




# A range of reasons

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## Abstract

Daniel Whiting's excellent new book, *The Range of Reasons* (2022), makes a number of noteworthy contributions to the philosophical literature on reasons and normativity. A good deal has been written on normative reasons, and it is no easy thing to make novel and promising arguments. Yet, this is what Whiting manages to do. We are sympathetic to some of his ideas and critical of others. It makes sense for us to focus on the first half of his book, where Whiting presents two accounts of normative reasons (the first superseded by, although possibly also compatible with, the second). We welcome this opportunity to clarify our own current views on the nature of normative reasons by contrasting them with Whiting's views.

**Keywords** Daniel Whiting · reasons · facts · evidence

## 1 Introduction

Daniel Whiting's excellent new book, *The Range of Reasons* (2022), makes a number of noteworthy contributions to the philosophical literature on reasons and normativity.<sup>1</sup> At this point, a good deal has been written on normative reasons, and it is no easy thing to make novel and promising arguments. Yet, this is what Whiting manages to do. Hopefully, his book will receive the attention it deserves. We are sympathetic to some of his ideas and critical of others. Of course, we will be selective here. It makes sense for us to focus on the first half of his book, where Whiting

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers that appear without a publication year below should all be read as references to this book.

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presents two accounts of normative reasons (the first superseded by, although possibly also compatible with, the second). As in our own prior work, Whiting is intent on analyzing reasons in a way that sees them as unified across both the practical and epistemic normative domains (without ignoring differences between those domains), yet like us as well he begins with practical reasons. In the second half of the book, Whiting focuses on issues in epistemology, defending the idea that the norm of belief is truth, rather than knowledge or justification. We will not be discussing this part of his project.

We welcome this opportunity to clarify our own current views on the nature of normative reasons by contrasting them with Whiting's current views. He himself contrasted a version of his first account of reasons with our own in Whiting (2018), arguing that it improved upon our account (first presented in Kearns and Star (2008) and (2009)). We disagreed at the time, and we disagree now, but we have also now both accepted a modification to our account, first proposed in Kearns (2016). We believe that this modification makes our account of reasons more impervious to criticisms and more likely to be true.

## 2 Reasons as evidence

In a series of papers, we argued for the following claim about normative reasons:<sup>2</sup>

RAE: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent S to A if F is evidence that S ought to A.

In short, we took the main argument for RAE to be roughly this. Some fact is a normative reason to A just in case it best plays certain roles with respect to this action and with respect to reasoning, obligation, virtue, responsibility, and other reasons. Such roles include the following:

- (a) Reasons can be used in reliable practical deliberation about what to do.
- (b) Reasons can provide us with knowledge of what we ought to do, what it is good to do, what it is permissible to do, etc.
- (c) Reasons can justify our actions and be used to justify our actions to others.
- (d) Reasons can make actions valuable.
- (e) Acting on reasons can render our actions morally worthy.
- (f) Reasons are those facts sensitivity to which renders us (perhaps alongside other factors) responsible for our actions.
- (g) A virtuous person proportions her actions, and motivations for those actions, to her reasons for action.
- (h) Reasons can be acted on, which is to say that agents can do things for reasons.
- (i) Reasons can be conclusive, and what one has conclusive reason to do, one ought to do.

<sup>2</sup> See, especially, Kearns and Star (2008 and 2009).

- (j) Reasons can have strengths that can combine or compete with the strengths of other reasons.

Evidence of what one ought to do plays *nearly* all of these roles very nicely. In any case, in our judgment, it is a fact's status as evidence of the normative or evaluative status of an action that best plays these roles, taken as a whole. Note that this style of argument gives us some wiggle room—perhaps evidence does not play *all* these roles very well. For instance, it might be considered odd to think that following evidence concerning what one ought to do can make an action valuable (d) when one considers that evidence can be *misleading*. Or, to take another example, it might be thought odd that some things that count as evidence that one ought to do something (for example, the fact that one *can* do it, in certain contexts) could provide us with knowledge of what we ought to do (b), or could *justify* an action (c).

It is not that we think we do not have responses to accusations of oddness in such cases. In relation to value, we might think it worth utilizing a distinction between actual value and expected value. Or in relation to knowledge and justification, and certain bits of evidence that do not feel like they are reasons to some philosophers, we might point out that it is not necessary to think that any single reason *alone* can justify or deliver knowledge of what we ought to do (evidence that one *can* do something might help out other reasons to get one to a point of being able to correctly conclude that one ought to do that thing and make it the case that one ought to). However, we are prepared to admit that our opponents may reasonably think that evidence that one ought does not play *all* the above roles well (or perhaps some important ones that we have left out). This may account for some people's reaction that evidence does not do exactly what a normative reason does. Maybe not, but when we look at other theories, we find ourselves skeptical that *any* of them provides an account of reasons that does *everything* that people have wanted reasons to do.

