

do *oughts* take propositions?

When Sara ought to smile, there is something that Sara ought to do – to smile. That is, smiling is something that Sara ought to do. Similarly, if Lori is left of the lamp, then there is something Lori is left of – the lamp. That is, the lamp is something Lori is left of. Just as ‘left of’ expresses a relation between Lori and the lamp, it is natural to think that ‘ought to’ expresses a relation between Sara and smiling: the *ought to* relation. This relation, it is natural to think, relates agents to actions. Just as actions are the kind of thing that can be right or wrong, so also it is actions that are the kind of thing we can stand to in the *ought to* relation.

That, at any rate, is a natural naïve view to take, and it should sound familiar. But it is far from standard. In fact, the dominant explicit view about ‘ought’ in the philosophical literature is that it has nothing in particular to do with actions. On the dominant view, ‘ought’ takes *propositions* as an argument, rather than actions. In fact, although the dominant view comes in two flavors, on the traditional version of the dominant view ‘ought’ doesn’t have anything in particular to do with agents, either. On the traditional version of the dominant view, ‘ought’ takes only one argument – propositions. New-fangled versions of the dominant view agree with the naïve view that ‘ought’ has an argument place for an agent, but still insist that the second argument place is for a proposition, rather than an action.

I hold that this dominant view is mistaken, in traditional and new-fangled flavors alike, and it is the aim of this paper to assemble in one place some of the key evidence from ethics, metaphysics, deontic logic, syntax, and semantics which bears on this question. In part I I’ll consider the evidence for and against the view that *ought* is a monadic property of propositions. I’ll argue that the evidence supports holding that at least some uses of ‘ought’ are instead best understood as expressing a relation that requires another argument place – for an agent – and hence that the traditional propositional view is wrong about at least *some* uses of ‘ought’. Then in part 2 I’ll consider the evidence for whether this relational sense of ‘ought’ relates agents to actions or to propositions. I’ll argue that the evidence which has been offered in favor of the new-fangled

view should be unconvincing, and that there is good, straightforward, evidence against it, based both on linguistic and metaphysical considerations. Finally, I'll close in part 3 by arriving at part of the philosophical payoff of all of this, and suggesting a few reasons why it matters.

I.1 'ought' as a raising verb and propositional operator


Let me start by being clear that there is one sense of 'ought' in English about which the traditional view is correct. The following two sentences, for example, are trivially equivalent:

- Ia It ought to be that the meeting starts at noon.
- Ib The meeting ought to start at noon.

In neither of these sentences does 'ought' contribute a relation between anything. 'The meeting' is not the logical subject of **Ib** any more than 'it' is the logical subject of **Ia**. Syntacticians say that 'it' in **Ia** is an *expletive* subject, because it makes no semantic contribution. It does not make sense to ask 'what ought to be that the meeting starts at noon?' We use the word 'it' in **Ia** because English sentences require a grammatical subject, and that requirement must be met somehow, but the underlying structure of **Ia** is **Ic**:

- Ic [ought][[the meeting][starts at noon]]


Providing the expletive 'it', however, is not the only way to turn **Ic** into a grammatical sentence of English. Another way to do so is what linguists call 'movement'. Movement happens when 'the meeting' moves, or *raises*, to the subject position before 'ought', leaving behind a 'trace' (sort of like a bound variable) which shows where it really, logically speaking, belongs.

- 2d The meeting ought t to start at noon.
A diagram consisting of a horizontal line with a vertical tick mark at its right end. From the left end of this line, a vertical line goes up, then a horizontal line goes left, and finally a vertical line goes down to the letter 't' in the sentence above.

Constructions like this sense of 'ought' are called *raising constructions*, and are distinguished by their lack of genuine 'external' argument places – arguments that would be filled by something appearing in the subject position. Because they have no *real* argument place to be filled by something in the subject position, the requirement for English sentences to have a *grammatical* subject must be filled in some other way, and it can be filled either by the expletive 'it' or through movement. Consequently, this view of the syntax of this sense of 'ought' predicts that **Ia** and **Ib**

should be trivially equivalent. They are trivially equivalent, because they make essentially the same contributions to the level of semantic interpretation, but merely satisfy the requirements of English grammaticality in different ways.

‘Ought’ is far from the only raising construction in English. There are many such constructions, and a useful one for us to keep in mind as a comparison is ‘seems’. Just as with ‘ought’, **2a** and **2b** are synonymous, because they each arise from **2c**, by satisfying the grammatical requirement that an English sentence must have a subject, but satisfying it in different ways – **2a** through the expletive ‘it’, and **2b** through movement, as in **2d**:

- 2a** It seems that the meeting starts at noon.
 - 2b** The meeting seems to start at noon.
 - 2c** [seems][[the meeting][starts at noon]]
 - 2d** The meeting seems *t* to start at noon.
- 

Just as with ‘ought’, ‘seems’ requires no genuine external argument place; we interpret it semantically as a property of propositions. Similarly, the raising sense of ‘ought’ is best interpreted semantically as a property of propositions. It is in this sense that the ‘O(—)’ operator of standard deontic logic is typically interpreted as ‘it ought to be the case that’.

I think it should be close to uncontroversial that on at least one natural sense in English, ‘ought’ is, like ‘seems’, a raising predicate. This is not *totally* uncontroversial, because Peter Geach [1983] denied it. Geach claimed that there is only one sense of ‘ought’ – the sense captured by the naïve view, on which it relates an agent to an action. According to Geach, the ‘ought’ sentences that we have been considering are merely *elliptical* for claims about what someone or other ought to do – agential ‘ought’ sentences. I think, however, that we should distinguish the question of whether there is in fact a raising sense of ‘ought’ from the question of whether it is in turn reducible to some further, relational sense. We should all agree that there *is* such a sense of ‘ought’, and Geach should go on to tell us how it can be analyzed in terms of the relational sense of ‘ought’. For my purposes here I’ll remain neutral on that question.

I.2 a relational ‘ought’: in search of evidence

Since the traditional version of the dominant view is right about *some* sense of ‘ought’, the challenge to both the newfangled view and the naïve view is to find evidence that there is in fact a second,

relational ‘ought’. In principle, of course, there could be some interesting relation that we do not actually have a word for, but I’m going to proceed on the assumption that if there is such a relation that plays an important role in ethical inquiry, then it is one that we have, at some point, managed to be able to talk about when we were engaged in ethical inquiry. So I’m going to assume that it must either be the semantic value of some English expression, or else be something that we could otherwise predict that we would be able to manage to talk about by using some English expression. This is why I’ll continue to proceed by looking for linguistic evidence for a relational sense of ‘ought’.

It turns out, however, that evidence for a relational sense of ‘ought’ is somewhat harder to come by than it might at first appear. Consider, for example, my throw-away argument from the beginning of the paper. From ‘Sara ought to smile’, I pointed out, it follows that there is something that Sara ought to do, namely, to smile, and that smiling is something Sara ought to do. So the same entailments hold as if ‘ought’ expressed a relation between Sara and smiling. An additional observation might make it look like this is a good argument: for these natural entailment relations *don’t* hold in the case of **Ia** or **Ib**, our examples of propositional uses of ‘ought’. From ‘it ought to be that the meeting starts at noon’ it does not follow that there is something it ought to do, and from ‘the meeting ought to start at noon’ it does not follow, except as a bad sort of pun, that there is something the meeting ought to do. Similarly, from ‘there ought to be world peace’ it does not follow that there is something there ought to do. So you might think that this test nicely distinguishes between the cases that fit the propositional ‘ought’ well, and cases that call for a relational sense of ‘ought’, as in ‘Sara ought to smile’.

But this would be wrong. This test tells us nothing, because it yields the same results for ‘seems’. From ‘Sara seems to smile’ it follows that there is something Sara seems to do – namely, to smile. It follows that smiling is something Sara seems to do. From ‘the meeting seems to start at noon’ it follows only as a bad sort of pun that there is something the meeting seems to do. And so on. But ‘seems’ does not have two senses, a propositional sense, and a relational sense on which it relates agents to actions. So whatever explains why this entailment holds in the right cases for ‘seems’ will do for ‘ought’ as well. We’ll have to look elsewhere for evidence that there is a distinct, relational, sense of ‘ought’.

