Normative Language in Context

Abstract

This paper motivates and develops an improved framework for contextualist semantics and pragmatics, which I call *Discourse Contextualism*, and then applies this framework to the case of normative language. I focus in particular on practical normative uses of modal verbs — so-called *deontic modals*. Two central challenges for contextualists have been to capture the behavior of deontic modals in discourse disagreements and attitude reports. The aim of Discourse Contextualism is to derive the distinctive behavior of deontic modals from a particular contextualist interpretation of a standard semantic framework for modals, along with general principles of interpretation and conversation. In using deontic modals interlocutors can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, and general pragmatic reasoning skills, to manage an evolving system of norms. Discourse Contextualism provides a perspicuous framework for further philosophical theorizing about the nature of normativity and the distinctive features of normative language and thought.

Contents

1   Introduction

An important function of language is to create and develop interpersonal relationships in communication. In inquiry we share and coordinate our beliefs about how the world is. But we also take a stance and socially orient ourselves toward possible acts, attitudes, and states of affairs. We evaluate possibilities as desirable, appropriate, horrible, trivial, permissible, wonderful. We make demands and grant permissions, emphasize commonality and breed antipathy. In communication we shape our identities as thinkers and feelers in a social world; we coordinate on how to act, what to feel, and whom to be.

For these reasons it is important that we understand the variety of normative and evaluative resources which language affords. This paper investigates one such resource: the language of modality. I focus in particular on practical normative uses of modal verbs, such as 'must' and 'may' — so-called *deontic modals*. The aim of this paper is to develop and defend a novel account of the meaning and use of these expressions. This account elucidates the distinctive role of normative language in conversation and deliberation, and provides a fruitful framework for theorizing about further normative and metanormative questions.

One influential approach to deontic modals is *contextualism*. A contextualist about an expression claims that the content of that expression depends on features of the context of utterance. Applied to the case of normative language, contextualism claims that the content of a normative sentence such as 'Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor' is, roughly, the proposition that the relevant normative standard in the context requires that Sally gives 10% of her income to the poor (we will make this more precise in due course). Contextualism about normative language often goes under the heading of 'Relativism'.[1] The view's past is, shall we say, checkered. As Chris Gowans puts it at the beginning of a recent survey article, "relativism has the unusual distinction — both within philosophy and outside it — of being attributed to others, almost always as a criticism, far more often than it is explicitly professed by anyone" (GOWANS 2012). Even in the recent contextualism-relativism debates in philosophy of language, where espousing *some* form of context-sensitivity is having its heyday, contextualism for the case of normative language has had few defenders.

This paper develops an improved contextualist theory of normative language, which I call *Discourse Contextualism*, and defends it against three prominent objections to contextualist accounts: first, that they cannot capture certain phenomena

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[1] For instances of this use of terminology, see, e.g., STEVENSON 1963b, HARMAN 1975, 1996, DREIER 1990, BOGHOSSIAN 2006.

involving normative disagreement; second, that they mischaracterize the contents of normative judgments; and third, that they have unwelcome substantive normative and metanormative implications. Contextualist accounts, few that there are, are frequently motivated by broader normative and metanormative aims — e.g., to capture the connection between normative judgment and motivation, to avoid positing a realm of distinctively normative properties or facts, or to explain the alleged "faultlessness" of fundamental normative disagreement.[2] I will argue that we can motivate Discourse Contextualism independently of such broader issues. The strategy of Discourse Contextualism is to derive the distinctive behavior of (in this case) deontic modals from a particular contextualist interpretation of a standard semantic framework for modals, along with general principles of interpretation and conversation. In *using* deontic modals speakers can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, and general pragmatic reasoning skills, to interpret deontic modals and manage an evolving system of norms. Discourse Contextualism illuminates a crucial role for deontic modals in discourse, and provides a perspicuous framework for posing various further normative and metanormative questions — for instance, concerning normative objectivity and the apparent distinctive practical character of normative language and judgment. This can lead to clearer, better motivated answers, and suggest new ways the dialectics may proceed. Discourse Contextualism is thus of interest to a wide range of metaethicists, regardless of their particular metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological commitments. The project isn't to show that no other theory can get the data right. It is to motivate and develop an improved framework for implementing contextualism that is empirically adequate and theoretically attractive.

