Philosophical Studies
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-025-02340-w

Conditional oughts and contrastive reasons

Thomas Schmidt[1]

Accepted: 25 April 2025

Abstract
I suggest a unified account of conditional oughts and of contrastive reasons. The core of the account is an explanation of facts about conditional oughts in terms of facts about contrastive reasons, and a reduction of contrastive reasons to non-contrastive reasons. In rejecting contrastivism about reasons, the account is consistent with orthodoxy about reasons. Moreover, it extends a standard view of how oughts and reasons are related to one another, and it makes sense of important and explanatorily recalcitrant phenomena. To the extent to which the account involves an explanation of facts about conditional oughts, it does not directly compete with semantic analyses of statements about conditional oughts. However, as I indicate in passing, the account coheres well with an important type of such analyses, while it is inconsistent with others.

Keywords Conditional oughts · Conditional obligation · Reasons · Contrastivism · Gentle Murder Paradox

1 Introduction

Conditional oughts are about what one ought to do conditional on something being the case. Such oughts give rise to a puzzle that has prompted a good deal of discussion in the literature.[1] Consider the following case:

[1] In some of the literature, oughts – conditional or unconditional – are referred to as 'obligations'. But there are good reasons to distinguish between oughts and obligations. As many moral philosophers think, obligations are correlated with rights, they are 'directed' (in being owed to someone), and they are not overall, but rather contributory, normative considerations – all of which is not, or at least not necessarily, true of oughts. A *locus classicus* for a discussion framed by this notion of obligation is Thompson (2004).

✉ Thomas Schmidt
t.schmidt@philosophie.hu-berlin.de

[1] Institut für Philosophie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany

Published online: 17 June 2025

Gentle Murder. One faces the options of murdering gently, murdering brutally, and refraining from murdering.

Plausibly, one ought to refrain from murdering, but if one murders, then one ought to do it gently. The classic desideratum is to provide an account of conditional oughts of the form 'if one either *x*-s or *y*-s, then one ought to *x*' such that they, when conjoined with 'one either *x*-s or *y*-s', do not entail that one ought to *x*. For, otherwise, if one – as a matter of fact – murders, it would follow that one ought to murder gently. And this would deontically contradict that one ought to refrain from murdering to begin with.[2]

Gentle Murder also is a paradigm for a related, and equally noteworthy normative phenomenon that involves contrastive reasons, i.e., reasons for doing one thing rather than another. Plausibly, one does not have a reason for murdering (either gently or brutally), but one has a reason for murdering gently rather than brutally. The desideratum is to provide an account of contrastive reasons such that 'there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing' does not entail that there is a reason for *x*-ing. Otherwise, that there is a reason for murdering gently rather than brutally would entail that there is a reason for murdering gently.

In this paper, I suggest a unified account of conditional oughts and of contrastive reasons that meets both these desiderata.[3] The core of the account is an explanation of facts about conditional oughts in terms of facts about contrastive reasons, and a reduction of contrastive reasons to non-contrastive reasons. The account extends a standard view of how (unconditional) oughts and (non-contrastive) reasons are related to one another, and it allows for attractive explanations of important and explanatorily recalcitrant normative phenomena.

This theoretical ambition sets the account suggested in this paper apart from various alternative views on conditional oughts and on contrastive reasons that have been put forward in the literature. Conditional oughts have been discussed primarily in deontic logic where the focus has been on working out an adequate semantics of *statements* about them. The account of conditional oughts I suggest, by contrast, involves a claim about what grounds the *facts* that such statements are about. To this extent, it does not directly compete with semantic views that the literature on conditional oughts has tended to focus on. However, as I indicate in passing below, the account coheres well with an important type of such views, while it is inconsistent with others.

Contrastive reasons have primarily been discussed in the theory of reasons and as suggesting contrastivism about reasons ('contrastivism' for short), according to which all reasons fundamentally are contrastive, and there are no reasons 'for *x*-ing

[2] The *Gentle Murder* case was introduced by Forrester (1984).

[3] The focus is on conditional oughts of the sort for which the one in *Gentle Murder* is a paradigm, i.e., ones that are about what one ought to do conditional on what else one does in the relevant situation. In what follows, the term 'conditional oughts' is meant to refer to such conditional oughts only – as opposed to ones that conditionalise on other things, e.g., on the agent's intentions ('if you intend to visit your parents, you ought to buy a ticket'), or facts about the situation ('if the person next to you is in distress, you ought to help').

simpliciter' (i.e., reasons for *x*-ing that are not relativised to some set of alternatives to *x*-ing).[4] As I argue, contrastive reasons are nothing but a certain class of non-contrastive reasons. If one, as I think one should, agrees with contrastivists that contrastive reasons are an important normative phenomenon, one thus neither has to assume contrastivism, nor the existence of two disconnected categories of reasons.

I begin by introducing the account I suggest (Sect. 2) and then go on to demonstrate its explanatory power, focusing on the *Gentle Murder* case and the desiderata stated above (Sect. 3). I subsequently show that the account covers other relevant cases as well (Sect. 4), and I end with some brief concluding remarks (Sect. 5).

