REVIEWS

Review of Daniel Whiting, *The Range of Reasons: in Ethics & Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 2022

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Daniel Whiting's book is the culmination of more than a decade of the author's reflections on a variety of topics at the crossroad of metaethics and epistemology. The primary goal of the book is to articulate a general meta-normative framework delineating the fundamental structure that is common to different normative domains (practical, epistemic, aesthetic). The framework defines central normative notions—such as justification, rationality, and obligation—and specifies their reciprocal relations. As one may evince from the title of the book, a central place in this framework is played by the notion of reasons.

The first part of the book articulates and defends this meta-normative framework (chapters 2-6). In the second part (chapters 7-9), Whiting applies the framework to the epistemic domain. Central questions addressed in this latter part are what reasons to believe are, what we may believe, and under which conditions a belief is justified or rational. This second part satisfies a double aim. On the one hand, it provides a concrete example of how the general framework is supposed to work in a specific domain, showing its flexibility and explanatory power. On the other hand, it develops a range of ideas that have characterized the author's philosophical reflections in epistemology at least since his seminal work, 'Should I Believe the Truth?' (2010). Embedded in the general framework, these ideas are presented and discussed in a more systematic and organic way.

In spite of the broadness and generality of the book's project, a reader can't fail to appreciate the high level of detail of the analyses, the depth of the discussion and the care with which the author tries to address even the tiniest issues. The book covers a wide range of topics in metaethics and epistemology: from the nature of normative reasons to the semantics of deontic modals, from the role of safety in ethics and epistemology to the nature of epistemic rationality and the treatment of several epistemic paradoxes, just to mention a few of them. Philosophers unfamiliar

with the main threads of the book also will find something interesting and useful in it.

The Meta-normative Framework

In chapter 2, Whiting considers alternative accounts of normative reasons and provisionally defends an evidence-based account. This will be supplanted by a modal account in Chapter 4. After introducing some terminological remarks and familiar classifications, Whiting contrasts explanation-based and evidence-based accounts of reasons. His comparison is primarily between the two following accounts:

> EXPLANATIONRR Necessarily, a fact is a reason for a person to act if and only if that fact explains why it is right in some respect for them to act.

> EVIDENCERR Necessarily, a fact is a reason for a person to act if and only if that fact is evidence that it is right in some respect for them to act.

As is apparent from these definitions, the notion of reason is considered by Whiting as less basic than that of *rightness* and analysable in terms of the latter. Whiting conceives rightness as an objective property, independent of the perspective of an agent. Rightness is taken to be equivalent to what other philosophers label correctness or fittingness: a given response is right when it fits the circumstances.

The main argument of Whiting in favour of EVIDENCERR and against EXPLANATIONRR is based on the plausible idea that for a fact to be a reason is for that fact to play certain characteristic roles. In particular, according to Whiting, reasons are characterized by (at least) three roles: they are supposed to *justify*, *guide* and *explain* actions (and attitudes).

Whiting argues that in some circumstances EXPLANATIONRR fails to capture the justifying and guiding roles of reasons. He considers a fact that stands in an evidential but not an explanatory relation to the rightness of an action. In his example, Nadia promised to leave the party at 11pm. Whiting claims that the fact that the clock reads 11pm justifies Nadia in leaving, and might be cited by Nadia in defending her decision to leave. Moreover, Nadia may use that fact as a premise in her deliberation. Whiting's conclusion is that that fact plays the justifying and guiding roles characteristic of reasons, but according to EXPLANATIONRR it is not a reason. The simple fact that the clock reads 11pm is evidence that it is right for Nadia to leave, but it doesn't explain why it is right for her to leave.

Based on the notion of reason developed in Chapter 2, Whiting starts delineating his meta-normative framework. In Chapter 3, he provides an account of

overall normative verdicts, concerning what one may, should or must do. His account relies on a distinction between *justifying* and *demanding* reasons.

Whiting provides several criteria to distinguish the two sorts of reasons. He argues that only demanding reasons to do something are also reasons to regret not acting in that way; and that sufficient means to an end provide justifying reasons to take them, while necessary means provide demanding reasons. He also illustrates this distinction with many examples (37-38). For instance, that Alex owns a car is a justifying reason for him to drive it, but not a demanding one. By contrast, the fact that the car is blocking Alex's neighbour's driveway is a demanding reason for him to drive it away.

Whiting defends the claim that justifying reasons are genuine reasons on the basis of several considerations, the most compelling of which is that they play the typical roles of reasons. Still, it may be difficult to intuitively demarcate facts that Whiting classifies as justifying reasons from mere enabling conditions. In response, Whiting suggests that this issue might ultimately be terminological (39), and claims that the distinction between reasons and enablers is not a clear-cut one (§3.4.3).