### 3 Fundamental and derivative reasons

In solo-authored work, we have each made further suggestions about how to understand normative reasons and the roles that they play. In Star (2015), one of us proposes a distinction between fundamental and derivative reasons. The proposal concerning fundamental reasons is roughly this

F is a fundamental reason to A just in case F makes it *pro tanto* right to A and is evidence that one ought to A.

Derivative reasons need not play such a right-making role, but their status as reasons can be explained by appeal to fundamental reasons (as well as by appeal to RAE). Here, then, we have the idea that some reasons play a right-making role. While not all reasons do, many reasons that do not play this role derive (in part) from the reasons that do.

This distinction is not introduced in Star (2015) to save the evidential account of reasons. Rather, it is argued that we all need to accept this distinction and that

the evidential account does it justice (and is perhaps the only account of reasons to do so). Why do we all need this distinction? It is no easy intellectual matter to ascertain what the (fundamental) right-makers are, as that requires us to be warranted in believing a correct ethical theory, and since ordinary virtue involves being properly (derivative) reasons-responsive, acting virtuously must be compatible with ignorance of fundamental reasons. The direction of explanation is the reverse of the direction of discovery when it comes to fundamental reasons. Normative ethics is very difficult, but ordinary virtue is intellectually less demanding.

#### 4 Extending reasons as evidence

In another solo-authored work, our account is not simply expanded upon, but rather revised. Specifically, Kearns (2016) *expands* the evidential account of reasons to encompass more than evidence that one ought. Being evidence that one ought is one member of a united class of relations between a fact and an action (or belief, desire, etc.). The members of this class are all evidential relations between a fact and the deontic or evaluative status of an action (or belief, emotion, etc., though our concern in this paper is with action). Consider these examples

E1: F is evidence that S ought to A.

E2: F is evidence that it is valuable (or good) for S to A.

E3: F is evidence that it is permissible that S As.

E4: F is evidence that S ought not to A (or that it is impermissible that S As).

E5. F is evidence that it is bad for S to A.

Kearns (2016) suggests that any such F—i.e., any fact that is evidence of the normative/evaluative status of an action—is a normative reason (if the fact is evidence of some *negative* such status, this fact is a reason *against* Aing).

The main reason Kearns (2016) advocates extending the original account is, roughly, that the same arguments for the view that some piece of evidence that one ought to A is a reason to A also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to these other evidential relations. Thus, evidence for the permissible (and the good, the bad, and the ugly, etc.) can be used in practical reasoning, can help justify our actions, have strengths, and can compete with, outweigh, or be defeated by other evidence, etc. In essence, evidence of normative/evaluative status *play the roles of reasons well*. As we mentioned above, we need not expect them to play these roles *perfectly*. It suffices that they play them well enough.

A further argument for extending our original view is that doing so provides an account of various distinctions between reasons. Thus, for example, we may understand a *conclusive reason* to A to be conclusive evidence that one ought to A, while a *sufficient reason* is conclusive evidence that it is permissible for one to A. Similarly, we may think of a reason *for* doing something as evidence of some *positive* normative/evaluative status of that thing, while a reason *against* doing something is evidence of some *negative* such status.

We now both accept Kearns's broadening of the evidential account of reasons and think it fits well with Star's concern to understand virtuous action under conditions of moral uncertainty, both in the way that Star (2015) was interested in

highlighting—we are all (still) very uncertain as to what the *fundamental* reasons that are right-makers and wrong-makers are (if we are honest and reasonable when it comes to the project of normative ethics)—and in an additional way now worth highlighting. That is, it is not necessary for the virtuous to respond only to evidence regarding whichever normative or evaluative notion turns out to be fundamental (if any) after the debate between ought-first, fittingness-first, value-first, etc. views is resolved. Suppose, for instance, that the value-first view is correct. Discovering once and for all that this is so (and not merely taking a side in a debate regarding this option) would be a watershed moment in the history of ethics. Virtue cannot possibly be a hostage to such a historical event. The broadened evidential account of reasons that we now both accept allows us all to get on with responding to reasons well without waiting for any philosophical debates of this kind to end.