So recall that one of the advantages of the syntactic account of **Ia** and **Ib**, and of **2a** and **2b**, was that it gave a simple syntactic explanation of their trivial equivalence. They are trivially equivalent because they provide essentially the same input to semantic interpretation. So this

might be a good test to bring to bear in the case of the sort of ‘ought’ sentences which might intuitively seem to be relational. Compare, for example:

- 3a** It ought to be that Sandy gets fired.
- 3b** Sandy ought to get fired.

If **3a** and **3b** are trivially equivalent, then the propositional treatment of **3b** would yield an attractive explanation of this as a prediction. But unfortunately it is not at all obvious that **3a** and **3b** *should* be equivalent. The thesis that **3a** and **3b** are equivalent is known among deontic logicians as the Meinong-Chisholm Thesis.¹ The Meinong-Chisholm Thesis, as I understand it, is a consequence of the thesis that the raising ‘ought’ is the only sense of ‘ought’ in English, and it is far from obvious.

Things are complicated, however. One major complication derives from the fact that we have already allowed that ‘ought’ does have a raising sense. It follows from this view that there *is* a reading of **3b** on which it is equivalent to **3a**. And this prediction is correct. If you and I are commiserating together about how Sandy’s poor performance is holding the office back, despite several warnings she has received, then it makes sense for us to say either **3a** or **3b**. But we don’t mean that *Sandy* ought to go about getting fired. On the contrary, we might be fully cognizant of the fact that Sandy is having trouble making ends meet, and is likely to have trouble acquiring a new job. Still, we can get *a* reading of **3b** on which it means nothing different from **3a**.

Yet it also seems that we can get a reading of **3b** on which it means something different from **3a**. In fact, this is the most natural reading – the reading on which **3b** seems clearly false, even if Sandy’s job performance has been poor. If Sandy is in financial trouble, then she ought to *keep* her job, rather than to lose it. If this is a genuine, distinct reading of **3b**, then it is a reading for which the pure propositional view does not appear to allow. If you think that you can get this reading, and that it is distinct from readings you can get of **3a**, then that would appear to be evidence that there is some sense of ‘ought’ that we have not yet captured.

I.3 agency in the complement clause

The argument just presented, however, goes too fast. The thesis that there is only one, raising, sense of ‘ought’, predicts that **3b** arises from a structure like **3c** through movement:

¹ See, for example, Horty [2001], McNamara [2006].

3c [ought][[Sandy][gets fired]]

It results, that is, from applying ‘ought’ to the English sentence, ‘Sandy gets fired’. Now, if there is only one semantic reading of ‘Sandy gets fired’, then semantically composing this reading with the semantic value of ‘ought’ will result in only one reading of 3b: ‘Sandy ought to get fired’. Since we seem to be able to get two readings of 3b, this appears to be a problem.

But it is a problem only on the assumption that ‘Sandy gets fired’ has, in fact, only one reading. Suppose, however, that ‘Sandy gets fired’ in fact has two readings, one of which attributes agency to Sandy in the matter of getting herself fired, and one of which places Sandy as merely the patient of a firing by someone else, with no instigating on her part. We might represent these two readings as 4a and 4b, informally employing a device used in the logic of agency² to represent precisely this notion: that we are talking about an *action* of someone, rather than a mere happening (‘stit’ is short for ‘sees to it that’):

4a Fired(Sandy)
4b Sandy stit: Fired(Sandy)

If ‘Sandy gets fired’ does, in fact, have each of these possible readings, then ‘Sandy ought to get fired’ would, as a result of applying ‘ought’ to each of these different readings, itself have two different readings (here formulated in terms of the ‘O’ of deontic logic):

4c O(Fired(Sandy))
4d O(Sandy stit: Fired(Sandy))

So this hypothesis about the semantics of ‘Sandy gets fired’ – that it admits of ‘agential’ and ‘non-agential’ readings – accounts for the same data as the hypothesis that there are in fact two senses of ‘ought’. Moreover, it is not an abstruse or implausible hypothesis. According to a well-developed hypothesis in linguistic semantics, supported by work in syntax as well³, argument places come marked with *thematic roles*, which distinguish between whether something is an AGENT or PATIENT in some relation. Appeal to thematic roles could distinguish between 4a and 4b straightforwardly:

4e Sandy_{PATIENT} gets fired.
4f Sandy_{AGENT} gets fired.

² See, for example, Belnap, Perloff, and Xu [2001].

³ See, for example, Jackendoff [1972], Grimshaw [1990], and Williams [1994].

It follows that any argument for a relational sense of ‘ought’ is going to have to do better. It will have to either propose an ‘ought’ sentence subject to an ambiguity of this kind, but for which the required readings of the complement clause are unavailable, or else it will have to show that even if the required readings were available, they would yield the wrong results. In the next two sections I’ll show how to do both.

To anticipate, here is a small but important problem with the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory. If the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory is right, then we should be able to get the same two readings of **3a** as we can get of **3b**. We should be able to get **4c** as a reading, and we should also be able to get **4d**, depending as we interpret ‘Sandy gets fired’ as **4a** or **4b**. But it seems to me that it is possible to get a reading of **3b** that I cannot get of **3a**. Similarly, if the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory is correct, then ‘seems’ sentences should admit of the same ambiguities as ‘ought’ sentences, because they can be applied to the same contents. But this seems not to be the case. Hence, the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory appears to overgenerate. It is flexible enough to generate the required readings only by being *too* flexible, and generating readings that there are not. In the next section I’ll exhibit more direct evidence of this kind.

I.4 the passive transformation argument

A better pair of examples than **3a** and **3b** comes from cases like the following (introduced by Harman [1973] and discussed by Geach [1982], who attributes the point to Anselm):

- 5a** Bill ought to kiss Lucy.
5b Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill.

On the assumption that they both employ the raising ‘ought’ already distinguished, **5a** derives through movement from the structure in **5c**, and **5b** derives from the structure in **5d**:

- 5c** [ought][[Bill][kisses Lucy]]
5d [ought][[Lucy][is kissed by Bill]]

Now, the existence of the raising ‘ought’ predicts that on these readings, **5a** and **5b** will be equivalent to **5e** and **5f**, respectively.

- 5e** It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy.
5f It ought to be that Lucy is kissed by Bill.

This prediction is, I think, correct. It is possible to get such readings of both **5a** and **5b**.

Moreover, according to a plausible assumption, ‘Bill kisses Lucy’ and ‘Lucy is kissed by Bill’, because they differ only by the passive transformation, must have the same semantic content. This assumption yields the prediction not only that **5a** is equivalent to **5e** and **5b** to **5f**, but that all of these are equivalent to each other. This prediction is also, I think, correct. On the reading of **5a** on which it is equivalent to **5e**, it is also equivalent to **5f**, and on the reading of **5b** on which it is equivalent to **5f**, it is also equivalent to **5e**. Hence, there are readings of **5a** and **5b** on which they are equivalent to each other.

But the problem is that there is a reading of **5a** on which it is not equivalent to any reading of **5b**, and a reading of **5b** on which it is not equivalent to any reading of **5a** – in fact, these are the most natural readings. These readings can be generated by a single, raising, sense of ‘ought’ only if there is a reading of ‘Bill kisses Lucy’ that is semantically distinct from any possible reading of ‘Lucy is kissed by Bill’, and a reading of ‘Lucy is kissed by Bill’ that is semantically distinct from any possible reading of ‘Bill kisses Lucy’. But unfortunately, there are no such readings. Because the passive transformation is a purely syntactic operation, there is no possible reading of either of these sentences for which there is no available reading of the other. Consequently, there is no way to apply a single, raising ‘ought’ to these two sentences in order to generate the distinct readings that it is easy to obtain of **5a** and **5b**.

Nuel Belnap and Jeff Horty [1995] have claimed, in an argument repeated in Horty [2001], that the problematic readings of sentences like **5a** and **5b**⁴ can be captured by the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory, by **6a** and **6b**, respectively:

- 6a** O(Bill stit: Kisses(Bill,Lucy))
- 6b** O(Lucy stit: Kisses(Bill,Lucy))

Horty and Belnap are correct that **6a** and **6b** are distinct in meaning, and they are correct that they incorporate the intuition that the natural readings of **5a** and **5b** seem to involve agency in some way. But they are not, I think, right that **6b** is an admissible reading of **5b**. It is not an admissible reading, because ‘Lucy stit: Kisses(Bill,Lucy)’ is not an admissible reading of ‘Lucy is kissed by Bill’.