The distinction between justifying and demanding reasons brings with it several explanatory advantages. Whiting's most interesting application of this distinction is in the analysis of deontic modals such as 'ought' and 'must'. Both these modals express overall verdicts akin to obligation, but intuitively they have a different strength. 'Must' is stronger than 'ought', in the sense that the former entails the latter, but not vice versa. This difference is well illustrated by cases of supererogation: one ought to donate to charity if this brings great benefits to others, but it is not the case that he must do so.

According to Whiting, both 'ought to ϕ' and 'must ϕ' require demanding reasons to ϕ whose weight is greater than the weight of any demanding reasons not to ϕ. However, only 'must ϕ' also requires that the weight of such demanding reasons be greater than the weight of any justifying reasons not to ϕ. By contrast, if one ought to ϕ, the weight of demanding reasons favours ϕ-ing, but there may be weightier justifying reasons not to ϕ. This allows for cases in which an agent is permitted (justified) to do a certain thing even though she ought (has most demanding reasons) not to do it. This, Whiting argues, is what happens in cases of supererogation. By contrast, if one must ϕ, one's demanding reasons outweigh any reason not to ϕ, of whatever type, and one is thereby not permitted to ϕ. Whiting then defines 'may' as the dual of 'must', as what it is not the case that one must not do.

While Whiting's accounts of overall verdicts have their own advantages, one may wonder whether these benefits really outweigh the costs. His accounts avoid some problems affecting standard ones (§3.6.1), but are also much more complex and

rely on a contentious distinction between justifying and demanding reasons. In particular, such accounts presuppose the commensurability of demanding and justifying reasons. But to me it is far from obvious that the two types of reasons could be weighed against each other, and that sometimes justifying reasons could outweigh demanding reasons. Consider again Alex's example above. It doesn't seem intuitively plausible that when Alex deliberates about whether to move his car away, the fact that he owns a car could be weighed together with (and even against) the fact that his car is blocking his neighbour's driveway.

A Modal Account of Reasons

In chapter 4, Whiting provides a new account of reasons. This account characterizes reasons as a factor of rightness and safety—where the latter is understood in terms of similarity relations between possible worlds (e.g. Williamson 2000, Pritchard 2005). The account could be stated as follows:

> MODAL Necessarily, a fact F is a justifying (demanding) reason for a person (not) to act if and only if:
>
> (i)   X is a respect in which it is right (wrong) for them to act; and
>
> (ii) In every (some) nearby metaphysically possible world in which F obtains, X obtains.

The account can be reformulated in counterfactual terms: if F is a justifying reason to ϕ, it couldn't have easily been the case that F obtained but it was not right (in some respect) to ϕ. MODAL makes the connection between reason-facts and the respect in which acting is right modally robust. Reasons are facts that are safely correlated to doing the right thing, or not doing the wrong thing. It follows that, by doing what is supported by reasons, one couldn't easily fail to do the right thing.

According to Whiting, this account fares better than the evidence-based one defended in Chapter 2. In particular, it provides a more intuitive explanation of a range of cases involving merely statistical evidential support. Whiting considers a specific case, LOTTO, in which a subject, Lily, is offered tickets 1–999 in a fair 1000-tickets lottery (61). If one of Lily's tickets is drawn, nothing happens. If ticket 1000 is drawn, someone will be harmed. Thus, it is highly likely that playing the lottery will not harm anyone. If we assume that statistical information provides evidential support, according to the evidence-based account Lily is permitted (she has justifying reasons) to play the lottery. But many would agree that Lily shouldn't play the lottery.

MODAL has an easy explanation of why it's not right for Lily to play the lottery. While it's unlikely that Lily will harm someone by playing, that outcome is

not a remote possibility. It could very easily be the case that ticket 1000 will be drawn, as any other ticket. Since in some nearby possible world in which Lily plays the lottery someone will be harmed, Lily has no justifying reason to play, and even a demanding reason not to play.

This type of case is familiar from the literature on the justificatory role of statistical evidence. On the basis of similar cases, other authors (e.g., Pritchard 2015, Smith 2016) argue that evidence shouldn't be understood as mere probabilistic support, but rather as some kind of modal (safety or normalcy-based) support. According to these views, that ticket 1000 has a very low chance of being drawn is no evidence that it will not be drawn. Since there are sufficiently similar or normal possible worlds in which ticket 1000 will be drawn, these authors conclude that the low odds do not count as evidence that no one will be harmed. Keeping an evidence-based account of reasons while switching to a modal notion of evidence seems thus sufficient to avoid the above problem. According to modal accounts of evidence, Lotto doesn't involve evidence that it is right (in a respect) for Lily to play the lottery. Therefore, also according to Evidence$_{\text{RR}}$, Lily has no reason to play the lottery.