2 A unified account of conditional oughts and of contrastive reasons

The account that I suggest can be understood as an extension of a straightforward and intuitively attractive view about how (unconditional) oughts and (non-contrastive) reasons for actions are related to one another that enjoys considerable support in the literature and that I refer to as the 'Balancing View of ought' (the 'Balancing View' for short):

(BV) One ought to *x* if, and only if, for each incompatible alternative to *x*, the reasons for *x*-ing are weightier than those for the alternative.

In order to accommodate the role that reasons against actions play in determining oughts, (BV) should be complemented with the view that a reason against *x*-ing is nothing but a reason for not-*x*-ing.[5]

The Balancing View is not uncontroversial. In particular, it has been claimed not to do justice to the complexities of how reasons normatively interact in determining the overall normative status of actions. While there is reason to believe that the Balancing View can be defended against this charge, the bulk of what follows is not premised on its truth. I proceed from the Balancing View primarily in order to avoid having to deal with too many moving theoretical parts. But the core elements of the account can also be embedded in alternative views about how oughts and reasons are related.[6]

[4] See, e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong (2008) and, in particular, Snedegar (2017), who has provided the most extensive elaboration and defence of contrastivism to date. Snedegar (2015) offers an overview and discussion of different, more specific forms that contrastivism can take. Another, equally unorthodox, view in the vicinity is that contrastive reasons are a distinct category of reasons that fundamentally differ from non-contrastive reasons. This view has not been explicitly suggested. But some authors in the recent literature, such as Muñoz and Pummer (2022, 1437–1439), seem to be sympathetic to it.

[5] Even though this entails that talk of 'reasons against' could be traded for talk of 'reasons for' without substantive loss, doing so would compromise readability. This is why I continue to use the term 'reasons against' in what follows.

[6] The Balancing View is explicitly put forward, e.g., by Parfit (2011, 32–33), and Schroeder (2015). Gert (2007), Snedegar (2021), and Tucker (2022) are amongst those who have suggested alternative, more complex views. I offer a detailed discussion and defence of central elements of the Balancing View in Schmidt (2024). In particular, I defend the view that a reason against *x*-ing is nothing but a reason for not-*x*-ing against recent criticism as voiced, e.g., by Greenspan (2005) and Snedegar (2018).

Extending the Balancing View in a way that covers conditional oughts and contrastive reasons proceeds in two steps. First, I suggest an explanation of conditional oughts in terms of contrastive reasons. Conditional oughts of the relevant sort ('one ought to *x* if one *x*-s or *y*-s'), I submit, can be identified with what we might call 'contrastive oughts' ('one ought to *x* rather than *y*'), and these, in turn, can be explained in terms of contrastive reasons in a way that mirrors (BV):

(BV_C) One ought to *x* rather than *y* if, and only if, for each way *w* of *y*-ing, the reasons for *x*-ing rather than *w*-ing are weightier than those for *w*-ing rather than *x*-ing.[7]

Even though, of course, much depends on how 'reasons for … rather than …' are to be understood, (BV_C) is, I submit, a natural way of thinking about contrastive oughts.[8]

Second, I offer a reduction of contrastive reasons ('for … rather than …') to non-contrastive reasons ('for/against …'). In doing so, I focus on cases that involve a choice between three mutually incompatible options, *x*-ing, *y*-ing, and *z*-ing, and in which there are reasons against *x*-ing and against *y*-ing.[9] In some such cases, there are reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing, and in some there are not. The main task is to identify the structural difference in virtue of which this is so.

Consider the following case:

> *Headache*. One faces the mutually incompatible options of *x*-ing, *y*-ing, and *z*-ing. *x*-ing and *y*-ing each cause one to have a headache (of the same sort and degree).

In *Headache*, there are reasons against *x*-ing and against *y*-ing, but there intuitively neither is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing nor a reason for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing.

[7] Even though (BV) and (BV_C) are formulated as symmetric biconditionals, they are to be understood as being about what grounds facts about oughts and about contrastive oughts, respectively: if one ought to *x*, then this is so *because*, for each alternative to *x*-ing, the reasons for *x*-ing are weightier than those for the alternative; and if one ought to *x* rather than *y*, then this is so *because* for each way *w* of *y*-ing, the reasons for *x*-ing rather than *w*-ing are weightier than those for *w*-ing rather than *x*-ing.

[8] (BV_C) is similar in spirit to a principle of conditional moral permissibility suggested by Muñoz and Pummer (2022, 1438). As it is true of Muñoz and Pummer's principle (which they call 'Conditional J&R'), (BV_C) (in combination with the suggestion that conditional oughts are contrastive oughts) can be seen as a way of taking up the view, worked out by Kratzer (2012), that conditionals are domain restrictors.

[9] Note that describing a case as involving a set of three mutually incompatible options is consistent with there being more than one way of doing one, or each, of these options. Moreover, in a case in which *x*-ing and *y*-ing are two incompatible options, *x*-ing and *y*-ing can be seen as two mutually incompatible and collectively exhaustive ways of performing a more general action. I sometimes refer to this more general action as [*x*-ing or *y*-ing] in what follows. But this is only for presentational purposes. I remain neutral on whether such a more general action should be understood as the disjunction, or as the set, of the more specific ways of performing it.