## 5 Whiting's *The Range of Reasons*

Whiting's book expresses close sympathies to evidential accounts of reasons like ours. Indeed, Whiting first sets out his own evidential account as a precursor to his modal account of reasons. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, we are sympathetic with several parts of Whiting's book. It stands as a shining example of the power of both evidential and modal accounts of reasons in accounting for various normative phenomena (in both the ethical realm and the epistemic).

Aside from illustrating the explanatory power of evidential accounts of reasons, Whiting also effectively counters various objections to such accounts. For instance, Schmidt (2017) objects that the fact that one ought to take the means to a certain end is evidence that one ought to pursue the end without this fact being a reason to pursue it, while Brunero (2018) claims that the fact that there is a reason to A is evidence that one ought to A without itself being a reason to A. Like Whiting, we think these objections pose little issue “[o]nce the focus is on, not what is doing the job, but the job it is doing” (29).<sup>3</sup> In other words, these objections generally ignore what roles such facts play in the contexts in which they are embedded—a fact is a reason because of what it *does* (or *can do*) not what it *is*. Thus, for example, the fact that one ought to take the means is not simply evidence that one ought to pursue the end but can form the basis on which one does pursue the end, can justify pursuing the end, and can be used in reasoning that concludes with believing that one should pursue the end, etc. Many proposed counterexamples to evidential accounts simply start and end with a pretheoretical intuition that a certain kind of fact is not a reason without delving further into the many ways in which these facts might play many significant reason roles.

While Whiting and we are on the same page about this and a number of other things, there are also some significant differences between us. In what follows, we shall spell out some of these differences (and, in one case, explain how we are closer

<sup>3</sup> See also Star (2018), 7–8.

to Whiting than he appreciates), first by comparing his evidential account to ours and then turning to two concerns we have with his modal account of reasons.

## 6 The contributory and the overall

Whiting's *evidential* account of reasons (which is superseded by his modal account later in the book) is the following:

EVIDENCE<sub>RR</sub><sup>DR</sup>: Necessarily, a fact is a reason for a person to act if and only if (i) there is a respect in which it is right for them to act and (ii) that fact is evidence that it obtains. (24)

To recall, our original account runs as follows:

RAE: A fact, F, is a reason to A if and only if F is evidence that one ought to A.

The difference we wish to highlight between these two accounts in this section is that Whiting's central normative notion (i.e., a respect in which it is right to act) is *contributory*, while ours (what one ought to do) is an *overall* notion. While some action might be right in a certain respect, this respect might be *outweighed*—what one ought to do (or what it is *overall* right to do) may diverge from what this respect recommends. This is what makes Whiting's central normative notion contributory—it *contributes* to the determination of an action's overall normative status, but its say-so is just one of a chorus of voices that may make various conflicting suggestions. That one *ought* to do something, on the other hand, is *the final say* on the matter. Our original account utilizes this overall notion.

This is one place where Whiting argues that views like ours falter. In particular, he offers the following counterexample to “overall”-invoking evidential accounts:

[A] group of friends is deciding which film to watch. One of the friends, Blanca, will enjoy a certain film. That is a reason for the group to pick it. Doing so will benefit Blanca. However, whenever Blanca enjoys a film, everyone else suffers (more than Blanca benefits). So, that Blanca will enjoy the film is not evidence that it is right for the group to pick it [though it is a reason to pick it]. (22)

This is the major reason he gives for why his own evidential and modal accounts of reasons invoke contributory notions instead of overall ones. We have three points we wish to make about Whiting's argument. First, it is not obvious to us that Blanca's potential enjoyment of a film is no evidence at all that we ought to pick that film—it may simply be outweighed evidence. After all, does not Blanca's enjoyment indicate at least *somewhat* that we ought to see that film? The obvious rejoinder is that Blanca's enjoyment cannot be evidence that we should see that film because it is in fact evidence (given what else we know—i.e., that everyone else will suffer if we see a film which Blanca enjoys) that we should *not* see it. In fact, it is at best unclear that these two claims conflict—it may be that Blanca's potential enjoyment is *both* evidence that we should see the film and evidence that we should not. Note that this is *not* to say that it is both evidence that P and evidence that ~P (for some P)—the proposition that we should *not* do something is not equivalent to the proposition that it is not the case that we should do it. Indeed, for those who embrace the possibility of moral dilemmas (as at least one of us does), the former does not even entail the latter. Even for those who reject moral dilemmas, Blanca's enjoyment may count as

evidence that we ought to see the film relative to some relevant subset of our evidence that does not include the fact that if we see a film Blanca enjoys, the rest of us suffer (see Kearns and Star (2013) for a similar reply to a related worry with our account).

