Justin Snedegar, *Contrastive Reasons*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xiv + 149 pp.

Justin Snedegar's book is a deft, lean and elegant explication and defense of contrastivism about reasons (henceforth, just 'contrastivism'). The idea behind contrastivism can be explained and motivated by thinking about simple cases like the following. I am trying to decide what to do tonight, and I have a splitting headache. Is the fact that I have a headache a reason for me to spend my evening reading? Well, that's tricky. It seems true that the fact that I have a headache is a reason for me to spend my evening reading *rather than clubbing*. But it doesn't seem true that it is a reason for me to spend my evening reading *rather than knitting*. So is it a reason to spend my evening reading, *simpliciter*? According to Snedegar's view, that last question rests on a mistake. Quite generally, there is no such thing as a reason for an action or attitude *simpliciter*. Rather, considerations only get to be reasons for actions or attitudes *as contrasted with* other actions or attitudes. Or, to put it another way, a consideration can only be a reason for some action or attitude out of a set of relevant alternatives. This is not to say that utterances of the form 'F is a reason to Φ', without any explicit relativization to a contrast class of relevant alternatives, cannot be true. But, the thought is, they get to be true only because they are *implicitly* relativized to a contrast class of relevant alternatives.

As the foregoing should make clear, Snedegar's contrastivism consists of both a metaphysical and a semantic claim (5). The metaphysical claim is that the reason relation is contrastive, in the sense that it contains an argument-place for a set of relevant alternatives. The semantic claim is that ordinary reasons-ascriptions should be understood as picking out this contrastive reason relation. When such ascriptions contain no explicit relativization to a set of relevant alternatives, the argument-place for a set of relevant alternatives is hidden; its value is then determined by conversational context. Thus, the semantic part of contrastivism is a form of contextualism, but one on which the context-sensitivity of the sentence 'F is a reason to Φ' is not a matter of the *word* 'reason' varying in semantic content as conversational context shifts, but rather of the sentence as a whole varying in semantic content as the value of the hidden argument-place for a set of relevant alternatives shifts. In one context, the sentence 'the fact that I have a headache is a reason to spend my evening reading' might express the (true) claim that the fact that I have a headache is a reason to spend my evening reading than clubbing. In another context, it might express the (false) claim that the fact that I have a headache is a reason to spend my evening reading than knitting.[1]

In prior literature, analogous versions of contrastivism have been defended for notions such as explanation, justification, and 'ought', all of which are at least arguably very closely related to the notion of a reason. But Snedegar's book is more than just a literature-gap-filling exercise in extending the view to reasons. Rather, it offers a battery of original, positive arguments that constitute serious

[1] Sometimes, Snedegar writes as if the view is that whether some fact F is a reason to Φ depends on which set of alternatives are salient or under consideration (7, 45-6, 63, 67). But this is at best a misleading statement of his view. On the contrastivist view, there is no such thing as being F's being a reason to Φ *simpliciter*; thus, there is no single proposition – that F is a reason to Φ – that changes in truth-value depending on which alternatives are salient. The most we can say is that whether the *sentence* 'F is a reason to Φ' is *true* depends on which set of alternatives are salient. To move from this to the object-level claim that whether F is a reason to Φ depends on which set of alternatives are salient is an instance of what DeRose (2009: 217ff.) calls the "fallacy of semantic descent".

challenges to orthodox, non-contrastive theories of reasons. Variously, Snedegar argues that without contrastivism, we will struggle to make sense of: (i) the semantics of reasons-claims that contain explicit 'rather than' clauses (24-28); (ii) cases where a single consideration favors some option B over some option A, but favors some further option C over option B (28-36); (iii) negative reason existentials (such as "you have no reason to think that *I'm* the one who committed the crime") (38-44); (iv) cases where you ought to choose some option because, although not the best option on any *individual* criterion for choice, it is the best option overall given *all* the criteria (52-61); and (v) the relationship between reasons and the promotion of objectives (68-76). In the final two chapters of the book, he shows that contrastivism also sheds light on puzzles about the transitivity of 'more reason' and the rationality of withholding attitudes, respectively. Each argument is important and worthy of discussion. In the limited space I have left, I will focus on (iv), which in turn raises a more general issue in the background.

Here's the case Snedegar gives, inspired by Ross (2006):

> "Suppose I have three dinner invitations, and that I must select exactly one: Invitation A is for Armenian with Ara. Invitation B is for burgers with Burt. Invitation C is for Chinese with Charlie. I love spending time with Ara, really like spending time with Burt, but can barely tolerate spending time with Charlie. On the other hand, I love Chinese, really like burgers, but can barely stomach Armenian." (52)

Snedegar's challenge for the non-contrastivist is as follows (52-3). Plausibly, given the right background conditions, I ought to accept invitation B. But if the reason-relation is non-contrastive, then it is unclear what consideration could constitute a reason for accepting invitation B.[2] The fact that invitation B is for a meal with Burt does not seem to favor accepting invitation B *simpliciter*, because it doesn't favor accepting invitation B over accepting invitation A. And the fact that invitation B is for burgers doesn't seem to favor accepting invitation B *simpliciter*, because it doesn't favor accepting invitation B over accepting invitation C. But if that's so, then there seems to be no reason to accept invitation B. But that sits, at best, very oddly with the verdict that I *ought* to accept invitation B.