⁴ Note that Belnap and Horty make things slightly easier for themselves by eliminating the passive form in the example that they discuss. But they are explicitly addressing Geach’s argument, so I take it that it is supposed to apply to passive examples like this one, as well. Also note that Belnap and Horty do not make any direct claims about natural-language semantics.

- 6c Lucy is kissed by Bill
 6d Lucy stit: Kisses(Bill, Lucy)

Consequently, there is no way to apply ‘ought’ to 6c, as 5b does, in order to obtain 6b as an admissible reading.

The significance of the passive transformation test is that it sets constraints on the possible readings of the complement clause, and these constraints rule out the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory. It’s not enough to have a formal language which can generate readings which, for all we can tell, might be the natural readings of 5a and 5b. There has to be some way those readings could come from the meanings of the parts of 5a and 5b, and the way that they are put together. But as I’ve just argued, there is no such way.

1.5 conflicts of interest

There is also evidence, however, that the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory fails to generate the right results anyway, in order to deal correctly with the agential ‘ought’ sentences. Here I’ll mention two kinds of case. In the first kind of case, which I take from Broome [unpublished], two agents ought to do two different, but incompatible, things. In Broome’s example, Father Murphy is the local parish priest, and it is his duty to baptize those in the parish who need to be baptized. Since Colleen needs to be baptized, Father Murphy ought to baptize Colleen. Yet it is in Colleen’s interests to be baptized by the holiest priest she can, and Father O’Grady is holier than Father Murphy, so Colleen ought to be baptized by Father O’Grady, and hence to avoid being baptized by Father Murphy. If we try to depict this situation within the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory, it looks like this:

- 7a O(Father Murphy stit: Baptizes(Father Murphy, Colleen))
 7b O(Colleen stit: ~Baptizes(Father Murphy, Colleen))

The problem with this depiction of the scenario, however, is that it violates some of the simplest assumptions that we could make about ‘ought’ and about agency: namely, (1) that if an agent, A, sees to it that p , then p must be true, and (2) that incompatible propositions never ought both to be the case. Broome’s case does not, however, seem to be impossible; it seems to be perfectly intelligible. And this supports the view that 7a and 7b do not, after all, capture the scenario he has in mind. His scenario can instead be captured by the *relational* sense of ‘ought’:

- 7c $O_{\text{Father Murphy}}(\text{Baptizes}(\text{Father Murphy}, \text{Colleen}))$
 7d $O_{\text{Colleen}}(\sim \text{Baptizes}(\text{Father Murphy}, \text{Colleen}))$

There is no incoherence, here.⁵

Broome’s example supports the relationality of ‘ought’ because it provides work for the extra argument place of such a relation to do. There are a range of different kinds of examples which have this flavor; in another one, we are playing chess. I could checkmate you, if only you would advance your king pawn. Fortunately, it is also in my power to make that your only legal move. So I ought to ensure that you advance your king pawn. But it is not the case that you ought to advance your king pawn. This seems perfectly coherent; the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory would have us interpret it as follows:

- 8a $O(\text{I stit: you stit: you advance your king pawn})$
 8b $\sim O(\text{you stit: you advance your king pawn})$

But unfortunately, the coherence of this scenario is threatened by principle (I), from above, and the principle that (3) when $A \supset B$ is a theorem, so is, $O(A) \supset O(B)$, which are, respectively, central assumptions about the logic of agency and in standard treatments of deontic logic. The coherence of this scenario suggests that it is instead better captured by the *relational* sense of ‘ought’:

- 8c $O_{\text{me}}(\text{you advance your king pawn})$
 8d $\sim O_{\text{you}}(\text{you advance your king pawn})$

Cases like this are introduced and called the Leakage problem by Krogh and Herrestad [1996]; also see the discussion in McNamara [2006].⁶

⁵ One might object that this argument will get a grip only on moral theories on which there can be conflicts in agents’ interests, but that some classical theories, such as utilitarianism, will deny this. I agree that some possible normative theories will deny this, but I think that utilitarianism as classically conceived *does* allow for it to be the case that each of two agents ought to do something which it is impossible that they both do. Suppose that Ned and Ted are each in a position to save a child, who will drown if helped by neither. But if both try to help, they’ll get in each others’ way and the child will still drown. In actual fact, neither one is going to help. Since Ned won’t help no matter what Ted does, the best thing for Ted to do is to help. So by classical utilitarian reasoning he ought to save the child. Similarly, since Ted won’t help no matter what Ned does, the best thing for Ned to do is to help. So by classical utilitarian reasoning, he ought to save the child. But they can’t both save the child – if Ned does, then Ted doesn’t. Compare Regan [1980] and Horty [2001] for discussion of this aspect of utilitarianism as classically conceived in terms of this sort of example. Jake Ross [unpublished] specifically draws a connection between the Meinong-Chisholm thesis and situations (like Ned and Ted’s) in which agents are in breach of their duties.

⁶ It turns out that situations like this one are impossible in some implementations of the logic of agency (stit logic), due to the behavior of embedded ‘stit’s. But so long as we use ‘stit’ loosely, to merely pick out the exercise of agency, these situations still seem intuitively natural. Thanks to Jake Ross and Jeff Horty for discussion.

I.6 comparison of evidence

We started with initial examples for which the synonymy of ‘it ought to be’ sentences and their ‘so-and-so ought to...’ counterparts was not obvious. This was initial counterevidence to the traditional view that there is only one, raising, sense of ‘ought’ in English, because that theory predicts such synonymy. But the evidence was hard to assess, in the face of the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory, which claimed to distinguish between the readings we were able to get on the basis of a difference in the complement of the ‘ought’, rather than a difference in the ‘ought’ itself. Since that point, we’ve seen two kinds of evidence against the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory: both that the readings it requires can’t be generated from the sentences of English and the way they are put together from their parts, and that it predicts, together with standard assumptions about agency and about the semantic value of the raising ‘ought’, that certain scenarios should be incoherent, which intuitively are not. I now want to compare these two kinds of evidence, and to show that the former kind helps us to even further narrow down the possible plausible theories of the relational sense of ‘ought’.

I’ll do this, by seeing how both kinds of evidence fare in the hands of a recent theory of ‘ought’ developed by Stephen Finlay ([unpublished a], [unpublished b]) in current work. According to Finlay’s *End-Relational* theory, which is resourcefully modeled on more general work on the semantics of modals, including ‘must’ and ‘may’, and including their ‘epistemic’ or ‘predictive’ uses as well as their normative uses, there is a single raising sense of ‘ought’, but semantically it requires an argument in addition to the proposition that is given by its complement clause. This further argument, however, is not an agent, but an *end* or *goal*. And it is not supplied by any overt argument position in an ‘ought’ sentence, but rather is in some way supplied by the context. According to Finlay, there is always some such end or goal that is implicit when we make ‘ought’ claims. Whenever we say ‘Bill ought to kiss Lucy’, we always mean that he ought to kiss her *in order to fulfill his heart’s desire*, or *in order to stop her from crying*, or *in order for the story to have a happy ending*, or some such thing.

Finlay’s account seeks to preserve the view that there is a single, raising, sense of ‘ought’, but due to its relational character, it has added flexibility, which can allow it to deal with a wide range of cases that non-relational accounts cannot. For example, Finlay can deal perfectly well both with Broome’s case and with the Leakage problem. He will simply say that the implicit *end* argument switches between **7a** and **7b**, and between **8a** and **8b**, barring the inferences that are

required in order to render their conjunctions incoherent. So the kind of evidence marshaled in section 1.5 doesn't really tell against his view.

The kind of evidence from section 1.4, however, is more powerful. It is altogether easy to come up with formal distinctions as rich as the distinctions made by natural language. It is much more constraining, to recognize that none of these accounts is adequate as a theory of what our natural language sentences actually do mean – and hence of what we are managing to be talking about when we use our natural language sentences – unless it falls out as a consequence of some compositional semantics for the requisite sentences. And that is what I argued in section 1.4 that the agency-in-the-complement-clause theory fails to do.