Let us say, however, that the above response fails to adequately answer Whiting's worry. The second point we wish to make is that our *extended* evidential account can accommodate his case with no issue. This is because this evidential account allows that evidence of contributory evaluative facts are reasons to act. So, for example, that Blanca will enjoy the film is evidence that us watching it would be nice for Blanca. That is, it is evidence of some positive (contributory) normative or evaluative status of such an action. This suffices for its being a reason for us to see the film. In effect, we now agree that evidence of the merely contributory suffices for being a reason. Happily, our view is closer to Whiting's than he may think.

Still, there is another difference worth highlighting, which brings us to our third and final point in this section. In essence, Whiting's counterexample casts doubt only on evidence of an overall ought's being a *necessary* condition of a fact's being a reason. Assuming the Blanca case is cogent, it shows that a certain reason to watch the film is not evidence that we ought. That is, it is possible for something to be a reason without being evidence that one ought. This point leaves completely untouched, however, the idea that being evidence that one ought *suffices* for being a reason.

Our (revised) account tells us that this idea is correct—such evidence is evidence of some normative/evaluative status of an action and thus a reason for action. This is one respect in which we prefer our (newer) account to Whiting's evidential account—although we think he is right to insist that any evidence of contributory normative notions is a reason, we also think he moves too quickly from this to the idea that *only* such evidence is a reason. This is too hasty because many of the roles of reasons that evidence of contributory normative notions plays is also played well by evidence of overall normative notions (see the beginning of this paper for several such roles).

Perhaps, Whiting feels he must resist this result because he wishes to give an account of what we ought to do in terms of reasons (50). The point nonetheless remains that, even if what one ought to do is determined by facts in the way Whiting suggests, there will still be evidence for and against various ought-claims (and there will still be facts that bear the distinctive modal relation (of Whiting's modal account) to such ought-claims). Even if we do not reserve the term "reason" for such evidence, it still does much of what reasons do.

## 7 Fittingness and justifying v. demanding reasons

Assuming fittingness is normative, our current evidential account of reasons can accept:

If F is evidence that it is *fitting* (in some respect) that S As, then F is a reason for S to A.

However, on our account, this is just one kind of reason, since there can be evidence of various other kinds of normative or evaluative status. Whiting, on the other hand, gives fittingness, which he views as synonymous with rightness, a central role to play in explaining reasons. Recall his formula (and note that his second, modal account of reasons, which we will turn to below, *also* explicitly focuses on respects in which it is right to act):

EVIDENCE<sub>RR</sub><sup>DR</sup>: Necessarily, a fact is a reason for a person to act if and only if (i) there is *a respect in which it is right for them to act* and (ii) that fact is evidence that *it* obtains. (24; emphasis added)

We are suspicious of the idea that fittingness plays such a crucial normative role, partly because it seems most at home in contexts where one is referring to *de facto* norms (e.g., that a chess move would be fitting, that envy would be fitting). In any case, resting an account of reasons on evidence of (or meeting a modal condition in relation to) respects in which acts are right or wrong *alone* leaves out many other kinds of normative evidence that a conscientious agent might well reasonably rely on in guiding their actions. Like us, Whiting takes the guidance role of reasons to be very important. A pressing question to pose for him is thus, why should *only* evidence concerning respect in which it is right (or fitting) to act be taken as providing guidance to agent, rather than also allowing in many other kinds of evidence of evaluative of the normative or evaluative status of actions? At this point, Whiting might respond that he can allow that agents *also* have evidence of other normative or evaluative statuses that they might be able to rely on for guidance.<sup>4</sup> However, this is not wholly satisfactory, we think, since what agents cannot appropriately do on Whiting's theory is view such bits of evidence under a mode of presentation that would have it that they are *reasons*.<sup>5</sup>

## 8 De dicto v. De re

Whiting (24–27) contrasts the two following theories and argues the second is a better theory.

EVIDENCE<sub>RR</sub><sup>DD</sup>: Necessarily, a fact is a reason for a person to act if and only if that fact is evidence that there is a respect in which it is right for them to act.

EVIDENCE<sub>RR</sub><sup>DR</sup>: Necessarily, a fact is a reason for a person to act if and only if (i) there is a respect in which it is right for them to act and (ii) that fact is evidence that it obtains.