The structure of the paper is as follows: §2 offers a general characterization of contextualist views about deontic modals and presents a standard version of the argument against contextualism from disagreement. §3 takes a step back from discourse disagreements with deontic modals and examines more general ways in which individuals manage their assumptions about context in action. Insight into these broader phenomena motivates a framework for implementing contextualism, which I call *Discourse Contextualism*. §4 develops the basics of a Discourse Contextualist account of deontic modals, and applies the account to several examples of discourse agreement and disagreement. §5 shows how the account solves the contextualist's problems with discourse disagreement and elucidates various aspects of deontic modals' meaning and use. §6 extends the Discourse Contextualist account of

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[2]See, e.g., Harman 1975, 2000, Wong 1984, Dreier 1990, 2005, Copp 1995, Unger 1995, Brogaard 2008, Finlay 2009; *cf.* Schroeder 2010: 66–67.

unembedded deontic modals to respond to a second prominent challenge to contextualism: the behavior of deontic modals in normative attitude ascriptions. §7 examines how a Discourse Contextualist account of normative language integrates with broader metaethical theorizing about the nature of normativity. §8 concludes and describes several limitations and possible extensions of the present discussion.

2   Contextualism and Discourse Disagreement

Deontic modals are interpreted (in some yet-to-be-specified sense) with respect to a body of norms, or normative standard. Sometimes the relevant norms are made linguistically explicit, like in (1).

(1)   According to the house rules, Timmy must be in bed by 8.

The phrase 'according to the house rules' specifies that it is the norms governing Timmy's household which figure in the interpretation of the modal 'must'. Roughly, (1) says that the house rules require (entail) that Timmy be in bed by 8. Other times, only a general type of normative standard is explicitly specified, like in (2), or no normative standard is specified at all, like in (3).

(2)   Morally, Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

(3)   Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

Call sentences like (3) *bare deontic modal sentences*; and call deontic modals that occur in such sentences *bare deontic modals*. It is bare deontic modals that will be the focus of this paper. To fix ideas, assume that all bare deontic modals in our examples are given the same type of normative reading — say, a moral reading, like in (2). Unless otherwise noted, by 'deontic modal' I will mean "bare deontic modal," and by 'deontic modal sentence (/utterance, /assertion)' I will mean "bare deontic modal sentence (/utterance, /assertion)."[3]

Our evaluations of deontic modal sentences depend on what norms we accept. (3) can seem acceptable if you accept norms requiring Sally to give 10%, but unac-

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[3]I use 'deontic' as a catchall term for any kind of practical normative reading. A distinction is sometimes made between narrowly deontic expressions ('must', 'reason', 'permissible') and evaluative expressions ('good', 'bad', 'beautiful'). It isn't uncontroversial how these families are related (see Van Linden & Verstraete 2011, Van Linden 2012 for recent discussion in descriptive linguistics). I will use 'deontic' and 'normative' broadly to cover expressions and readings of both types. In calling a use 'deontic' I am not assuming that it need be performative, i.e. involve performing a directive/permissive speech act (more on this in §5).

ceptable if you accept norms permitting her to give less. Contextualists and relativists, in contrast to invariantists, claim that this dependence of our evaluation of deontic modal sentences on what norms we accept derives from a more basic dependence of the interpretation of deontic modals on a contextually relevant body of norms. Contextualists and relativists agree that the truth value of a deontic modal sentence may vary across parameters of interpretation (contexts of utterance, circumstances of evaluation, contexts of assessment) even if everything else in the world remains constant and a particular type of normative reading for the modal (say, moral) is held fixed.