After all, *x*-ing and *y*-ing are disfavourable in the same respect and to the same degree.

Now consider:

> *Two Promises*. One faces the mutually incompatible options of *x*-ing, *y*-ing, and *z*-ing. One has promised *A* not to *x*, and one has promised *B* not to *y*.

In *Two Promises*, there are also reasons against *x*-ing and against *y*-ing. But, other than in *Headache*, intuitively there are reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, and for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing. After all, *y*-ing is disfavourable in a respect in which *x*-ing is not (*y*-ing violates a promise to *B*, *x*-ing does not), and *x*-ing is disfavourable in a respect in which *y*-ing is not (*x*-ing violates a promise to *A*, *y*-ing does not). Moreover, the reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing intuitively *is* that *y*-ing violates a promise to *B*, and the reason for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing *is* that *x*-ing violates a promise to *A*.

The relevant structural difference between the two cases, I submit, is this: in *Headache*, there is a reason against *x*-ing because *x*-ing is a way of doing something more general against which there is a reason ('… causes a headache'), with *y*-ing being an alternative way of doing this. The reasons against *x*-ing and against *y*-ing are, as I put this, 'provided by' a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing]. In *Two Promises*, there are also reasons against *x*-ing and against *y*-ing. But in this case, these are not provided by a reason against doing something more general, since the reason-giving properties here are different ('… violates a promise to *A*' / '… violates a promise to *B*').[10]

Note that this explanation of the relevant structural difference between cases in which there are no reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing (and vice versa) on the one hand, and cases in which there are such reasons on the other, does not depend on first-order views. If you disagree with what I have suggested and instead think that, in *Two Promises*, there is only one relevant property (e.g., '… violates a promise') rather than two, then you will also disagree that there are reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing.

On the basis of this, I suggest the following reduction of contrastive reasons to non-contrastive ones:

(CR) A reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing is a reason against *y*-ing that is not provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing].

In effect, (CR) says that a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing is a reason against *y*-ing that specifically disfavours *y*-ing.

[10] A reason against (for) *x*-ing *provides* a reason against (for) *y*-ing if, and only if, the fact that there is a reason against (for) *x*-ing is part of what explains that there is a reason against (for) *y*-ing. Note that this is compatible with holding that the fact that is the reason against (for) *y*-ing is also the fact that is the reason against (for) *x*-ing. Assume, for instance, that one has promised not to *x*, and that *y*-ing is a way of *x*-ing. Then, there is a reason against *y*-ing, and the fact that one has a promissory reason against *x*-ing is part of what explains that this is so. This is compatible with holding that the fact that one has promised not to *x* not only is the reason against *x*-ing, but also the reason against *y*-ing.

(CR) entails, as desired, that there is neither a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, nor one for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing in *Headache*, and that there are reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing in *Two Promises*. It also entails the intuitively correct verdicts about what these latter reasons are: that *y*-ing violates a promise to *B* is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, and that *x*-ing violates a promise to *A* is a reason for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing.[11]

Note that (CR) also entails that all reasons against actions are contrastive reasons. To see why, assume that there is a reason against *x*-ing. This reason cannot have been provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or not-*x*-ing], for it is impossible that there is a reason against [*x*-ing or not-*x*-ing]. If there were such a reason, it would be (as per the account of reasons against actions introduced before) nothing but a reason for refraining from [*x*-ing or not-*x*-ing], which is impossible to do. Hence, (CR) entails that a reason against *x*-ing always is a reason for not-*x*-ing rather than *x*-ing. At the same time, it does not entail that a reason against *x*-ing is a reason for any specific way of not-*x*-ing rather than *x*-ing. This, I submit, is precisely as it should be.

This completes the introduction of the account I suggest. The account combines the Balancing View, the principle that relates contrastive oughts and contrastive reasons stated above, and the reduction of contrastive reasons to non-contrastive ones just suggested – i.e., the claims (BV), (BV_C), and (CR).[12]

3 The account's explanatory power: the Gentle Murder case

Focusing on the *Gentle Murder* case, I now argue that the suggested account meets the desiderata stated at the outset. Recall the case:

> *Gentle Murder*. One faces the options of murdering gently (*gm*-ing), murdering brutally (*bm*-ing), and refraining from murdering (*rm*-ing).

Intuitively, there is a reason for *gm*-ing rather than *bm*-ing, but there is no reason for *gm*-ing. Moreover, one ought to *gm* rather than *bm*, but it is not the case that one ought to *gm*.

[11] While (CR) covers all cases discussed in this paper, there are cases that require working with the following generalised version of the reductive claim:

(CR′) A reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing is a reason against *y*-ing that is not provided by a reason against a more general action type that *x*-ing and *y*-ing are ways of performing.