<sup>4</sup> Here we are in fact paraphrasing what Whiting himself said when responding to us in a recent symposium on his book.

<sup>5</sup> Whiting also makes a point of separately providing explanations of justifying and demanding (or requiring) reasons. In our early work on reasons, we admittedly did not discuss this distinction. However, Joshua Gert (2016, 166) points out that there is an alternative way for us to capture it: we can construe justifying reasons as evidence that it is not the case that one ought not A (i.e., that it is permissible to A). See also Kearns (2016). This small move away from RAE as a precise statement is clearly in the spirit of our new expansive evidential account of reasons.



Contrary to Whiting, we think the first of these formulae is preferable. Whiting thinks the problem with the first is that it is susceptible to a “moral fetishism” charge. He starts making this charge with a claim that it is false that “The virtuous agent when deliberating whether to act considers evidence that there are respects in which acting is right” (25). Admittedly, this particular phrasing suggests something rather odd. But if we think of a wide range of ordinary virtuous agents as typically being ignorant of (some) fundamental right-makers (or at least not being sure which candidates for right-makers are right-makers), and also often being unclear about what they ought to do in *difficult* situations (following Star (2015)), then we deny it is moral fetishism for them to try to work out what they ought to do or what would be good for them to do or what would be appropriate for them to do (etc.) by considering the evidence (reasons) that they have concerning what they ought to do, or what is good for them to do, or what is appropriate for them to do, etc. The moral fetishism charge does not stick if we focus not on cases where it is fairly obvious what to do, but on cases where it is far from obvious what to do. Furthermore, as we shall see below, we argue that Whiting’s (modal) account of reasons should introduce a significant *de dicto* element.

## 9 Whiting’s modal account of reasons

So far, we have compared Whiting’s initial evidential account of normative reasons with our own such account (and our developments of it). However, it is important to note that Whiting’s final account of normative reasons is not evidential (or, at least, not explicitly so). Rather, as we note above, his evidential account is a precursor to, and a stepping stone toward, his distinctive *modal* account. In this final section, we turn to this account.

Whiting’s general modal analysis of what it takes for a fact to be a reason is the following:

Necessarily, if a fact, *F*, is a reason for a person to act, then

- (i) *R* is a respect in which it is right for them to act;
  - (ii) in some nearby metaphysically possible world in which *F* obtains, *R* obtains.
- (71)

He also offers accounts of justifying and demanding reasons in the same vein:

Necessarily, a fact, *F*, is a justifying reason for a person to act if and only if

- (i) *R* is a respect in which it is right for them to act;
  - (ii) in every nearby metaphysically possible world in which *F* obtains, *R* obtains.
- (64)

Necessarily, a fact, *F*, is a demanding reason for a person to act if and only if

- (i) *W* is a respect in which it is wrong for them not to act;
  - (ii) in some nearby metaphysically possible world in which *F* obtains, *W* obtains.
- (67)

As Whiting points out (65), we could understand the above accounts as spelling out an evidential account of reasons assuming a certain understanding of evidence (as something like a modally reliable or safe indicator), and thus Whiting still

sees much in common between his final modal account and evidential accounts of reasons.

In our view, a modal account of reasons is a promising avenue to explore. In what follows, however, we shall express three potential worries concerning the details of Whiting's own modal account. There is, of course, much more one might say about this account, and we strongly recommend consulting Whiting's book to appreciate the explanatory power of his view in both ethical and epistemic realms.

## 10 Contingent respects in which it is right (or wrong) to act

Similarly to his evidential account, Whiting's modal account utilizes the notion of a respect in which something is right (and the notion of a respect in which something is wrong). On either such account, a fact is a reason just in case it bears the right kind of relation to a respect. As Whiting points out (and as we discuss above), we may think of the relationship between a reason and a respect in one of (at least) two ways—a *de dicto* way and a *de re* way. A *de dicto* account highlights the relationship between a reason and the fact that an action is right in *some respect or other*, while a *de re* account highlights that there are respects in which an action is right and a reason bears a relationship to (at least) one such respect (but *not* to the fact that it is a respect in which acting is right).

Whiting's modal account, like his evidential account, is *de re*. The crucial modal relations that a fact, F, bears to a respect in which acting is right (or wrong) in no way concern the fact that such a respect is indeed a respect in which acting is right (or wrong). Consider Whiting's account of demanding reasons to illustrate this point further. On this account, a fact F is a demanding reason to act just in case, for some respect W in which it is wrong not to act, there is a nearby possible world in which both F and W obtain. Note, however, that this account does *not* tell us that, in this nearby possible world, W is a respect in which it is wrong not to act.