Conversely, Snedegar thinks, the contrastivist can handle the case nicely (61). There is most reason for me to accept invitation B *rather than* invitation A – since B is for burgers and A is for Armenian, and I greatly prefer burgers to Armenian (so as to outweigh my slight preference for Ara's company over Burt's). Similarly, there is most reason for me to accept invitation B *rather than* invitation C – since B is with Burt and C is with Charlie, and I greatly prefer Burt's company to Charlie's (so as to outweigh my slight preference for Chinese over burgers). Moreover, Snedegar endorses the

[2] Strictly speaking, Snedegar frames this challenge in terms of the *favoring* relation, rather than (explicitly) in terms of the *reason* relation. This is because the discussion comes, dialectically, at a point where he is considering a view that accepts contrastivism about reasons-ascriptions but maintains that there is an underlying, non-contrastive favoring relation. However, I assume the challenge generalizes to the reason relation – indeed, as Snedegar notes, it's orthodox to assume that the reason relation *just is* the favoring relation, in which case the challenge automatically applies to the reason relation as well.

principle that one ought to Φ, out of some set of relevant alternatives, iff for every relevant alternative A one has most reason to Φ rather than A. Thus, I ought to accept invitation B.

But Snedegar is not comparing the contrastivist and non-contrastivist views on equal terms here. When he raises the problem for the non-contrastivist view, he sets that view the task of finding some individual atomic fact (such as 'invitation B is for burgers') that on its own constitutes a reason to accept invitation B. However, when he explains why the problem does not apply to the contrastivist view, he subtly switches to the language of 'most reason' (where 'reason' is now a mass noun rather than a count noun), and cites a whole *cluster* of facts (invitation B is for burgers, invitation A is for Armenian, I greatly prefer burgers to Armenian, my preference for Ada's company over Burt's is only slight…) that explain why I have most reason to accept invitation B rather than invitation A. Similarly for the comparison of invitation B with invitation C; and thus for why I ought to accept invitation B out of the set {A, B, C}. But if that constitutes an adequate explanation of why I ought to accept invitation B, I don't see why the non-contrastivist can't mimic it, claiming that what makes it the case that I have most reason to accept invitation B *simpliciter* is a general *cluster* of facts, including all facts about which cuisines and company each invitation involves, and my preferences (and their strength) regarding the cuisine I eat and the company I keep.

Snedegar might reply that the contrastivist *can* identify an individual atomic fact that constitutes a (count-noun) reason to choose option B rather than option A (perhaps: that B is for burgers), and an individual atomic fact that constitutes a reason to choose option B rather than option C (perhaps: that B is for dinner with Burt), but that the non-contrastivist cannot identify any individual atomic fact that constitutes a reason to choose option B *simpliciter*. But it seems to me that, even if we accept the demand that the reason consist in an atomic fact rather than a cluster of facts (or a lengthy conjunction of those facts), there are many candidate atomic facts that the non-contrastivist could appeal to, including at least:

- That invitation B is for the most enjoyable dinner experience overall
- That invitation B offers the best balance of good cuisine and good company
- That invitation B is the only invitation that doesn't involve something I can barely tolerate

This raises a deeper issue about the ideology of "reasons". On the picture Snedegar seems to take for granted, both the contrastivist and the non-contrastivist face the task of identifying one or more atomic facts that each, taken individually, constitute a reason for the action of accepting invitation B (either *simpliciter*, or relative to a set of alternatives). Only once those reasons are identified can we vindicate the claim that I ought to accept invitation B. On a second, different picture (see Fogal 2016), a whole cluster of facts jointly explain why I have most reason (mass-noun), or ought, to accept invitation B. Identifying what it's appropriate to cite as a/the reason (count-noun) for Φ-ing, when one ought to Φ, is often just a matter of identifying which fact from among the cluster is most in need of being raised to conversational salience, and there will often be multiple different permissible ways of framing what the reason is. This nicely explains why each of the three candidate atomic facts above feels just as intuitively acceptable to cite as "the reason" for me to accept invitation B – even though

these different "reasons" are not *additive*, in the sense that it would be a mistake to count all three of them, separately, as carrying independent weight.[3]

In my view, the pressure to go contrastivist is significantly mitigated if we adopt the second, rather than the first, picture. Here, I've only been able to gesture at the case for that conjecture by examining one of Snedegar's many arguments. But even if my suspicion that one can resist contrastivism by adopting the second picture is correct, it would still be a significant achievement for Snedegar to show that one needs to adopt contrastivism conditional on the first picture's correctness. Before reading this book, contrastivism struck me as just one more possible view in the logical space; reading it has convinced me that it is a serious contender, even if it hasn't made a full believer of me yet.[4]

References

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[3] See also Johnson King (forthcoming) on this kind of point in another context.
[4] Thanks to Daniel Fogal and Justin Snedegar for helpful feedback.