Finlay's view also fails by this test, I believe. Finlay will tell us that on the readings which have been giving us difficulty, **5a** and **5b** are understood as relativized to different ends – **5a** to some end of Bill's, and **5b** to some end of Lucy's, most likely. This sounds plausible, but it doesn't explain why we *can't* get the alternative readings – where **5a** is relativized to the end of Lucy's that makes **5b** sound natural, or where **5b** is relativized to the end of Bill's that makes **5a** appropriate. These alternative readings are completely unavailable, and Finlay's view, on which the *end* argument for an 'ought' claim is simply provided by the context of utterance, would seem to have no principled way of explaining why not.

1.7 an intermediate conclusion

A much simpler view about 'ought' *can* explain this, however. On the much simpler view, there is a sense of 'ought' on which it expresses a relation between an agent and something else, and the noun phrase appearing in the subject position before the 'ought' fills this agent position. On this view of the syntax and semantics of 'ought', there is no puzzle about why there is no reading of 'Bill ought to kiss Lucy' on which Lucy fills the AGENT role. There is no such reading, because the agent role is filled by whoever appears in the subject position, because that is a genuine argument place in the 'ought'.

On this theory, 'ought', in this sense, is not a raising construction at all (recall that raising constructions don't have genuine argument places filled by their subjects), but rather has a genuine argument place for an agent. When 'Bill' appears before the agential 'ought', he is the one who is filling the AGENT role for the 'ought', and when Lucy appears before the agential 'ought', she is the one who is filling the AGENT role. The agential sense of 'ought' is therefore of a different syntactic

category than the raising ‘ought’ distinguished in section I.I. It is what linguists call a *control* predicate. Unsurprisingly, the test that is employed by the passive transformation argument is one of the standard tests employed by linguists to distinguish raising predicates from control predicates. As we’ve already seen, ‘seems’ is a raising predicate, whereas ‘wants’ is a control predicate:

- 9a Bill wants to kiss Lucy.
- 9b Lucy wants to be kissed by Bill.

- 9c Bill seems to kiss Lucy.
- 9d Lucy seems to be kissed by Bill.

Control predicates like ‘wants’ always fail the passive transformation test, because they have genuine external argument places. Raising predicates like ‘seems’ always pass it, because their subject places are semantically null, and only occupied through movement so as to achieve a grammatical English sentence. ‘Ought’ is complicated, but only because it is both a raising predicate and a control predicate. Sentences that employ the raising ‘ought’ pass the passive transformation test, but sentences that employ the control ‘ought’ fail it – as we’ve seen. We require no special apparatus in order to explain this; it arises simply because ‘ought’ is lexically ambiguous, between one sense that behaves like ‘seems’, and one sense that behaves like ‘wants’.

This lexical ambiguity in ‘ought’ is important to appreciate. It is supported by the remainder of a battery of tests used to distinguish raising constructions from control constructions. For example, (1) only raising constructions admit of expletive subjects like ‘it’ or ‘there’; (2) only raising constructions admit idiomatic subjects; and (3) control constructions place restrictions on what sorts of subjects can be allowed without anomaly.⁷ These tests are illustrated below:

- 10a It seemed/*wanted/ought to be assumed that he is capable.
- 10b All hell seemed/*wanted/ought to break loose.
- 10c The meeting seemed/*wanted/ought to start at noon.

The hypothesis that the difference in agential and non-agential readings of ‘ought’ sentences derives from the fact that ‘ought’ is lexically ambiguous between raising and control constructions makes a concrete prediction about all of these kinds of case. It predicts that each of these sentences will be admissible only on the raising construction, and that the ‘agential’ reading of each

⁷ I borrow these tests from Radford [2004, 268-274].

of these sentences will be as hard to make sense of as the corresponding sentences involving ‘wants’. This prediction is, I think correct.

I.8 williams’ scope ambiguity argument

Before moving on, I should note that we are now in a position to evaluate an important argument given by Bernard Williams [1981] for the traditional view that the raising ‘ought’ is the only sense of ‘ought’ available in English. Williams’ argument begins by observing that sentence **IIa** appears to be ambiguous, between readings roughly paraphrasable as **IIb** and **IIc**:

- IIa** Someone ought to tell the boss.
- IIb** It ought to be that someone tells the boss.
- IIc** Someone is such that she ought to tell the boss.

Williams’ argument then requires three assumptions. First (1), he assumes that on the reading paraphrasable as **IIb**, **IIa** employs the raising ‘ought’, which expresses a property of propositions – in this case, of the proposition that it is the case that someone tells the boss. Second (2), he assumes that on the reading paraphrasable as **IIc**, **IIa** involves precisely the kind of ‘agential’ use of ‘ought’ which I have been claiming must be interpreted as a relation between agents and actions. And (3), he assumes that the ambiguity in **IIa** is of a familiar kind; it is merely the kind of scope ambiguity with which we are all familiar.

The argument then works like this: if (1) the reading of **IIa** on which it can be paraphrased as **IIb** involves the raising ‘ought’, then it can be stated more formally as **IIId**, below. And so if (3) the ambiguity in **IIa** is due to a mere scope ambiguity, then it must be that the reading on which it can be paraphrased by **IIc** can be stated more formally as **IIe**, below.

- IIId** $O(\exists x:x \text{ tells the boss})$
- IIe** $\exists x:O(x \text{ tells the boss})$

But then by the assumption (2) that the reading of **IIa** on which it can be paraphrased by **IIc** involves precisely the kind of use of ‘ought’ which I have been claiming requires a distinct sense of ‘ought’, it follows that I am wrong. **IIe** does not, after all, employ a relational sense of ‘ought’; since its difference from **IIId** is the result of a mere scope ambiguity, it employs the *same*, raising,

sense of ‘ought’. Williams’ argument is thus designed to show that in at least some cases, the ‘agential’ ‘ought’ with which we have been concerned *have* to be understood as raising ‘ought’s.

This argument is, I think, clever, but totally unconvincing. Though it is clear that **IIa** is ambiguous, it is only a theory that tells us that the ambiguity that we observe is merely a scope ambiguity. On the view that I have been defending, **IIa** is in fact *three* ways ambiguous. One reading is paraphrasable as **IIb**, and *two* readings are paraphrasable as **IIc**, depending on whether we interpret the ‘ought’ in **IIc** as the raising ‘ought’ or the control ‘ought’. Further, just as *any* sentence of the form, ‘Jack ought to do *A*’ is ambiguous between raising and control readings, but the control readings are more natural, the control reading of **IIc** is, I think, more natural than its raising reading.

This means that of Williams’ three assumptions, (1) is true, but both (2) and (3) turn on the ambiguity in **IIc**. On the control reading of **IIc**, Williams’ assumption (2) is true: that is, after all, the reading for which I proposed to postulate the control ‘ought’! But on the raising reading of **IIc**, Williams’ assumption is false: I have insisted all along that since there really is a raising ‘ought’ in English, sentences like **3b**, **5a**, and **5b** do have *readings* which do not require the control ‘ought’. Meanwhile, on the raising reading of **IIc**, Williams’ assumption (3) is true – the ambiguity between the reading of **IIa** that can be paraphrased by **IIb** and the reading that can be paraphrased by the raising sense of **IIc** really is a mere scope ambiguity. But on the control reading of **IIc**, this is of course false.

I conclude that Williams’ argument doesn’t tell us anything that we didn’t already know; since ‘ought’ is lexically ambiguous in English between raising and control constructions, sentences like ‘she ought to tell the boss’ are ambiguous. This yields the prediction that sentences like **IIa** will be, in fact, three ways ambiguous, a prediction which is, I think, on reflection correct. I conclude that ‘ought’ really does, in English, on at least some uses, express a relation between agents and something else. The question that leaves us is: what is the something else?