Given this, and assuming that it is possible to have respects which are only contingently respects in which it is right (or wrong) to act, the following may obtain:

F is a fact.

W is respect in which it is wrong not to act.

W does *not* obtain.

There is a nearby world in which F obtains and W obtains.

*But*, there is no nearby world in which F obtains, W obtains, and W is respect in which it is wrong not to act.

On Whiting's account, F is a demanding reason to act. And, furthermore, it is a demanding reason to act precisely because it bears the crucial modal relation that Whiting specifies in his account of demanding reasons to a respect in which it is wrong not to act. What is at the very least *odd* about this is that it is seemingly irrelevant how a demanding reason relates to a respect in which it is wrong not to act relative to possible worlds in which this respect is *not* a respect in which it is wrong not to act. A fact, F, which constitutes such a demanding reason may well indicate that a respect, W, could easily *obtain*, but it in no way indicates that W could *obtain while being a respect in which it is wrong not to act*. It seems,

then, that even for someone who is sympathetic with a modal account of reasons, Whiting's version does not quite express the appropriate modal relation between a reason and a respect.

We can consider an example to bring the issue out further. It will be simpler to consider demanding reasons *not* to act (and thus respects in which it is wrong to act), rather than reasons to act. Let us say that an action's harming someone is a respect in which so acting is wrong. We shall further suppose that this respect is only contingently so because it is not a respect in which acting is wrong whenever this harm is *deserved*. That is, if there is someone deserving of the harm, it is not wrong to act so as one harms this person. Desert acts as a *disabler* of this respect. Given all this, the following case is possible:

There is a respect (call it "W") in which it is wrong for me to act (namely in the respect of harming someone).

W does not obtain (that is, none of my actions harm someone).

It is a fact (call it "F") that anyone harmed by any of my actions deserves to be so. (F follows trivially from the fact that no one is harmed by my actions; note that F does not entail that there is someone who deserves to be harmed.)

There is some nearby world in which both F and W obtain. That is, it is true in this nearby world both that anyone harmed by my actions deserves to be so, and that someone is harmed by my actions.

Given our supposition that W is *not* a respect in which it is wrong to act whenever the harm is deserved, it follows from the above that W is not a respect in which it is wrong to act in any nearby world in which both F and W obtain. This is because the obtaining of both F and W entails that those harmed by my actions in such a world deserve to be so.

On Whiting's account, in the above kind of case, the fact, F, that anyone harmed by my actions deserves to be so is a demanding reason *not* to act. This is already strange enough (but perhaps not intolerable should F be embedded in a certain context), but stranger still is how Whiting's account comes to this verdict—F demands that I do not act because, in a nearby world, my acting harms someone who deserves it. This, we take it, is the wrong result. Whiting's modal account tracks actual respects in which it is wrong to act across nearby worlds, but it does *not* track whether these respects remain respects in which it is wrong to act in these nearby worlds. As such, the account concludes that certain facts are (demanding) reasons not to act because they indicate the near possibility of some such respect *obtaining*, without concerning itself with whether there is a nearby world in which it both obtains and is a respect in which it is wrong to act.

This issue is further exacerbated if we think it possible not just that respects in which it is wrong (not) to act can be *disabled*, but that the valence of such respects can be *reversed*. Our example of deserved harm may be considered such a case. That is, it may be that harming someone is not simply no longer a respect in which it is wrong to act when this harm is deserved but becomes a respect in which it is *right* to act, or perhaps even a respect in which it is wrong *not* to act. If this is correct (or there is some other example that fits this kind of description), then Whiting's account tells us that F is a demanding reason for one *not* to act because there is a nearby possible world in which F obtains where W obtains by

one's acting, despite the fact that W is a respect in which it *right* to act (and even wrong *not* to act) in every such nearby world.

Though we have concentrated here on Whiting's account of demanding reasons, the same basic problem arises from his account of justifying reasons. This tells us that a fact is a justifying reason to act just in case there's some respect in which it is right to act such that, in every nearby world in which the fact obtains, the respect obtains. This does nothing to guarantee, however, that the respect in which it is right to act *remains* a respect in which it is right to act in any such nearby world. Again, put simply, there are cases in which Whiting's account emphasizes the importance of the relation between a fact and a respect in which it is *in fact* right to act in various nearby worlds while entirely ignoring whether this respect remains a respect in which it is right to act in such worlds. Furthermore, if such respects are not merely disabled but their valences reversed in such worlds, then, on Whiting's account, facts are justifying reasons in virtue of the robust modal relation between them and respects, even if it is easily possible for one to act wrongly by helping these respects obtain.