Contextualists claim that this context-dependence, broadly construed, is to be understood as a dependence of the semantic (conventional) *content* of a deontic modal sentence on features of the context of utterance, those features that determine some contextually relevant body of norms.[4] Contextualists treat a particular body of norms determined by the context of utterance as figuring in the truth conditions of a deontic modal sentence. To a first approximation, the semantic content of (3) in a context of utterance *c* is the proposition that the relevant moral norms in *c* entail that Sally gives 10% of her income to the poor.[5] So, to give a proper account of the meanings of deontic modals in context, the contextualist must provide a general account of what body of norms is supplied as a function of the context of utterance and figures in deriving semantic content. The putative problem for contextualism is that there doesn't seem to be any way of specifying the contextually relevant body of norms that explains both (*a*) how we're in a position to make the deontic modal claims that we seem licensed in making (call it the *justified use condition*), and (*b*) how we can reasonably disagree with one another's deontic modal claims (call it the

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[4]This isn't the only respect in which deontic modals might be sensitive to context. Deontic modals have also been argued to be sensitive to a contextually relevant body of information. To keep the discussion manageable I will abstract away from this latter sort of context-sensitivity here (see, e.g., KOLODNY & MACFARLANE 2010, DOWELL 2013, *suppressed for anonymous refereeing*).

When I use 'relativism' in referring to a position contrasted with contextualism, I mean the view that no particular normative standard figures in the semantic content of a deontic modal sentence, and that token deontic modal utterances can have different truth values relative to different assessors in the same world (see, e.g., KÖLBEL 2004, MACFARLANE 2014; *cf. suppressed for anonymous refereeing*). As noted in §1, many positions in ethics and metaethics described as 'relativist' are kinds of contextualism on the taxonomy used in this paper.

[5]As will become evident, I am glossing over differences between sentences-in-context and utterances; my occasional talk about the semantic properties of utterances can be understood as short for talk about the semantic properties of the sentences uttered in the contexts of those utterances. I return to the importance of the distinction in §7.

disagreement condition).[6]

Suppose Alice and Bert are considering the substantive normative question of how much morality requires Sally to give to the poor. They agree on all the relevant non-normative facts, like how much Sally earns, how stable her job is, what the needs of the poor are like, and so on. Their question is fundamentally normative: it concerns what moral norms to accept. The following dialogue ensues:

(4)   *Alice:*   Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.
        Bert: No, Sally doesn't have to give that much. She can give less.

What body of norms should the contextualist say figures in the interpretations of Alice's and Bert's uses of the deontic modals 'must', 'have to', and 'can'?

Suppose, first, that Alice's utterance of (3) is just about her own moral standard. Assuming Alice is in a position to make a claim about her own moral standards, this captures the justified use (*a*)-condition: how Alice is justified in making her deontic modal utterance. But it leaves the disagreement (*b*)-condition unexplained. If Alice's utterance of (3) is just about her own moral standard, it is unclear how Bert can reasonably disagree with her. And it is unclear how in uttering (5) Bert is disagreeing with Alice if each of them is making a claim about their respective moral standards.

(5)   No, Sally doesn't have to give that much (=10% of her income to the poor).

Alice and Bert can agree about whether Sally's giving 10% follows from their respective moral standards while disagreeing with what one another says. Bert's linguistic denial in (4) is felicitous, whereas *B*'s in (6) is not.

(6)   *A:*   In view of Alice's moral standard, Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.
        B: #No, in view of Bert's moral standard, Sally doesn't have to give 10% of her income to the poor.

This puts pressure on the claim that (7) and (8) explicitly specify the semantic contents of (3) and (5), respectively.