2.1 the newfangled propositional view

John Broome ([1999], [unpublished]) and Ralph Wedgwood [2006] share my view that when we make ‘ought’ claims, we are concerned, in at least central cases, with a relation that holds between an agent and something else. They do not share my view about the syntax of ‘ought’, however, which means that they cannot avail themselves of what I have taken to be the strongest arguments

for this view. And they disagree with me about what agents are related to by this ‘ought’. Broome and Wedgwood both claim that it relates agents to propositions, but as a proponent of the naïve view, this is something I deny. I claim, and in this part of the paper will proceed to argue, that in its control sense, ‘ought’ relates agents to *actions*, rather than to propositions.

The sense of ‘action’ on which I claim that ‘ought’ relates agents to actions is very broad. It can be the case that Max ought to believe that p , or that Max ought to be saddened by recent events, but believing that p and being saddened by recent events are not commonly thought of as actions. Still, for my purposes I will use ‘action’ in a very broad way, to refer to the kind of thing that agents can *do*, in a very broad sense. On my view, we can think of actions as subclass of non-trivial properties of agents – properties over which agents have a certain amount of control.

My basic argument that ‘ought’ relates agents to actions rather than to propositions is very simple. The basic problem with the propositional view is that it is too powerful. Whenever an agent ought to do some thing, Broome and Wedgwood will say that she stands in the *ought* relation to the proposition that she does that thing. In this way, their view will capture everything that I think we can and do talk about when we are interested in this relation, and everything that I think it makes sense to talk about. But propositions are cheap. If *ought* is just a relation that you can stand in to some proposition – for example, the proposition that you exercise daily – then it is a relation of which it makes sense to ask whether you stand in it to arbitrary other propositions – for example, to the proposition that *I* exercise daily. But I don’t think that it makes sense to ask whether you stand in the *ought* relation to the proposition that I exercise daily. It’s not that I think it is *false* that you ought for me to exercise daily; I just don’t think this question makes any sense. The view that the *ought* relation relates agents to propositions is too powerful, because it predicts that some things should make sense which don’t. That is why it is wrong. That is the basic problem.

Broome and Wedgwood, however, have some arguments for their view, and a counterargument to the basic problem. In the following sections I’ll exhibit the evidence, and argue that except for the basic problem, it is inconclusive.

2.2 the scope ambiguity argument, again

Wedgwood offers an argument for the newfangled propositional view that is based on Bernard Williams’ scope ambiguity argument for the traditional view. Recall that Williams’ argument was

based on the observation that **IIa** is ambiguous, between readings that can be paraphrased as **IIb** and **IIc**:

- IIa** Someone ought to tell the boss.
- IIb** It ought to be that someone tells the boss.
- IIc** Someone is such that she ought to tell the boss.

Here is what Wedgwood says about a sentence like **IIa** (his example is ‘go and inform the manager’, rather than ‘tell the boss’):

Even if one keeps constant the interpretation of ‘ought’ as having its practical or deliberative sense here, this sentence is clearly ambiguous. The ambiguity is most naturally interpreted as involving a scope ambiguity: on one reading, [IIa] means ‘It ought to be that: someone goes and informs the manager’; on the other reading, it means ‘Someone is such that: *he* ought to go and inform the manager’. On the first reading, the only agent who could possibly be the “subject” of the ‘ought’ is presumably the group involved in the joint deliberation, viewed as a collective agent. But this collective agent is not explicitly mentioned in the sentence, and so... ‘ought’ in this first reading of [IIa] also seems to be a propositional operator; and as Williams says (1981: 116), “it is hard to see what requires it, or even allows it, to turn into something else” in the second reading. So there seems to be a reason for treating even the practical or deliberative ‘ought’ as a propositional operator [2006, 133-134].

It appears that Wedgwood means to parallel Williams’s argument. Like Williams, he assumes (I) that on the ‘first’ reading, the ‘ought’ expresses a propositional operator. Of course, Williams held that it was the ordinary raising ‘ought’, whereas Wedgwood holds that it is what he calls a ‘deliberative’ ought, but each starts with the assumption that on the first reading, ‘ought’ takes a propositional argument. Next, like Williams, Wedgwood assumes (2) that the second reading is a ‘deliberative’ reading – the kind of reading that I think relates agents to actions, rather than to propositions. He doesn’t state this explicitly, but it is clear from his reasoning. And finally, like Williams, Wedgwood assumes that the ambiguity in **8a** is due to (‘involves’, he says, just to be careful) a scope ambiguity.

However, Wedgwood’s argument differs from Williams’ in more than one way. To begin with, Wedgwood is not trying to argue for the traditional view that there is only one raising sense of ‘ought’, but for the newfangled propositional view, according to which even on its relational sense, ‘ought’ relates agents to propositions. So if he is to maintain premises (2) and (3), his premise (I) cannot be the same as Williams’s; whereas Williams took the highly plausible view

that **I**1b**** involves the familiar raising ‘ought’, Wedgwood is forced to hold that **I**1b**** involves an agential ‘ought’, but with the whole *group* as the agent. It can be formalized this way:

$$\mathbf{I1f} \quad O_{\text{the group}}(\exists x:x \text{ tells the boss})$$

One problem with Wedgwood’s argument is therefore that **I1f** is not, after all, a particularly compelling reading of **I1b**. I don’t believe that I can get this reading of **I1b** at all. So this is not a particularly promising place for his argument to start.

The next problem with Wedgwood’s argument is about his justification for holding that on the first reading of **I1a**, ‘ought’ really does, after all, take a proposition. Williams’s justification for this claim was that on the first reading ‘ought’ is the ordinary raising ‘ought’. But since Wedgwood does not think that it is, he cannot accept this reasoning. Yet he cannot simply assume outright that this deliberative ‘ought’ takes a propositional argument, because what is at stake in his argument is precisely whether deliberative ‘ought’s take propositional arguments. So all that remains to him, is the argument that if **I1b** does, in fact, express a deliberative ‘ought’ of whom the group is the agent, it mentions no action of the group’s – only a proposition. So holding fixed Wedgwood’s assumption that **I1b** really does express a deliberative ‘ought’, it can’t relate the group to an action the group could do, and must be understood as relating the group to a proposition that might obtain. But this is a weak argument, because it is not particularly plausible that **I1b** expresses a deliberative ‘ought’, after all. On the contrary, it appears to be paradigmatic of the ordinary raising ‘ought’, which is precisely why Williams’s first assumption is so compelling.

Yet a third problem with Wedgwood’s argument is that given his own view, the ambiguity in **I1a** is not, after all, a mere scope ambiguity after all. For on his view, **I1c** can be formalized this way:

$$\mathbf{I1g} \quad \exists x:O_x(x \text{ tells the boss})$$

The difference between **I1f** and **I1g** is not merely one of scope; it also turns on how the agent argument of the ‘ought’ relation is supplied. In **I1f** this argument is filled by the group, whereas in **I1g** it is filled by no one in particular, but is rather bound by the quantifier. Perhaps this is what Wedgwood meant to qualify, when he said that the ambiguity ‘involves’ a scope ambiguity, but this substantially undercuts the force of his argument. If the ambiguity is not a *mere* scope ambiguity, then that opens the door to other accounts of the nature of the ambiguity.

Moreover, this reveals what is at the heart of the differences between Williams's account, my own, and Wedgwood's, over the ambiguity in **IIa**. According to Williams, there are two possible readings of **IIa**, which differ in terms of the scope of the 'ought'. According to me, there are both of those readings, plus a further reading, which is given by **IIc**, understood as involving the control 'ought'. Whereas according to Wedgwood's view, **IIa** is in fact *four* ways ambiguous. Since he allows for the ordinary raising 'ought' (which he follows Sidgwick in calling the 'political ought'), he gets both of Williams's readings. And then he gets two more readings, corresponding to the two possible scopes for what he calls the 'deliberative ought', and corresponding to whether the group is the agent, or whether the agent argument is bound by the quantifier.

In fact, since according to Wedgwood the agent argument of the 'ought' relation is not supplied by any overt argument place, but rather is somehow supplied by the context, as we need in order to generate **IIf** as a reading of **IIb**, Wedgwood in fact is committed to allowing that **IIa** could be used to express as many distinct propositions as there are agents who we might understand as occupying the agent argument of the 'ought'. Like Finlay's view in section 1.6, Wedgwood's view is flexible enough to make all of the right distinctions, but it is *too* flexible, and generates readings that there are not.