These issues are, at least in part, artifacts of Whiting's commitment to a *de re* account of the relation between reasons and respects in which it is right or wrong to act. The simplest fix is to amend the account to ensure that the respects in which it is right or wrong to act remain so in relevant nearby worlds. Thus, the accounts of justifying and demanding reasons may be amended to the following:

Necessarily, a fact, F, is a justifying reason for a person to act if and only if

- (i) R is a respect in which it is right for them to act;
- (ii) in every nearby metaphysically possible world in which F obtains, R obtains.
- (iii) in every nearby world in which F obtains, R is a respect in which it is right for them to act.

Necessarily, a fact, F, is a demanding reason for a person to act if and only if

- (i) W is a respect in which it is wrong for them not to act;
- (ii) in some nearby metaphysically possible world in which F obtains, W obtains.
- (iii) in every nearby world in which F obtains, W is a respect in which it is wrong for them not to act.

While this fixes the issue we describe above, such an amended account is no longer the purely *de re* view that Whiting argues to be superior to *de dicto* accounts such as ours. Indeed, we suspect the above considerations highlight the importance of moral reasoning (for both the everyday folk and the truly virtuous) of the *de dicto* considerations that Whiting finds unimportant (or even positive impediments to true virtue). This is especially so for modal accounts of reasons that make much of how things are in other possible worlds. It simply will not suffice for a fact, or indeed an agent, to be concerned with whether a respect in which acting is right or wrong obtains in nearby possible worlds—it is also relevant whether such a respect *remains a respect in which it is right or wrong to act* in such worlds. Adding the above *de dicto* element to Whiting's account plugs this gap while blunting his objections to other *de dicto* accounts.

## 11 An issue with the weight of reasons

We shall turn now to a second related worry we have with Whiting's account. Whiting tells us that the *weight* of a reason is "a function of the degree to which it is (not) right in the relevant respect (not) to act and the proportion of nearby worlds in which (not) acting is (not) right in that respect" (68). Our worry is with this characterization of the weight of a reason (there are other questions we shall not explore; for example, how are we to understand the proportions of infinitely many possible worlds?).

The above quote is ambiguous. As we have already seen, Whiting distinguishes there being a respect in which it is right/wrong (not) to act from this respect's obtaining. Thus, one respect in which it is wrong to act is (let us say) that so acting harms someone. This can be true even when one's actions harm no one. This respect *obtains* when one's actions do harm to someone. Thus, two ways of understanding Whiting's account of the weight of reasons are as follows:

The weight of a reason is a function of the degree to which it is (not) right in the relevant respect (not) to act and the proportion of nearby worlds in which it is (not) right in the relevant respect (not) to act (whether not one does so act).

The weight of a reason is a function of the degree to which it is (not) right in the relevant respect (not) to act and the proportion of nearby worlds in which that respect obtains.

A third possibility combines these two:

The weight of a reason is a function of the degree to which it is (not) right in the relevant respect (not) to act and the proportion of nearby worlds in which both it is (not) right in the relevant respect (not) to act and that respect obtains.

It is unclear which of these Whiting has in mind.

Further, this characterization of the weight of a reason is somewhat odd insofar as it does not mention the fact which is supposed to be the reason. How can we characterize the weight of a reason without mentioning the reason? Given what Whiting goes on to say here when considering a particular example (69), we *think* what he has in mind is something like the following:

The *weight* of a reason, fact F, is a function of the degree to which it is (not) right in the relevant respect (not) to act and the proportion of nearby worlds *in which F obtains* and which (not) acting is (not) right in that respect.

Obviously, this characterization might then be spelt out in one of the three ways above.

Thus, take harming someone as our respect in which it is not right to act. The weight of a reason, F, for me not to act is partly a function of the degree to which it is not right to harm someone. But what about the other part? Is it the proportion of nearby F-worlds in which I harm someone? Or is it the proportion of nearby F-worlds in which it is not right for me to harm someone (whether I do or not)? Or is it the proportion of F-worlds in which I harm someone *and* it is not right for me to harm someone?