(7)   In view of Alice's moral standards, Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

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[6]For discussion in the broader literature, see, e.g., MOORE 1912, GIBBARD 1990, 2003, SMITH 1994, KÖLBEL 2003, RICHARD 2004, LASERSOHN 2005, VON FINTEL & GILLIES 2008, DREIER 2009, SWANSON 2011, MACFARLANE 2014, *suppressed for anonymous refereeing.*

(8)   In view of Bert's moral standards, Sally doesn't have to give 10% of her income to the poor.

If we replace the speaker with a relevant group, and treat deontic modal claims as claims about this group's normative standards, we can capture the disagreement (*b*)-condition that Alice and Bert make inconsistent claims. But we seem to leave the justified use (*a*)-condition unexplained. It becomes unclear how Alice is in a position to make a claim about whether Sally must give 10%, which, intuitively, she is. It can be appropriate for Alice to utter (3) even if she doesn't know anything about Bert's moral views.

In sum, the objection from disagreement is that if we treat deontic modal utterances as about the speaker's norms ("speaker contextualism"), we capture the justified use condition but leave the disagreement condition unexplained. But if we treat deontic modal utterances as about the norms of a larger group ("group contextualism"), we capture the disagreement condition but leave the justified use condition unexplained. There seems to be no general way of specifying what body of norms is relevant as a function of context that captures all our intuitions.

Before proceeding I would like to make several brief clarificatory remarks on the scope of the present discussion of agreement and disagreement. First, following the consensus I assume that there is a disagreement between the speakers in dialogues such as (4), and moreover that there is some aspect of the disagreement that needs to be explained by a linguistic theory. This isn't to say that a linguistic theory needs to give a general philosophical account of the nature of disagreement. Although I will be focusing specifically on discourse disagreements, of course not all disagreements are verbally expressed in linguistic exchanges.[7] For our purposes what needs to be explained in dialogues like (4) is the licensing of expressions of linguistic denial — in English, expressions such as 'no', 'nope', 'nu-uh', etc. These expressions signal the speaker's discourse move of rejecting (denying, objecting to) some aspect of the previous utterance. Importantly, not all cases in which speakers intuitively disagree can be marked in this way. *B*'s "disagreement in attitude" with *A* in (9) cannot be signaled with a linguistic denial.

(9)   [Context: *A* and *B* are deciding where to go for dinner.]
        A: I like Mexican.
        B: ^{ok}I like Thai.
        B′:   #No, I like Thai.

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[7] For discussion of inter-conversational disagreement, see, e.g., MACFARLANE 2007, *suppressed for anonymous refereeing.*

Our task is to generate a representation of dialogues like (4) that correctly predicts the felicity of expressions of linguistic denial and the discourse moves they mark.

Second, in calling dialogues like (4) 'disagreements' I am not making any theoretical assumptions about at what level the disagreement ought to be explained. My usage is compatible with semantic or pragmatic explanations. A common way to explain why linguistic denial is licensed is to posit that the semantic or asserted contents of the speakers' utterances are incompatible. Indeed such a view was implicit in the standard worry for speaker contextualism noted above. However, no such specific account of disagreement is built into the very data itself to be explained. Alternative explanations are possible, at least in principle (and, I will argue, not *merely* in principle).

Third, many authors have expressed the intuition that discourse disagreements like (4) are in some sense "faultless." Saying that Alice and Bert disagree doesn't itself imply that one of them must be making a cognitive mistake. Yet nothing in the above characterization of the objection to contextualism, or in the discussion to follow, requires taking a stand on this issue one way or the other (more on this in §7).[8]

The epicycles from here are involved. I will spare the reader many of the details (see n. 6). I simply want to mention one not uncommon initial reaction. I am sympathetic with the informal impression that in dialogues like (4) the speakers are disagreeing about what sort of context to be in — specifically, about what norms to accept in the conversation. Intuitively, Alice and Bert are disagreeing, not about whether Sally's giving 10% is required by such-and-such norms, but about what norms *to accept*. They are managing their assumptions about what moral norms are operative in the context. Simply noting this, however, is insufficient. The challenge for contextualism is to explain how such "metacontextual" or "discourse-oriented" negotiations are possible, and, more pressingly, *why they are so systematic*, given that a contextualist semantics is correct. The force of this challenge has gone underappreciated by contextualists.[9]

According to contextualism, deontic modal sentences have ordinary representational contents; they have a mind-to-world direction of fit. Even if we find examples of ordinary descriptive claims sometimes having normative implications — consider

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[8]For general discussion of the notion of faultless disagreement, see, e.g., Wright 2001, Kölbel 2003, MacFarlane 2014.

