, and Horty’s austere view.

Keywords: weight, strict, reasons, conditions, modifiers, sufficient, ought, most reason, Scanlon, W.D. Ross, Horty

Chapter Two: Conditions, Modifiers, and Holism
Ralf Bader

Abstract:
This chapter provides a framework for understanding two ways in which reasons can vary across contexts, namely through the effects of (i) conditions which take the form of enablers and disablers, as well as (ii) modifiers which take the form of intensifiers and attenuators. It will be established that the distinction between those features of the context that condition or modify a reason and those that constitute the reason is metaphysically robust and can be drawn in a non-arbitrary and non-pragmatic manner, and that the former features cannot be included in the specification of the reason. Moreover, it will be shown that instrinsicality as well as restricted forms of non-trivial separability can be preserved, thereby establishing that the additive theory of weighing reasons can be rendered consistent with these forms of context-dependence.

Keywords: holism, enablers, disablers, intensifiers, attenuators, separability, additivity, instrinsicality

Chapter Three: How do reasons accrue?
Shyam Nair

Abstract:
There are situations where we have multiple reasons to do a certain action, a, that are individually worse than a reason to do another incompatible act. But in some of these cases, the reasons to do a taken together (which can be called the accrual of the reasons to do a) make it so that you ought to do a. This chapter explores how the weight of individual reasons determines how strongly an accrual of reasons support an act. It argues that a key to understanding how individual reasons determine how strongly an accrual support an act is to distinguish sharply between derivative and non-derivative reasons.

Keywords: accrual, derivative reasons, non-derivative reasons, confirmation theory
Chapter Four: Reasons, Reason, and Context
Daniel Fogal

Abstract:
This chapter explores some important yet neglected subtleties of ordinary reasons-talk. The first concerns the use of ‘reason’ (in its normative sense) as a count noun and as a mass noun, and the second concerns the context-sensitivity of reasons-claims. The more carefully one looks at the language of reasons, it is argued, the clearer its limitations and liabilities become. The cumulative upshot is that although talk of reasons is intelligible and useful for the purposes of communication, one should be wary of placing much weight on it when engaging in substantive normative inquiry. By way of illustration, some potential pitfalls of taking talk of reasons too seriously are considered, including how careful attention to the language of reasons undermines the main arguments for moral particularism, Mark Schroeder’s recent defense of Humeanism about practical reasons, and the “reasons-first” program in metanormativity.

Keywords: reasons, reason, context, mass/count, particularism, Hypotheticalism, Humeanism

Chapter Five: Commitment: Worth the Weight
Alida Liberman & Mark Schroeder

Abstract:
This chapter takes an indirect approach to the question of how we weigh conflicting reasons to determine what we ought to do. It is argued that obligations are a distinct normative concept that also admits of weighing. A natural, simple way due to W.D. Ross – Simple Weighing – of construing the manner in which both reasons and obligations are weighed, is introduced. Commitments are introduced as a third normative concept that admits of weighing, and it is argued that Simple Weighing is inadequate for commitments. Commitments, it is argued, are actually a special case of self-imposed obligations; it follows that obligations in general need a more sophisticated weighing process than it first appears. The payoff for our understanding of the weight of reasons is a challenge: if Ross was wrong about how obligations weigh, could Simple Weighing also be wrong about how reasons weigh?

Keywords: commitment, reason, obligation, weighing, conflict, W.D. Ross, Sam Shpall

Section Two: Analytic Issues in the Theory of Weight

Chapter Six: Democratizing Humeanism
Kate Manne

Abstract:
This chapter discusses Humean or desire-based theories of reasons, and sketches a novel, 'Democratic' alternative to a standard, agent-centered Humean view. According to Democratic Humeanism, any subject’s desires can in principle give rise to reasons for action for any agent. It is argued that reasons should be construed, on this picture, as consisting in desires that some subject, in service of one of the subject’s ends (and where the agent and the subject may, but need not, be one and the same person). During the second half of the chapter, a suitable theory of the weight of reasons for Democratic Humeanism is developed. It is argued that the weight of a reason should be held to be proportional to the depth or fundamentality, rather than the strength or phenomenological intensity, of the desire that constitutes this reason.

Keywords: Humean Theories of Reasons; desires; reasons for action; the weight of reasons; proportionalism.
Chapter Seven: Value and the Weight of Practical Reasons
Joseph Raz

Abstract:
Assuming that the value of options (actions, activities or omissions) constitutes the proximate reason for pursuing them, this chapter will advance some considerations that encourage doubts whether we have reason to promote or to maximise value. A proper argument would require establishing a negative: that there is no reason to promote value, or something like that. Raising doubts is less demanding: it consists in explaining some aspects of the relation between values and reasons that enable us to dispense with the doubtful thesis, by illustrating alternative relations between values and reasons. Theses such as that value should be promoted bring with them a way of determining the strength of reasons (of two reasons the stronger is the one that promotes more value). Abandoning the thesis reopens the question of how to determine the strength of reasons. For the most part this task is left for another occasion. In this chapter develops some theoretical doubts about promotion of value, and proceeds to outline a novel argument, to show that the disagreement is not merely terminological. The argument establishes that even though the value of things and of activities is a reason to engage with them there is a range of cases in which there is not always a reason to choose the best. The concluding section touches both on the limits of the argument, and on its importance.

Key words (phrases): Practical reasons, value-based reasons, weight of reasons, promoting value.