The first proposal inherits a similar worry to that described in the last section. It may be that in *all* the nearby F-worlds in which someone is harmed, everyone

harmed deserves to be so, and thus harming someone is not a respect in which it is not right to act in such worlds. In such a case, the proportion of nearby F-worlds in which I harm someone should not add any weight to F's weight as a reason not to harm.

The second proposal has a different issue. It is possible that, while harming someone is a respect in which it is not right to act in every nearby F-world, there is no nearby F-world in which one harms someone. This being so, it is not clear why such worlds have any relevance to the weight of one's reasons not to harm in the actual world. Whiting wishes to capture the idea that certain of one's (potential) actions could *easily* harm—one's reasons not to act are weightier the more easily acting might harm. This idea of what is easily possible is spelt out as what obtains in nearby worlds. If there are *no* nearby worlds in which one harms someone, then, one's actions *cannot* easily harm anyone, and thus what obtains in such worlds does not increase the weight of one's reasons.

The third proposal resolves these issues (although, it is no longer a purely de re account of the manner in which reasons and their weights relate to respects). However, all these proposals render irrelevant the *degree* to which it is not right for me to harm someone in any of these nearby F-worlds, as well as the proportion of such worlds in which harming someone is right to a high degree (such as worlds in which this harm is richly deserved). That is, Whiting's proposal, however, it is understood, deems irrelevant the obtaining of disablers, attenuators, enhancers, and valance-reversers, in the nearby F-worlds.

## 12 An issue with oughts

A final related worry concerns the way in which Whiting relates what one (objectively) ought to do with the relative weight of one's demanding reasons. Whiting expresses this relation with the following necessary biconditional:

Necessarily, a person ought to do something if and only if (i) there are demanding reasons for them to do it and (ii) the weight of those reasons is greater than the weight of any demanding reasons for them not to do it. (50)

As already mentioned, his account of demanding reasons is as follows:

Necessarily, a fact, F, is a demanding reason for a person to act if and only if

(i) W is a respect in which it is wrong for them not to act;

(ii) in some nearby metaphysically possible world in which F obtains, W obtains.

(67)

As we have seen, there are multiple ways to understand how Whiting thinks reasons gain weight. Regardless of exactly how to understand him, Whiting's account of oughts is open to a certain dilemma.

Consider the following simple kind of case. There is a demanding reason, F, for me not to A because there is a respect, W, in which it is wrong for me to A, and W obtains in a nearby F-world at which I A. I also A in the actual world, but W does not obtain in the actual world. Let us assume for now that W is the only respect in which it is wrong for me to A, and there are no demanding reasons for me to A (or if

you prefer, only clearly outweighed reasons for me to A). It follows that I ought not to A.

If such a case is possible, it is also possible that I ought not to A, even though there *obtains* no respect in which it is wrong for me to A. This is because, per our assumption, W is the only respect in which it is wrong for me to A and it does not obtain in the actual world. This strikes us as, at the very least, odd—how can it be that I ought not to A even though there obtains no respect at all in which it is wrong for me to A (I do not harm anyone by my A-ing, I do not break any promises by A-ing, I do not deceive, etc.)?

Whiting might reply as follows: although W does not obtain, the nearby worlds in which it *does* obtain show that, by A-ing, I *could easily* harm, or break a promise, or deceive, etc. It is that which then explains why I ought not to A. This response is fair, but it now leads us to ask the following question: is the fact that I could easily harm (or break a promise, etc.) by A-ing a respect in which it is wrong for me to A or is it not? If it is *not*, then we are still left with a case in which I ought not to do something even though there obtains no respect in which my doing it is wrong. If it *is*, then this respect (of risking harm) obtains in *all* nearby possible worlds, assuming these worlds are also nearby each other, making the proportion of possible worlds in which a respect in which it is wrong to act obtains 100%. We do not want to insist that neither of these routes is traversable, but both seem to have their difficulties, and we are not sure which one Whiting would travel down.

In conclusion, we consider our (present) evidential account of reasons to have various advantages over Whiting's first (evidential) account of reasons. The two accounts are similar at heart, and we welcome his articulation and defense of the elements that they have in common, but this is also what gives us some confidence in the critical comparisons that we have made here coming out in our favor. Regarding Whiting's second (modal) account of reasons, which he views as an improvement on his first account, the criticisms we have presented incline us in the direction of concluding that it fails in its current state. Perhaps a successor will improve upon it, but given how well Whiting has articulated and argued for his modal account, one might suspect that, if even *his* version does not succeed, the prospects for other modal accounts are dim.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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