[12] It is worth noting that neither the much-discussed narrow-scope analysis ('$x \vee y \rightarrow O(x)$') nor the equally prominent wide-scope analysis ('$O(x \vee y \rightarrow x)$') of conditional oughts cohere well with the account. This is so since these analyses reduce conditional ought statements to a construction that only involves the monadic ought ('O(…)'). They thus suggest that one does not need to genuinely extend a view about unconditional oughts (such as, e.g., the Balancing View) in order for it to cover conditional oughts as well. Since the account I suggest is a genuine extension of the Balancing View, it seems to require an analysis which interprets conditional oughts as involving a dyadic operator ('O(…|…)') that requires a separate semantics different from the one for the monadic ought. For a brief overview of the discussion of conditional oughts in deontic logic, see McNamara and Van De Putte (2022, Sect. 4).

Here is how the account applies to the case: since gently murdering and brutally murdering are instances of murdering, there are reasons against each that are provided by a reason against [*gm*-ing or *bm*-ing]. Since *bm*-ing (unlike *gm*-ing) is brutal, there is an additional reason against *bm*-ing that is not provided by a reason against [*gm*-ing or *bm*-ing]. Thus, (CR) entails that there is a reason for *gm*-ing rather than *bm*-ing, but no reason for *bm*-ing rather than *gm*-ing. Then, (BV_C) entails that one ought to *gm* rather than *bm*. Even though there is a reason for *gm*-ing rather than *bm*-ing, there is no reason for *gm*-ing.[13] Thus, (BV) entails that, even though one ought to *gm* rather than *bm*, it is not the case that one ought to *gm*.

The account thus returns the intuitively correct results on the case and, in so doing, meets the desiderata stated above. It explains how it is possible that there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, even though there is no reason for *x*-ing; and it explains how it is possible that one ought to *x* rather than *y,* even though it is not the case that one ought to *x*.

The element of the account that does the main work here is the view that reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing always are reasons against *y*-ing, as entailed by the reductive claim (CR). This ensures that it is possible that there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, even though there is no reason for *x*-ing.[14] (BV_C) then ensures that contrastive oughts inherit the relevant structural feature, i.e., that it is possible that one ought to *x* rather than *y*, even though it is not the case that one ought to *x*. Since, as I have suggested, conditional oughts of the sort occurring in *Gentle Murder* are to be understood as contrastive oughts, (BV_C) also ensures that it is possible that one ought to *x*, conditional on that one *x*-s or *y*-s, even though it is not the case that one ought to *x* – not even if one in fact *x*-s or *y*-s.

Because of these structural features, the account is able to answer a related, pressing question about conditional oughts of the sort under discussion. Chisholm (1963) famously referred to such conditional oughts as 'contrary-to-duty imperatives', since they tell us what we ought to do conditional on that we fail to do what we ought to do. In so doing, they fulfil an important guiding function, since we undeniably sometimes are set on doing what we ought not to do. As Muñoz and Pummer nicely put this: 'wrongdoers need guidance, too' (2022, 1429). But how can contrary-to-duty imperatives fulfil their guiding function, given that they must not, on pain of contradiction, end up telling us that we ought to do something that we actually ought to refrain from doing?

Here is what the suggested account has to say about this. According to it, the fact that one ought to *x* if one *x*-s or *y*-s is grounded in the fact that the reasons

[13] I assume that the reason that specifically disfavours *bm*-ing (the fact that *bm*-ing is brutal) does not provide a reason for *gm*-ing. This is in line with a view about the conditions under which reasons against actions provide reasons for their incompatible alternatives that has independent support in its favour (see note 18 below).

[14] This view has intuitive and theoretical appeal, but as a theoretical option it has been overlooked in the literature. The candidates for potential reductions of contrastive reasons that have been discussed all entail that if there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, then there necessarily is a reason for *x*-ing. It is, as Snedegar (2017, 34) points out, precisely this feature of those other candidates for reductive views in virtue of which these are bound to fail.

that specifically disfavour *y*-ing are weightier than those that specifically disfavour *x*-ing. It tells the killer who is set to murder gently or brutally and who asks what to do: 'the reasons that specifically speak against murdering brutally are weightier than those that specifically speak against murdering gently'. To be sure, the killer likely won't be moved by the reason against murdering. But this does not eradicate the normative significance of the further reason specifically against murdering brutally, and the killer may well still be moved by this reason. In this sense, conditional oughts provide the relevant sort of guidance while being consistent with what is the more important normative truth here: that the killer ought not to murder at all.

4 Extending the account to other cases

I now argue that the suggested account can be extended to other relevant cases that structurally differ from the ones discussed before.

4.1 Cases involving differences in degree

In *Two Promises* and in *Gentle Murder*, there are reasons for doing one thing rather than another since the relevant options are disfavourable in different respects: in *Two Promises*, *x*-ing does not, while *y*-ing does, violate a promise to *B*; in *Gentle Murder*, gently murdering does not, while brutally murdering does, involve doing something brutal. But there are also cases in which there is a reason to do one thing rather than another and in which the relevant options are disfavourable to different degrees. Consider:

> *Degrees of Pain*. One faces the mutually incompatible options *x*-ing, *y*-ing, and *z*-ing. *x*-ing is painful (to degree *D*), *y*-ing is even more painful (to degree $D + \Delta$), and *z*-ing is not painful at all.[15]

Intuitively, there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, but there is no reason for *x*-ing. Moreover, one ought to *x* rather than *y*, but it is not the case that one ought to *x*.