2.3 the argument from infinitival *to*

In 'Normative Requirements', Broome [1999] took the fact that 'ought' takes an infinitival clause for its complement to justify treating the argument as a proposition. In general, infinitival clauses *do* provide proposition-like arguments. Compare, for example, 'Jon wants to get rich' to 'Jon wants Mary to get rich'. If we interpret 'Jon wants to get rich' as having an unpronounced pronoun referring to Jon, then we can explain the meaning of these two sentences by appeal to the same semantic values and same compositional principles. This assumption is standard in linguistics, where the postulated unpronounced pronoun in 'Jon wants to get rich' is called 'PRO'. The reason 'wants' is called a 'control' verb is that it is said to allow its subject to 'control' the PRO argument – essentially, to bind 'PRO' like a variable, so that it essentially refers to the subject of 'wants'.

This relates to the hypothesis that 'wants' relates a being with psychological states to a proposition, because when Jon wants Mary to get rich, what Jon wants, is for Mary to get rich. He wants the following to obtain: that Mary gets rich. Similarly, when Jon wants to get rich, what Jon wants, is for Jon to get rich. He wants the following to obtain: that Jon gets rich. These readings

are predicted, if the role of the infinitive clause, ‘___ to get rich’, is to semantically contribute a proposition. ‘Mary to get rich’ contributes the proposition that Mary gets rich, ‘PRO to get rich’ contributes the proposition that x gets rich, where x is the value of ‘PRO’ determined by the larger sentence in which it figures, and ‘wants’ can be understood as semantically unambiguous between these constructions and constructions like ‘wants that’ ‘wants for’, and so on. So if the role of infinitive clauses is to semantically contribute propositions, and ‘ought’ takes an infinitive complement, that would seem to suggest that ‘ought’ relates agents to propositions.

This is an intriguing argument, but unfortunately it goes too fast. Unlike ‘wants’, ‘ought’ allows *only* for a PRO argument. Sentences like ‘Jon ought to get rich’ are fine, but sentences like ‘Jon ought Mary to get rich’ are not even grammatical. ‘Ought’, it seems, selects for a PRO subject in its complement. Why should this be? I think it is because even though infinitive clauses, in general, have the expressive power to be able to pick out arbitrary atomic propositions, this expressive power is not needed in order to pick out the argument of ‘ought’. The things that Jon ought to do are *actions*, and that is why in its control sense, ‘Jon ought’ can only be followed by ‘PRO to ϕ ’, where ‘ ϕ ’ is a verb phrase denoting some action.⁸

2.4 the ungrammaticality defense

In more recent work, Broome claims to have an explanation of why ‘Jon ought Mary to get rich’ is ungrammatical. His explanation is that ‘ought’ is not *really* a control construction like ‘wants’ at all. Broome sets out his explanation in the framework of traditional grammar,⁹ but in the syntactic terminology of this paper, his claim is that ‘ought’ does not, in fact, have any lexical entry as a control verb (never mind his earlier argument just discussed); it exists only as a raising construction. Unfortunately, because this leaves our language with no way of picking out the relational sense of ‘ought’ which is, as Broome believes, the ‘central normative concept’, we sometimes engage in an activity which he calls ‘reparsing’. Essentially, ‘reparsing’ involves pretending that ‘ought’ is a control verb like ‘wants’, even though it is really a raising construction like ‘seems’. It is this strange hypothesis which Broome takes to explain why ‘Jon ought Mary to

⁸ To be fair, Broome may not have understood his remarks about control verbs like ‘wants’ in his [1999] as an *argument* that ‘ought’ relates agents to propositions, so much as justifying his *stipulation* that he was going to treat ‘ought’ in that way. This does not affect the interest of this sort of argument, which I take to be the most compelling in favor of his view.

⁹ Broome takes ‘ought’ to be an auxiliary, and understands auxiliaries as combining with main verbs to form a complex verb [unpublished 35-36]. This traditional view conflicts with standard tests for constituency – to see what words together form a ‘unit’ in the sentence. See, for example, Radford [2004].

get rich' is ungrammatical, and which leads him to feel justified in introducing the horrendous 'Jon ought that Mary gets rich', in order to be able to express all of the incoherent (as I think) things that he wants to be able to say, but are ungrammatical in English. This is the main object of a ten-page appendix in Broome [unpublished].

I say that Broome's hypothesis is strange, because as I showed in part I, the evidence is that there *really is* a control sense of 'ought' – not just raising uses of 'ought' which we 'inexcusably' 'reparse' or pretend have a different syntactic structure and meaning than they really, in fact do. It is also strange because other cases – including the one that Broome himself discusses at the beginning of Broome [1999] – show that no such complicated explanations are needed in order to explain the ungrammaticality of 'Jon ought Mary to get rich'. For example, 'hopes' is, like 'wants', a control verb, and is so classified by the passive transformation, expletive subject, idiomatic subject, and restricted subject tests of section I.7. Moreover, it fails Broome's tests to be an auxiliary verb – the feature which Broome claims creates the grammatical complications with 'ought'. Yet though 'Jon hopes to get rich' is perfectly grammatical, 'Jon hopes Mary to get rich' is not. The problem is not that 'hopes' belongs to a completely different kind of syntactic category, but that it *selects* only certain sorts of admissible complements. 'Jon hopes Mary will get rich' is perfectly okay, as is 'Jon hopes for Mary to get rich', and these allow us to say essentially the same thing. This shows that Broome is wrong about why 'Jon ought Mary to get rich' is ungrammatical. Like 'Jon hopes Mary to get rich', it is ungrammatical because of selectional properties of 'ought' and 'hopes'; not because 'ought' is really an auxiliary.

I think this case is illustrative, because Broome also believes that when I say that I don't think the question of whether you stand in the *ought* relation to the proposition that I exercise daily makes any sense, I am merely misled by the fact that the sentences we might use to state answers to that question are ungrammatical. Not only is 'you ought me to exercise daily' ungrammatical, so is Broome's favored locution, 'you ought that I exercise daily'. Broome has a hypothesis about why I find these claims incoherent – it is because they are ungrammatical.¹⁰

That is an interesting hypothesis, but it overgeneralizes, and yields false predictions. 'Jon hopes Mary to get rich' is ungrammatical, but it makes perfect sense. Its anomaly is syntactic, not semantic: I would know what anyone was saying, who uttered it. It means that Jon hopes Mary will get rich. Similarly, 'Jon ought that Jon gets rich' is ungrammatical, but I don't think it is

¹⁰ Personal communication.

incoherent, either. It means, pretty obviously, that Jon ought to get rich. What I don't understand, is what it would be for it to be the case that Jon ought that Mary gets rich, unless it is supposed to be that Jon ought to make it the case that Mary gets rich, or to ensure that she gets rich – but those are both actions.

Now, in the face of this evidence, Broome still holds¹¹ that I am being misled by grammar. He thinks that I am allowing that I understand an ungrammatical sentence only if I can paraphrase it with a grammatical sentence, and hence ruling out on grounds of grammar his view, which requires that there are some interesting claims that cannot be made with *any* grammatical sentence. I don't believe that I am making this error. I genuinely don't understand what it could possibly be, for it to be the case that you ought that I exercise daily. I don't claim that this is an argument which will convince Broome, but I think that unless you have spent too much time poring over papers in deontic logic which treat 'ought' as taking propositions simply because it is formally tractable to model deontic logic on modal logic, you won't think that this is an intelligible question, either.

Finally, I think that the fact that 'ought' belongs to a linguistic construction which can *so easily* take arbitrary subjects in its complement should draw our attention forcefully to the question of why there is *no* grammatical way of doing so, in the case of 'ought'. *None* of the following sentences is grammatical with 'ought':

- I2a Jon wants/*hopes/*ought Mary to get rich.
- I2b Jon wants/hopes/*ought for Mary to get rich.
- I2c Jon *wants/hopes/*ought Mary will get rich.
- I2d Jon *wants/hopes/*ought that Mary gets rich.