In the rest of chapter 4, Whiting provides a careful defence of his modal account of reasons. He argues that this modal account preserves all the advantages of evidence-based accounts discussed in chapter 2, and thus it has the upper hand over explanatory accounts of reasons. He also addresses several possible objections to the account, and shows how it allows analyses of overall notions similar to those discussed in chapter 3. I found the idea of a modal account of reasons extremely interesting and original. This account should definitely be considered a serious contender to others commonly discussed in the literature. Reason relations may well not be explanatory, evidential or inferential, but modal.

A particularly nice feature of this account is that it explicitly acknowledges the normative relevance of modal notions such as safety and danger. While these notions have played a central role in contemporary epistemology, they are too often neglected in other normative domains. Moral philosophers have traditionally preferred probabilistic notions (e.g., risk) to modal ones. I agree with Whiting that safety and danger constitute important components of our moral evaluation (see also Williamson 2009). A merit of Whiting's approach is to have made this lack fully manifest.

However, I doubt that Whiting's account captures the role that safety and danger play in our moral deliberation. If Whiting's account were right, these modal properties would be constitutive of reason relations. We could think of them as filters discriminating which facts count as reasons (those that safely lead to right

action) and which don't. However, intuitively, this is not the way we factor safety and danger in our deliberative processes. When we deliberate about what to do, we treat danger and safety as part of the facts that are reasons to do or refrain from doing certain things. For instance, we say that we shouldn't swim in that river because its currents are dangerous, or we may cross the bridge because it is safe. We also weigh considerations about danger against other types of consideration constituting reasons (e.g., that swimming in the river is refreshing).

In other words, facts about danger and safety are typically factored in our deliberation as reasons (in MODAL, as fact F), rather than as filter-like conditions determining which facts count as reasons.[2] In LOTTO, the reason why Lily shouldn't play the lottery is the fact that playing is dangerous. However, safety considerations cannot play both the role of a reason-fact and a condition on that fact being a reason, on pain of double counting the normative force of such considerations. If reasons are defined as facts that safely lead to do the right thing, facts about safety cannot themselves be reasons.

I also have a second worry about Whiting's modal account. Whiting supports his account using intuitive cases such as LOTTO, but he doesn't explain why modal relations should matter normatively. If by φ-ing an agent succeeds in doing the right thing, one might legitimately wonder why she should also care about what happens in nearby possible worlds. If what ultimately matters is doing the right thing, why should one not just focus on what makes an action right in the actual world? In Whiting's account, rightness alone cannot explain why counterfactual considerations are normatively relevant. We need some further more fundamental norm recommending us, not just to do the right thing, but to do it safely. But then rightness is not the only fundamental standard, as Whiting's model seems to suggest.

Perspectival Assessments

The notions of reason and overall verdicts analysed in chapter 4 are objective, "provided by facts irrespective of a person's access or sensitivity to those facts or their reason-giving force" (8). In chapters 5 and 6, Whiting further extends his normative framework to cover perspectival senses of reasons and overall verdicts. This allows for vindicating a wide array of normative assessments, such as those of justification and rationality.

Chapter 5 introduces the notion of *possessed reasons*, namely, reasons that are capable of guiding a person's actions. Whiting characterizes these reasons as,

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[2] For similar considerations about the notion of risk, see Hansson (2013, 2). See also Fassio (2022, §4).

roughly, known facts that, from the agent's perspective, reliably indicate a respect in which acting is right. More precisely, he defines possessed (justifying) reasons as objective reasons that (i) are known by the agent, (ii) such that the agent has the general ability to act on their basis, and (iii) such that it is right to act in that way in every nearby epistemically possible world in which the reason-fact obtains. Demanding reasons are defined in a similar fashion. In (iii), epistemic possibility is defined as compatibility with what the agent is in a position to know *a priori*. The latter condition is supposed to ensure not only that a reason-fact safely leads to right acting, but that it does so also from the perspective of the agent.

Whiting then uses the notion of possessed reasons to specify further normative notions. He claims that for a person to act justifiedly, she must possess a reason for doing so. Moreover, Whiting defines perspectival senses of the overall notions ('ought', 'must' and 'may') by restricting the definitions introduced in chapter 3 to possessed reasons.

Chapter 6 focuses on *subjective reasons*. These are the reasons that determine what it is rational for a person to do. After a critical review of alternative accounts, Whiting provides his own definition of subjective reasons. The definition mirrors that of possessed reasons in chapter 5, except that such reasons need not be known; they have merely to appear to a person to be the case. Moreover, the account doesn't require a metaphysical modal connection between the reason-fact and the rightness of the action; an epistemic connection is sufficient. These modifications allow for vindicating the internalist intuition that rationality supervenes on internal mental states of the subject. More precisely, according to this account, subjective reasons (and rationality) are a factor of how things appear to be and how they could turn out to be from the internal perspective of the subject.