Here is how the account applies to the case. Since both *x*-ing and *y*-ing are painful to (at least) degree *D*, there are reasons against each that are provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing] (namely, that doing either is painful to degree *D*). Since the reason against *y*-ing is that *y*-ing is painful to degree $D+\Delta$, there is an additional reason against *y*-ing that is not provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing]. Thus, (CR) entails that there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing, but no reason for *y*-ing rather than *x*-ing. Then, (BV_C) entails that one ought to *x* rather than *y*. But since there is no reason for *x*-ing, (BV) entails that it is not the case that one ought to *x*.

[15] This case is structurally similar to, but avoids certain complications of, a case suggested by Snedegar (2017, 28–29).

In this analysis of *Degrees of Pain*, I have suggested that we break down what could be seen as one reason against *y*-ing into two reasons that separately contribute to how much reason there is against *y*-ing. If one assumes, as it is widely held, that reasons are facts and that facts are true propositions, then there is, I submit, nothing wrong with individuating reasons in such a rather fine-grained way. To be sure, when it comes to figuring out whether one ought to *x*, what matters is how the set of reasons for *x*-ing compares, weight-wise, to the sets of reasons for the incompatible alternatives to *x*-ing. And as far as this is concerned, it does not matter whether we consider the members of such a set to be individual reasons that separately contribute to the weight of the set, or whether we consider the set to contain only one reason. But as far as figuring out contrastive reasons is concerned, it does matter whether the reasons that disfavour an action have parts in common with reasons that disfavour an alternative. Intuitively, these common parts do not make a comparative difference. The crucial question is thus whether there is a reason against an action that remains in place once all the parts that ultimately speak against an alternative as well are disregarded. To state that, in *Degrees of Pain*, there is a reason against *y*-ing that is, and there is a reason against *y*-ing that is not, provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing], is precisely to express that this is so in this case.[16]

4.2 Cases involving differences in favourability

The cases in which there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing discussed so far were ones that involve a difference in disfavourability between *x*-ing and *y*-ing, since, in the cases discussed, *y*-ing is disfavourable in a respect in which, or to a degree to which, *x*-ing is not. It is rather straightforward that the reductive view (CR) covers such cases. For, saying that there is a reason against *y*-ing that is not provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing], or by a reason against a more general action type that *x*-ing and *y*-ing are ways of performing, just is another way of saying that there is a respect in which, or a degree to which, *y*-ing is disfavourable and *x*-ing is not.

But what about cases that involve a difference in favourability? That is, what about cases in which there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and in which this

[16] The view suggested here entails that, if one reason (e.g., 'is painful to degree D') is part of another (e.g., 'is painful to degree to degree $D+\Delta$'), then the combination of both reasons is as weighty as the latter reason. This is as it should be and corresponds to a familiar mereological principle: if $a \sqsubseteq b$, then $a \sqcup b = b$. For a detailed discussion of how the phenomenon of overlapping reasons can be accounted for within Reasons Fundamentalism, see Maguire and Snedegar (2021). Fogal (2016) thinks that the possibility of overlapping reasons suggests that talk of 'reasons' (count noun) should be replaced by 'reason' (mass noun). For a brief discussion of how this view bears on the dialectical situation regarding contrastivism, see Worsnip (2019). In a later paper, Fogal and Risberg (2023) defend a view that they call 'support-explanationism' that is related to Fogal's earlier suggestion and according to which facts about normative reasons can be analysed in terms of explanation and normative support. While the reductive account of contrastive reasons that I suggest does not cohere well with the view from Fogal's 2016 paper, I do think that it is consistent with Fogal and Risberg's support-explanationism, but I cannot discuss the details here. In order to do so, one would need to figure out whether the concept of normative support (mass noun) and explanation that is at work in Fogal and Risberg's view allows for the relevant sort of theoretical texture to account for overlapping reasons.

seems to be so since there is a respect in which (or a degree to which) *x*-ing is favourable but *y*-ing is not? Consider:

> *One Promise*. One faces the mutually incompatible options *x*-ing, *y*-ing, and *z*-ing. One has promised to *x*.

In *One Promise*, there is a promissory reason for *x*-ing, and – because of that – there plausibly are reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and for *x*-ing rather than *z*-ing.

The reductive view (CR) entails the correct verdicts about contrastive reasons in *One Promise* only if there are reasons against *y*-ing and against *z*-ing. But it is plausible that there are, since it is plausible to hold that, in *One Promise*, the promissory reason for *x*-ing provides reasons against *y*-ing and against *z*-ing. Since these reasons, then, are not provided by reasons against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing] or against [*x*-ing or *z*-ing], respectively, (CR) entails the intuitively correct result that there are reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and for *x*-ing rather than *z*-ing.