But each of these sentences is fine with either 'wants' or 'hopes', and I2b is fine with both. Grant Broome that there are such interesting things to talk about. Once we observe that all it would take to be able to talk about them is to get around the kinds of minor differences that make the difference between which of I2a-I2d admit of 'wants' and which allow for 'hopes', it becomes extremely puzzling why we have never developed any of these means to be able to talk about them. I offer a simple hypothesis. We have never needed 'ought' to work in such constructions, because there is no such interesting thing to talk about.

¹¹ Personal communication.

2.5 the basic problem again

The basic problem is not a syntactic problem. Some sentences, like ‘Jon hopes Mary to get rich’, are anomalous for purely syntactic reasons, making perfect semantic sense. The sentences required in order to relate you by the *ought* relation to the proposition that I exercise daily are not like that. They are ungrammatical, true. But there also isn’t anything for them to be about. They are semantically anomalous. The problem that I have been claiming for the view that ‘ought’ relates agents to propositions, is that it is too powerful. It makes sense of all of the right things, but then it also makes sense of things that don’t, in fact, make any sense. It is sensitive to *positive* evidence, making sense of all of the things that *should* make sense, but it ignores *negative* evidence, making predictions that some things *should* make sense, which don’t.

Broome and Wedgwood are not put off by this consequence; rather, they embrace it. They both hold that we should find ourselves to be educated by this consequence of their theories – a discovery of a whole realm of interesting questions about whether you ought that I exercise daily, whether I ought that your wife gets pregnant, and so on. These are questions we could never have dreamed of asking, before. My *reductio* is their interesting consequence, so I do not expect considerations like these to convince them. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that theory-independently, it is not what we would expect to find.

That is why I think that in its relational sense, ‘ought’ relates agents not to propositions, but to *actions*, in the very broad sense of things that agents can *do*. Actions, as I conceive of them, are not particular events, but a kind of *property of agents*. On some, loose, conceptions of properties, my exercising regularly may count as one of your properties. But being such that I exercise regularly is not something that you can *do*. So it is not an action. It is not the kind of thing that you can stand in the *ought* relation to. Consequently, the view that *oughts* relate agents to actions correctly avoids overgenerating.

3.1 why it matters

The questions I have been asking in this paper may seem very arcane and academic. After all, why should we care whether ‘ought’ relates agents to actions or to propositions? And how do all of these considerations about language really bear on philosophy or ethical theory? But I think that any number of interesting questions in ethical theory turn on the answer to this and similar questions. How can we get very far in trying to understand what we ought to do, if we don’t even

know whether the answer is supposed to consist in actions or propositions? And how can we evaluate proposals about the *semantics* of ‘ought’ sentences offered by expressivists and others as part of their metaethical views, if we have no grasp of their structure? In the following sections, I outline just a few examples of what I think are important implications of this particular question.

3.2 wide-scoping

Broome is interested in whether ‘ought’ takes propositions because he is a prominent advocate of the ubiquitous *Wide-Scoping* program in the theory of rationality. In many different areas, it seems that someone’s situation can have an effect on what she ought, or it is rational for her, to do. For example, it seems that your ends, intentions, or desires, together with what is necessary for fulfilling them, can have an effect on what you ought to do. It seems that your intentions and your *beliefs* about how to fulfill them can have an effect on what you ought to do. It seems that your beliefs about what you *ought* to do can have an effect on what you ought to do, that your promises can have an effect on what you ought to do, and that your beliefs can have an effect on what you ought to believe. But in each of these domains, it seems too strong to suppose that it really *follows* from the fact that something is necessary for your ends (for example) that you ought to do it. On the contrary, putative counterexamples are common. You might have bad ends, or irrational beliefs about what you ought to do.

Wide-Scopers propose to account for this by postulating ‘wide-scope’ *oughts* or requirements. The initial idea is that sentences like the following are scope-ambiguous.

- I3a If you will the end, you ought to take the means.
- I3b If you believe that you ought to do it, then you ought to do it.
- I3c If you believe that p , and that if p then q , then you ought to believe that q .

Since the ‘ought’ appears both in the consequent and in the sentence as a whole, it can be understood as taking scope over the consequent, or over the sentence as a whole. The former readings are the contentious *Consequent Scope* readings, which are subject to putative counterexamples; the latter are the *Wide Scope* readings, which are supposed to be uncontroversial. Wide-Scoping is widely supposed to be ‘uncontroversial’, and rejecting it is supposed to be based on ‘confusion’.¹²

¹² Compare prominent defenses of Wide-Scoping applied specifically to instrumental reason in Hill [1973] and Darwall [1983], and very broad advocacy of a Wide-Scoping approach in Gensler [1985] and Broome [1999]. Also

If **I3a-c** and similar statements really were uncontroversially true on some reading or other, and really were scope-ambiguous, then the counterexamples to their Consequent Scope readings really would be evidence that Wide-Scoping is uncontroversial and of central importance in ethical theory. But if ‘ought’ does not take propositions, then there is no interesting question of whether it takes scope over the entire sentence or merely over its consequent. It will take scope only over verb phrases, of which in this sentence there are two – one in the antecedent and one in the consequent.

It is possible, as I’ve noted elsewhere, to reconstruct Wide-Scope views as positive theories about various domains without the assumption that ‘ought’ takes propositions, so this doesn’t by any means show that Wide-Scope views are false. For example, the basic idea behind the Wide-Scope interpretation of **I3a** can be expressed by saying that you ought to either will the means or not will the end. In the foregoing sentence, ‘either will the means or not will the end’ is a verb phrase, and it picks out a nontrivial property of agents. I think it describes something that you can *do*, in the very broadest sense that I have in mind. So this evidence doesn’t show that Wide-Scope views are false. But it does undermine a major source of the idea that they should be uncontroversial, deriving from the idea that Wide Scope readings are available as possible readings of English sentences like **I3a-c**, and hence from the idea that ‘ought’ takes propositions.¹³

3.3 the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons

It is plausible to suppose that whatever the agential ‘ought’ relates agents to is the same sort of thing as whatever *reasons* relate agents to. If ‘ought’ relates agents to actions, then reasons count in favor of actions. If ‘ought’ relates agents to propositions, then it is natural to think that strictly speaking, reasons will count in favor of propositions. If this is so, the question of whether ‘ought’ takes propositions has important implications for some of our most treasured distinctions regarding reasons.¹⁴

The distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons is said by Thomas Hurka to be ‘one of the greatest contributions of recent ethics’.¹⁵ So presumably this is supposed to be an important and uncontroversial distinction. But as I’ll now show, it is not. There is an

see the more restrained assessment of the consequences of wide-scope ‘oughts’ in Greenspan [1975], and the critical discussion in Schroeder [2004].

¹³ See Schroeder [2004].

¹⁴ See Schroeder [2007a] and [2007b] for further discussion of the issues raised in this section.

¹⁵ Hurka [2003, 628].

uncontroversial distinction in the neighborhood, but it is only with the aid of a controversial view such as the view that reasons relate agents to propositions that this uncontroversial distinction is taken to do the work that it is standardly assumed to do.

The uncontroversial distinction is a distinction between reasons that are reasons for any possible agent, and reasons that are reasons for only some agents. This is where ‘free agent-variables’ come in to Nagel’s original definition of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ reasons (his original words for ‘agent-neutral’ and ‘agent-relative’). According to the precise version of Nagel’s original formulation, the way that you check to see whether Ryan’s reason to do A is agent-relative or agent-neutral, is to look at the weakest condition, $\lambda x(\mathbf{R})$, such that (1) Ryan satisfies $\lambda x(\mathbf{R})$, and (2) necessarily, for all x , if x satisfies $\lambda x(\mathbf{R})$, then there is a reason for x to do A . If ‘ x ’ is free in ‘ \mathbf{R} ’, then Ryan’s reason is agent-relative; otherwise it is agent-neutral.