The general normative framework that emerges in the first part of the book provides a comprehensive picture of how different types of normative assessments fit together: each normative domain has at its core one or more central concerns (e.g., well-being, autonomy, pleasure), which determine conditions of rightness. Objective reasons are defined in terms of rightness. Definitions of possessed and subjective reasons are natural extensions of that of objective reasons. In turn, these different notions of reasons determine various kinds of overall assessment (what one ought, must and may do), as well as standards of justification and rationality.

Epistemic Normativity

Chapters 7 to 9 apply the general meta-normative framework to the epistemic domain. Here Whiting endorses a substantive normative commitment: the sole

right-maker in the epistemic domain is truth.[3] It is right to believe what is true, and wrong to believe what is false. He then explores the consequences of this commitment within the framework discussed in chapters 3-6.

Chapter 7 focuses on objective epistemic assessments. Whiting first introduces the idea that truth is the sole right maker of belief: it is right for a person to believe a proposition p if and only if it is true that p. Combining this thesis with the general account of objective reasons in chapter 4, we reach a safety-based account of epistemic reasons. Whiting defines objective (justifying) epistemic reasons as follows:

> EPISTEMIC REASON⁺ Necessarily, a fact F is a reason for a person to believe a proposition if and only if, in every nearby metaphysically possible world in which F obtains, that proposition is true (132).

This definition captures the idea that, if a fact F is a reason to believe a proposition p, then it couldn't be easily the case that F is the case, but p is not true. In other words, a reason to believe p is a fact that is safely correlated to the truth of p. We might think of the former as a safe indicator of the latter.

From EPISTEMIC REASON⁺ some quite unorthodox theses follow. For instance, that reasons are factive: if there is a justifying reason to believe p, then p is true; that there are no demanding reasons to believe, only not to believe; and that if p is false, whatever fact is a reason not to believe that p. Moreover, given this characterization of objective epistemic reasons, Whiting also argues that, in an objective sense, a person may believe all and only truths. Truth is necessary and sufficient for permissible belief.

Chapters 8 and 9 extend the application of the meta-normative framework to perspectival epistemic reasons and assessments. From this picture it emerges that truth is not the only standard to govern belief. Whiting claims that belief is subject to a plurality of standards, and that the main task of a theory of epistemic normativity is to articulate these standards and their relations.

In particular, in chapter 8 Whiting provides an analysis of possessed epistemic reasons. He argues that these reasons determine a knowledge norm of belief: one must not believe a proposition unless one is in a position to know it. In chapter 9 he provides an account of subjective epistemic reasons, and argues that belief is also governed by a standard of rationality. There he provides a novel modal account of rational belief. Chapters 8 and 9 also explore the consequences of the above theses for a wide range of topics in contemporary epistemology.

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[3] See also Whiting 2010, 2013.

The general picture emerging from chapters 7-9 involves a form of norm pluralism. This raises the issue of which standard is normatively prior and most authoritative when we have to find out what to believe. The issue becomes particularly pressing when epistemic assessments at different levels conflict with each other (Gibbons 2013). What should a subject believe in this type of circumstance? Whiting's answer is that what we ultimately may believe in the deliberative sense is what is supported by possessed reasons: we should only believe what we are in a position to know. More precisely, according to Whiting, rightness and the truth norm are more fundamental than other standards in a metaphysical and explanatory sense (2, 167), but the knowledge norm is normatively prior and most authoritative (197-198). The latter is the norm we should follow when we inquire into what we may believe (170). These ideas seem to mark a significant shift from more objectivist positions defended by Whiting in the past (2010; 2013).

Conclusion

I would highly recommend Whiting's book to two types of readers: philosophers concerned with meta-normative issues such as the nature of reasons and the relations between different normative domains, and epistemologists interested in the nature and structure of epistemic normativity. This extremely well informed, ambitious and thought-provoking book delivers outputs as diverse as a highly original modal account of reasons, a general framework mapping the common structure of normative domains, and a detailed and fully articulated theory of epistemic assessments.

Some will disagree with specific details of Whiting' theory, or will find some of his arguments less than fully convincing. Others will find some of the theory's consequences counterintuitive, and some definitions exceedingly complex. This is the inevitable destiny of any grand project combining such explanatory breadth, depth and precision as that realized by Whiting in this book. Whiting's theory shouldn't be judged from the details, but from the broad and coherent picture it delivers. The most compelling case for this theory is its ability to provide a very general, comprehensive and unified account of different normative notions, capable of explaining similarities across different domains while also making sense of the respective differences. As Whiting himself claims in the book's conclusion, the main contribution of the book is "not so much the verdicts themselves, but embedding them in a broader framework, one which delivers, unifies, and illuminates them" (198). I fully agree with this remark.

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