More generally, it is plausible to assume – and defensible on independent grounds – the following principle of reasons transmission (where a non-derivative reason is one that is not provided by a reason for or against one of the other options that are present in the respective case):

(RT) A non-derivative reason for *x*-ing provides reasons against each incompatible alternative to *x*-ing.[17]

Since a promissory reason for *x*-ing plausibly is a non-derivative reason for *x*-ing, (RT) entails that, in *One Promise*, the reason for *x*-ing provides reasons against *y*-ing and against *z*-ing.

Note that this way of getting the suggested account to return the verdict that, in *One Promise*, there are reasons for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and for *x*-ing rather than *z*-ing makes explicit the view about reasons transmission that I implicitly relied on in Sect. 2. The suggestion there was that, in *Headache*, there are reasons against *x*-ing and against *y*-ing that are provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing]. We now can state more precisely what is going on here: since, given the setup of *Headache*, *z*-ing is nothing but not-[*x*-ing or *y*-ing], the (non-derivative) reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing] (that doing either causes a headache) is nothing but a (non-derivative) reason for *z*-ing. As per the transmission principle (RT), that reason provides individual reasons against *x*-ing and against *y*-ing.

The explanation why the account covers *One Promise* straightforwardly carries over to all relevantly similar cases, i.e., to all cases in which there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing and in which *x*-ing is favourable in a respect in which, or to a degree to which, *y*-ing is not. For, *x*-ing is favourable in a respect in which, or to a degree to which, *y*-ing is not if, and only if, there is a reason for *x*-ing that is not provided by a reason for a more general action that *x*-ing and *y*-ing are ways of

[17] For a defence of related transmission principles, see Kiesewetter (2015, 945–946; 2018, sect. III) and Schmidt (2024, 249–253).

performing. If that is so, then *y*-ing is incompatible with doing whatever action is favoured by the reason that provides the reason for *x*-ing. Thus, (RT) entails that this reason provides a reason against *y*-ing that is not provided by a reason against [*x*-ing or *y*-ing]. Then, (CR) entails that this reason against *y*-ing is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing – as desired.

Thus, when the account is complemented with principle (RT), it covers all cases in which there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing – i.e., cases in which (I) *x*-ing is favourable in a respect in which, or to a degree to which, *y*-ing is not, or (II) *y*-ing is disfavourable in a respect in which, or to a degree to which, *x*-ing is not. Indeed, (RT) entails that all cases that satisfy (I) satisfy (II) as well. Remarkably, the converse is not true. This is so since, arguably, the transmission behaviours of reasons for actions and of reasons against actions are not symmetric. While – as stated in (RT) – all non-derivative reasons for *x*-ing provide (derivative) reasons against each incompatible alternative to *x*-ing, non-derivative reasons against *x*-ing arguably provide reasons for incompatible alternatives to *x*-ing only under certain conditions.[18]

There is thus good reason to think that the suggested account covers all cases of contrastive reasons, i.e., cases in which there is a reason for *x*-ing rather than *y*-ing.

4.3 Diachronic cases

In this subsection, I briefly indicate how the suggested account can be brought to bear on certain puzzling cases of diachronic choice that involve conditional oughts. A much-discussed case has been made famous by Jackson and Pargetter:

> *Professor Procrastinate*. 'Professor Procrastinate receives an invitation to review a book. He is the best person to do the review, has the time, and so on. The best thing that can happen is that he says yes, and then writes the review when the book arrives. However, suppose it is further the case that were Procrastinate to say yes, he would not in fact get around to writing the review. Not because of incapacity or outside interference, but because he would keep on putting the task off. This has been known to happen. Thus, although the best that can happen is for Procrastinate to say yes and then write, and he can do exactly this, what would in fact happen were he to say yes is that he would not write the review. Moreover, we may suppose, this latter is the worst that can happen. It would lead to the book not being reviewed at all.' (Jackson & Pargetter, 1986, 235)[19]

In *Professor Procrastinate*, there are three possible courses of action. Ranked from best to worst, they are these: [*accept* and *write*], [*decline* (and *not write*)], [*accept* and *not write*]. Plausibly, the following conditional ought statement is true:

[18] As I have argued in Schmidt (2024, 253–260), the Balancing View should be complemented by the principle that non-derivative reasons against *x*-ing provide reasons for incompatible alternatives to *x*-ing if, and only if, these are optimal in a specific sense of this term – i.e., a principle that is more restrictive than (RT).

[19] In formulating this case, Jackson and Pargetter take up, and modify, an earlier case introduced by Goldman (1978, 185–186).

(P) Procrastinate ought to decline if he won't write.

The issue is how (P) is to be understood. Actualists hold that what one ought to do now can, and in *Professor Procrastinate* does, depend on what one does later. This is why they tend to favour a narrow-scope interpretation of (P), so that the following inference is valid: if Procrastinate won't write, then he ought to decline; Procrastinate won't write; therefore, he ought to decline.

Possibilists, by contrast, think that what one ought to do now does not depend on what one will do, but on what one can do. Since, as per the description of the case, Procrastinate can [*accept* and *write*], and since this is the best course of action, they think that Procrastinate ought to [*accept* and *write*] and that, in particular, he ought to accept. But what are possibilists to make of the fact that (P) intuitively is true? The above account suggests understanding (P) as being about a contrastive ought:

(P′) Procrastinate ought to [*decline* (and *not write*)] rather than to [*accept* and *not write*].