If a reason is a reason for any possible agent, then the weakest necessarily sufficient condition for it to be a reason for, say, Ryan, will not have to mention Ryan. For example, if there is a reason for anyone to help Katie, then it will follow from this that there is a reason for Ryan to help Katie, but the explanation will be, say, merely the fact that Katie needs help. This has no ‘free agent variable’; it is just the condition, $\lambda x(\text{Katie needs help})$, and so it is an agent-neutral reason according to the definition. Similarly, if there is a reason for only certain sorts of people to do something, then a necessarily sufficient condition for some particular agent to do that thing will have to mention the fact that that agent is the right sort of person. So, for example, if there is a reason for Ronnie but not Bradley to go to the party, then the complete explanation of why there is a reason for Ronnie to go to the party will have to pick out what distinguishes him from Bradley – for example, that *he* likes to dance. So it will have a ‘free agent variable’, and hence be an agent-relative reason, according to the definition. It is the condition, $\lambda x(x \text{ likes to dance})$. The point is, all of the talk about ‘free agent variables’ and necessarily sufficient conditions is just a fancy way of distinguishing between reasons that are idiosyncratic, and reasons that everyone has to have.

It is widely supposed that this uncontroversial distinction can help us to pick out the differences in the kinds of cases that can be allowed for by ordinary consequentialist views and those that can only be allowed for by views that look more like deontological views. But this turns on what sort of thing we think that reasons can stand in favor of. If reasons stand in favor of *propositions*, then an agent-neutral reason for Franz not to murder will be a reason for every agent in favor of the proposition *that Franz doesn’t murder*. So on this view, if there are only agent-neutral

reasons, and there is a reason for each agent not to murder, then given a choice between not murdering and murdering in order to prevent several other murders, there will be more reasons on the side of murdering than on the side of not murdering. And this is the ordinary consequentialist result about agent-centered constraints. So on the view that reasons stand in favor of *propositions*, the distinction picks out the relevant difference between consequentialist views and other moral theories.

But if reasons stand in favor of *actions* rather than propositions, and actions are, as I have been saying, simply a kind of non-trivial property of agents, we get no such result. On this view, if Franz's reason not to murder is an agent-neutral reason, then it is a reason for every agent in favor of the same thing as it is for Franz: *not murdering*. So on this view, if there are only agent-neutral reasons not to murder, nothing follows about the (im)possibility of agent-centered constraints. So if this view about reasons is right, then there is no uncontroversial distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons that has the implications that have been claimed for it, and which have made it seem like 'one of the greatest contributions of recent ethics'.¹⁶

3.4 the viability of deontology

Relatedly, one cause for suspicion about deontological moral theories has been that they seem to require agents to treat themselves specially – that they seem to require *different* things of each agent. Franz, according to this interpretation of deontological views, ought to avoid getting *Franz's* hands dirty, but Hans ought to do something else – to avoid getting *his* hands dirty. This is supposed to be a puzzling feature of deontological views – surely it would be simpler to think that moral obligations are the *same* for everyone, rather than *different* – 'neutral', rather than 'relative'.

The view that deontology requires different things of different agents is based on the view that what morality requires of agents is propositional in structure - *that Franz's hands not get dirty* may be required of Franz, but *it* is not required of Hans; what is required of Hans is *that Hans's hands not get dirty*. But on the view that what is required of agents is *actions*, this is not so. Actions, I have been saying, are a kind of property of agents, and so deontological views are naturally understood as holding that the *same* things are required of every agent - *not murdering*, *not stealing*, and the rest. So

¹⁶ Convinced that there must be *some* good distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons which tracks issues related to the dispute between consequentialism and deontology, McNaughton and Rawling devised a quite different way of drawing the distinction in McNaughton and Rawling [1991]. Their distinction is also based on controversial premises, however, albeit different ones; there is unfortunately no space to discuss the point, here. See also Schroeder [2007a] for further discussion.

that is where the idea comes from, that it is a peculiar feature of deontology that it requires different things of different agents, while consequentialism, sensibly, requires the same things of different agents. It is an artifact of a view about the kinds of thing that are the objects of *requirements* – the same family of views as the question of whether the agential ‘ought’ relates agents to actions or to propositions.

3.5 in sum

These are just a few of the possible implications of the question of whether ‘ought’ takes propositions. In general, it is my view that we must get the answers to questions like this one right, or at least to come to an adequate understanding of the costs of different answers, before we can hope to make progress on many other hard questions in ethical theory or even, as I argued in section 3.3, to be able to make the distinctions that we want to make in clear and uncontroversial ways. In this paper I hope to have assembled some of the relevant evidence in a way that allows us to make progress on the question. It’s my view that the evidence is compelling that ‘ought’ has a control sense as well as a raising sense, and reasonably convincing that the control sense relates agents to actions rather than propositions. That interpretation is open to challenge; unlike some of my opponents, I don’t claim that those who disagree are merely subject to a linguistic confusion. But the important thing is that proponents of the propositional view must meet head-on the serious challenges for their view – particularly if they are going to marshal their view in the advancement of some substantive ethical theory.¹⁷

references

- Belnap, Nuel, Michael Perloff, and Ming Xu [2001]. *Facing the Future: Agents and Choices in Our Indeterminist World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Broome, John [1999]. ‘Normative Requirements.’ *Ratio*. 12(4): 398-419.
- _____. [unpublished]. *Reasoning*. Unpublished lectures given at Brown University and the University of Stockholm.

¹⁷ Special thanks to, among those I can remember, Barry Lam, Stephen Finlay, John Broome, Ralph Wedgwood, Jeff Horty, Paul Pietroski, Jake Ross, Jeff King, Maria Nelson, Lewis Powell, Billy Dunaway, Geoff Georgi, Jim Higginbotham, Delia Graff, Sergio Tenenbaum, Amy Challen, Mike McGlone, Ant Eagle, Sari Kisilevsky, Jeff Speaks, and Matt King.

- Darwall, Stephen [1983]. *Impartial Reason*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Finlay, Stephen [unpublished a]. '(In Order That) Ought...' Unpublished draft manuscript.
- _____ [unpublished b]. 'What *Ought* Probably Means, and Why you Can't Detach It.' Unpublished draft manuscript.
- Geach, P.T. [1982]. 'Whatever Happened to Deontic Logic?' *Philosophia* 11: 1-12.
- Gensler, Harry [1985]. 'Ethical Consistency Principles.' *Philosophical Quarterly*. 35(139): 156-170.
- Greenspan, Patricia [1975]. 'Conditional Oughts and Hypothetical Imperatives.' *The Journal of Philosophy*. 72(10): 259-276.
- Grimshaw, Jane [1990]. *Argument Structure*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Harman, Gilbert [1973]. 'Review of *The Significance of Sense: Meaning Modality, and Morality*.' *Philosophical Review* 82(2): 235-239.
- Hill, Thomas [1973]. 'The Hypothetical Imperative.' *The Philosophical Review*. 82(4): 429-450.
- Horty, John F. [2001]. *Agency and Deontic Logic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____ and Nuel Belnap [1996]. 'The Deliberative Stit: A Study of Action, Omission, Ability, and Obligation.' *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 24: 583-644.
- Hurka, Thomas [2003]. 'Moore in the Middle.' *Ethics* 113(3): 599-628.
- Jackendoff, Ray [1972]. *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Krogh, Christen, and Henning Herrestad [1996]. 'Getting Personal: Some Notes on the Relationship Between Personal and Impersonal Obligation.' In Brown, Mark, and José Carmo, eds., *Deontic Logic, Agency, and Normative Systems*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- McNamara, Paul [2006]. 'Deontic Logic.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, version of February 7, 2006. <http://plato.stanford.edu>.
- McNaughton, David, and Piers Rawling [1991]. 'Agent-Relativity and the Doing-Happening Distinction.' *Philosophical Studies* 63:167-185.
- Nagel, Thomas [1970]. *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Radford, Andrew [2004]. *Minimalist Syntax: Exploring the Structure of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ross, Jake [unpublished]. 'Personal and Impersonal Obligation.' Unpublished manuscript.
- Schroeder, Mark [2004]. 'The Scope of Instrumental Reason.' *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (Ethics): 337-364.
- _____ [2007a]. 'Teleology, Agent-Relative Value, and 'Good'.' *Ethics* 117(2): 265-295.
- _____ [2007b]. 'Reasons and Agent-Neutrality.' *Philosophical Studies* 135(2): 279-306.

- Wedgwood, Ralph [2006]. 'The Meaning of 'Ought'.' *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* I: 127-160.
- Williams, Bernard [1981]. 'Ought and Obligation.' In his *Moral Luck*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 114-123.
- Williams, Edwin [1994]. *Thematic Structure in Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.