Chapter Eight: The Distinction between Justifying and Requiring: Nothing to Fear
Joshua Gert

Abstract:
This chapter collects a number of arguments for a robust distinction between the justifying weight and requiring weight of a given normative practical reason. It then presents a new form of argument for such a distinction: a demonstration that it is already latent in the very different accounts of such reasons supported by Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, T. M. Scanlon, and Joseph Raz. That the justifying/requiring distinction shows up in views that are so different in other ways – views that, moreover, did not set out explicitly set out to capture or even allow for it – suggests that it is a genuine feature of the practical normative domain. The chapter also shows how a more explicit recognition of a robust justifying/requiring distinction would provide important benefits for proponents of all three views. This too provides some reason to accept it.

Keywords: justification; requirement; normative reasons; the balance of reasons; supererogation; exclusionary reasons

Chapter Nine: Bearing the Weight of Reasons
Stephen Kearns

Abstract:
Reasons and their weights play various roles in our ideology. Reasons outweigh other reasons; the weightier a reason is, the more it justifies an action; if a reason to act in a certain way is conclusive, we ought to act in this way; etc. In this chapter, Kearns considers these and other roles for the weight of reasons, and argues that most of them are best captured by an evidential view of reasons, according to which reasons are evidence of some positive evaluative or normative status of an action. Kearns also explores roles of the weight of reasons (such as that of determining an action’s objective value) that do not sit well with this evidential view.

Keywords: Reasons; evidence; ought; justification; knowledge.
Section Three: Applications of the Theory of Weight

Chapter Ten: Reasoning with Precedents as Constrained Natural Reasoning
John F. Horty

Abstract: This chapter develops a picture according to which decision making in the common law is entirely guided by reasons, rather than rules, and differs from ordinary decision making only to the extent that a common law reasoner, conforming to the requirements of precedent, must adapt his or her own weighting, or priority ordering, on reasons so that it coheres with a priority ordering derived from a background case base. Common law reasoning is thus cast as a form of constrained natural reasoning, in which precedent cases are treated as reasons for altering the weights, or priorities, that would normally be assigned to other reasons.

Keywords: common law, precedent, reasons, weights, priorities

Chapter Eleven: Comparativism: The Grounds of Rational Choice
Ruth Chang

Abstract: What makes a choice rational? This chapter defends comparativism, the view that what makes a choice rational is a comparative fact about the alternatives or their reasons. Comparativism is a view that, if correct, any first-order normative theory must accept. There are three important challenges to comparativism: (1) that noncomparative relations among reasons, such as ‘exclusion’, can be what makes a choice rational, (2) that in some or all choice situations there is just ‘the’ or ‘a’ thing to do, and so comparative facts are irrelevant to what makes a choice rational, and (3) that the incomparability of the alternatives is compatible with the possibility of a rational choice. These challenges are explored and addressed.

Keywords: comparisons, rational choice, grounds of rational choice, normative ethics, practical reason, exclusionary reasons, deontology, incomparability

Chapter Twelve: The Modesty of the Moral Point of View
Karl Schafer

Abstract: In recent years, several philosophers (Joshua Gert, Douglas Portmore, and Elizabeth Harman) have argued that morality itself does not treat moral reasons as consistently overriding. In the present essay Schafer develops and extend this idea from a somewhat different perspective. In doing so, he offers an alternative way of formalizing the idea that morality is modest about the weight of moral reasons – making explicit the connections between this thesis and similar issues in the epistemic sphere. Schafer discuss how these ideas transform our thinking about familiar questions such as the nature of self-effacement, the significance of reflective endorsement, the weight that moral reasons ought to be given all things considered, and the plausibility of “indirect” moral theories. Finally, Schafer shows that these ideas are compatible even with pictures of morality – such as Kant’s – on which morality might seem to anything but modest about its own importance.

Keywords: Rationality, Moral Reasons, Moral Requirements, Moral Sainthood, Supererogation, Demandingness, Overridingness, Self-Effacement, Value Pluralism
Chapter Thirteen: Making the “Hard” Problem of Moral Normativity Easier
Stephen Darwall

Abstract:
It is often assumed that the proposition that agents have (even) some reason to comply with moral obligations is more ambitious philosophically, or more difficult to establish or justify, than that they have reason to do what is in their interest or would fulfill their aims or desires. It is argued that this is not the case, indeed, that the opposite is true. Although it is a conceptually open question whether there is any reason whatsoever for agents to do what is for their good or will advance their aims or desires, an analogous question concerning moral right and wrong is not conceptually open. This is so, it is argued, owing to conceptual connections between obligation and accountability and to inescapable presuppositions of holding someone accountable through moral blame.

Keywords: normative reasons, right, wrong, deontic, obligation, blame, blameworthy, accountability, reactive attitude

Chapter Fourteen: The Implementation Problem for Deontology
Michael Smith and Frank Jackson

Abstract:
Ethical theories mostly focus on what constitutes right action, with competing theories offering their favoured answers: Do what maximises happiness; Do that which God would approve of; Refrain from actions which violate principles for the regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement; and so on. They typically have much less to say about how one should implement their favoured answer. The question of implementation is the focus of this chapter. Various answers that deontologists might offer to this question are considered and found wanting, and a diagnosis of the source of their difficulties is suggested.

Keywords: Deontology, implementation, value, probability, knowledge, constitution, absolutism

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