(Note that [*decline* (and *not write*)] and [*accept* and *not write*] are the only two courses of action that are consistent with not writing the review.) As per the account, (P′) is the case if, and only if, the reasons for [*decline* (and *not write*)] rather than [*accept* and *not write*] are weightier than those for [*accept* and *not write*] rather than [*decline* (and *not write*)]. And this, in turn, is so if, and only if, the reasons that specifically disfavour [*accept* and *not write*] are weightier than those that specifically disfavour [*decline* (and *not write*)]. And the description of the case suggests that this is indeed the case: the (only) reason that specifically disfavours [*accept* and *not write*] is that this will result in the review not being written at all (which is the worst possible outcome); and the (only) reason that specifically disfavours [*decline* (and *not write*)] is that the review will then not be written by the person who could do it best (which would be not ideal, but not a catastrophe either). Thus, the account entails that (P), is true, as desired. Moreover, when (P) is explained as suggested by the account, it does not follow that Procrastinate ought to decline even if he in fact won't write, as desired by possibilists.

This does, of course, not settle the debate between actualists and possibilists.[20] After all, while the inferential behaviour of the conditional ought statement in *Gentle Murder* is not controversial, the inferential behaviour of the conditional ought statement in *Professor Procrastinate* is. No one wants it to follow that, in *Gentle Murder*, one ought to murder gently; but actualists, other than possibilists, want it to follow that, in *Professor Procrastinate*, Procrastinate ought to decline. But the suggested account does offer possibilists an attractive way of formulating an important element of their view.[21]

[20] For a relatively recent contribution to that debate that includes a very helpful overview over some of the relevant issues, see Timmerman and Cohen (2016).

[21] In particular, the account offers an alternative to the view that the relevant conditional in *Professor Procrastinate* should be given a wide-scope interpretation, as suggested, e.g., by Kiesewetter (2015; 2018).

5 Conclusion

The core of the account of conditional oughts and of contrastive reasons that I have suggested in this paper is an explanation of facts about conditional oughts in terms of contrastive reasons, and a reduction of contrastive reasons to non-contrastive reasons. The account preserves the Balancing View of ought and extends it to contrastive oughts and to contrastive reasons in a way that makes sense of puzzling normative phenomena and that is consistent with orthodoxy about reasons.

As I have argued, there is reason to think that the account is extensionally adequate with regard to all relevant cases of conditional oughts and of contrastive reasons. Moreover, I am hopeful that the account, when coupled with a view about how reasons determine *moral* deontic status, can be extended to puzzling cases of conditional moral permissibility.[22] But I have to leave further discussion of this matter for another occasion.

Acknowledgements This paper has benefited from discussions of earlier versions with audiences at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Universität Bielefeld, University of Birmingham, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, UNC Chapel Hill, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Lunds Universitet, Universität Münster, University of Southampton, and Universität Zürich. For individual conversations, or written feedback, on drafts, I am very grateful to Jonathan Beere, Singa Behrens, Christopher Bottomley, Daniele Bruno, Francesca Bunkenborg, Marie Castner, Leo Eisenbach, Kit Fine, Jason Kay, Benjamin Kiesewetter, Felix Koch, Jonathan Lucas, Michelle Mason Bizri, Erasmus Mayr, Conor McHugh, David Plunkett, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Peter Schaber, Mark Schroeder, Nicholas Shackel, Bart Streumer, Jack Woods, and Richard Woodward.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

References

Chisholm, R. M. (1963). Contrary-to-duty imperatives and deontic logic. *Analysis, 24*(2), 33–36.

Fogal, D. (2016). Reasons, Reason, and Context. In E. Lord & B. Maguire (Eds.), *Weighing Reasons* (pp. 74–103). Oxford University Press.

Fogal, D., & Risberg, O. (2023). Explaining Normative Reasons. *Noûs, 57*(1), 51–80.

Forrester, J. W. (1984). Gentle Murder, or the Adverbial Samaritan. *Journal of Philosophy, 81*(4), 193–197.

Gert, J. (2007). Normative Strength and the Balance of Reasons. *Philosophical Review, 116*(4), 533–562.

Goldman, H. S. (1978). Doing the Best One Can. In A. I. Goldman & J. Kim (Eds.), *Values and Morals* (pp. 185–214). Reidel.

[22] This is true, in particular, of the 'All or Nothing Problem' introduced by Horton (2017) that has been the focus of some discussion in the recent literature.

Greenspan, P. (2005). Asymmetrical Practical Reasons. In M. E. Reicher & J. C. Marek (Eds.), *Experience and Analysis*, Vienna: öbv & hpt. pp. 387–394
Horton, J. (2017). The All or Nothing Problem. *Journal of Philosophy, 114*(2), 94–104.
Jackson, F., & Pargetter, R. (1986). Oughts, Options, and Actualism. *Philosophical Review, 95*(2), 233–255.
Kiesewetter, B. (2015). Instrumental normativity: In defense of the transmission principle. *Ethics, 125*(4), 921–946.
Kiesewetter, B. (2018). Contrary-to-duty scenarios, deontic dilemmas, and transmission principles. *Ethics, 129*(1), 98–115.
Kratzer, A. (2012). *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives*. Oxford University Press.
Maguire, B., & Snedegar, J. (2021). Normative metaphysics for accountants. *Philosophical Studies, 178*(2), 363–384.
McNamara P., & Van De Putte F. (2022) Deontic Logic. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2022 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/logic-deontic/>.
Muñoz, D., & Pummer, T. (2022). Supererogation and conditional obligation. *Philosophical Studies, 179*(5), 1429–1443.
Parfit, D. (2011). *On What Matters* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
Schmidt, Th. (2024). The Balancing View of Ought. *Ethics, 134*(2), 246–267.
Schroeder, M. (2015). What makes reasons sufficient? *American Philosophical Quarterly, 52*(2), 159–170.
Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2008). A Contrastivist Manifesto. *Social Epistemology, 22*(3), 257–270.
Snedegar, J. (2015). Contrastivism about reasons and ought. *Philosophy Compass, 10*(6), 379–388.
Snedegar, J. (2017). *Contrastive Reasons*. Oxford University Press.
Snedegar, J. (2018). Reasons for and reasons against. *Philosophical Studies, 175*(3), 725–743.
Snedegar, J. (2021). Reasons, Competition, and Latitude. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* (Vol. 16, pp. 134–156). Oxford University Press.
Thompson, M. (2004). What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice. In R. J. Wallace, Ph. Pettit, S. Scheffler, & M. Smith (Eds.), *Reason and Value. Themes From the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (pp. 333–384). Oxford University Press.
Timmerman, T., & Cohen, Y. (2016). Moral obligations: Actualist, possibilist, or hybridist? *Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 94*(4), 672–686.
Tucker, Ch. (2022). Weighing Reasons Against. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* (Vol. 17, pp. 77–107). Oxford University Press.
Worsnip, A. (2019). Review of J. Snedegar, Contrastive Reasons. *Philosophical Review, 128*(3), 367–371.

Terms and Conditions

Springer Nature journal content, brought to you courtesy of Springer Nature Customer Service Center GmbH ("Springer Nature").

Springer Nature supports a reasonable amount of sharing of research papers by authors, subscribers and authorised users ("Users"), for small-scale personal, non-commercial use provided that all copyright, trade and service marks and other proprietary notices are maintained. By accessing, sharing, receiving or otherwise using the Springer Nature journal content you agree to these terms of use ("Terms"). For these purposes, Springer Nature considers academic use (by researchers and students) to be non-commercial.

These Terms are supplementary and will apply in addition to any applicable website terms and conditions, a relevant site licence or a personal subscription. These Terms will prevail over any conflict or ambiguity with regards to the relevant terms, a site licence or a personal subscription (to the extent of the conflict or ambiguity only). For Creative Commons-licensed articles, the terms of the Creative Commons license used will apply.

We collect and use personal data to provide access to the Springer Nature journal content. We may also use these personal data internally within ResearchGate and Springer Nature and as agreed share it, in an anonymised way, for purposes of tracking, analysis and reporting. We will not otherwise disclose your personal data outside the ResearchGate or the Springer Nature group of companies unless we have your permission as detailed in the Privacy Policy.

While Users may use the Springer Nature journal content for small scale, personal non-commercial use, it is important to note that Users may not:

1. use such content for the purpose of providing other users with access on a regular or large scale basis or as a means to circumvent access control;
2. use such content where to do so would be considered a criminal or statutory offence in any jurisdiction, or gives rise to civil liability, or is otherwise unlawful;
3. falsely or misleadingly imply or suggest endorsement, approval , sponsorship, or association unless explicitly agreed to by Springer Nature in writing;
4. use bots or other automated methods to access the content or redirect messages
5. override any security feature or exclusionary protocol; or
6. share the content in order to create substitute for Springer Nature products or services or a systematic database of Springer Nature journal content.

In line with the restriction against commercial use, Springer Nature does not permit the creation of a product or service that creates revenue, royalties, rent or income from our content or its inclusion as part of a paid for service or for other commercial gain. Springer Nature journal content cannot be used for inter-library loans and librarians may not upload Springer Nature journal content on a large scale into their, or any other, institutional repository.

These terms of use are reviewed regularly and may be amended at any time. Springer Nature is not obligated to publish any information or content on this website and may remove it or features or functionality at our sole discretion, at any time with or without notice. Springer Nature may revoke this licence to you at any time and remove access to any copies of the Springer Nature journal content which have been saved.

To the fullest extent permitted by law, Springer Nature makes no warranties, representations or guarantees to Users, either express or implied with respect to the Springer nature journal content and all parties disclaim and waive any implied warranties or warranties imposed by law, including merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose.

Please note that these rights do not automatically extend to content, data or other material published by Springer Nature that may be licensed from third parties.

If you would like to use or distribute our Springer Nature journal content to a wider audience or on a regular basis or in any other manner not expressly permitted by these Terms, please contact Springer Nature at

onlineservice@springernature.com