[9]See, e.g., Cappelen 2008; Recanati 2008: 60–61; Björnsson & Finlay 2010: 19–22, 27–28, 31–36; Schaffer 2011: 219; Sundell 2011: 276n.14, 277–279, 282–283; Plunkett & Sundell 2013: 3, 13–19, 28; see also note 10. For additional discussion, see *suppressed for anonymous refereeing*, *suppressed for anonymous refereeing*.

'It's cold in here' ↝ 'You should shut the window' — it's not as if they systematically carry those particular normative implications across uses. Why, then, should uttering a sentence which conventionally describes given bodies of norms systematically communicate something about what norms to accept? 'I'm hungry' doesn't (systematically) trigger an implication that the addressee ought to be hungry. 'That [demonstrating *b*] is a cute baby' doesn't (systematically) trigger an implication that the addressee ought to be demonstrating *b*. *B*'s denials in (10)–(11) are marked.

(10)   *A:*   I'm hungry.
         B: #No, I'm not hungry.

(11)   *A:*   That is a cute baby. [said demonstrating *b*]
         B: #No, that isn't a cute a baby. [said demonstrating *b'*]

The paradigm use of deontic modals is to manage speakers' assumptions about the very features of context on which their interpretation intuitively depends. Deontic modals contrast with paradigm context-sensitive expressions in this respect. The worry is that the distinctive discourse properties of deontic modals are unexpected given the contextualist's semantics.

The overall consensus is that the objection from discourse disagreement is devastating for standard versions of contextualism (*cf.*, e.g., EGAN ET AL. 2005: 149; MACFARLANE 2010: 1, 11; 2014: 248–249). But I am more optimistic. In the next section I would like to take a step back from discourse disagreements with deontic modals, and look at agreement and disagreement phenomena more generally. Perhaps better understanding the role of context in collaborative action will shed light on the role of deontic modals in managing the state of the context and what norms to accept.

Before turning to this positive project, I want to emphasize a methodological point. It isn't uncommon for contextualists to respond to recalcitrant data by positing linguistically unconstrained interpretive mechanisms and ad hoc pragmatic principles (e.g., CAPPELEN 2008, BJÖRNSSON & FINLAY 2010, VON FINTEL & GILLIES 2011; see also n. 9). I view such responses as non-starters. I take it as a constraint on an adequate contextualist account that it meet the relevant challenges without resorting to novel grammatical, pragmatic, or interpretive principles. If we cannot explain the distinctive behavior of deontic modals in terms of independently attested aspects of conventional meaning and general interpretive and pragmatic principles, then we should give up being contextualists.[10]

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[10]PLUNKETT & SUNDELL (2013: 4) claim to have a similar aim of explaining disagreement phenomena in terms of general semantic and pragmatic mechanisms. However, as far as I can tell, they

3 Managing the Context:
Toward Discourse Contextualism

Suppose it is common knowledge between Clara and Dan that several days ago she said something to him that could have been construed as rude. Clara isn't sure whether Dan took what she said that way, and, if he did, whether he is offended. She doesn't want to bring up their previous interaction explicitly since she wouldn't want to make something out of nothing. So the next time she sees Dan she acts as though everything is normal between them. She is warm and open as usual. Since Dan wasn't in fact offended by Clara's earlier remark, he responds in kind to Clara. Since Clara knows that Dan wouldn't respond this way if he was actually annoyed, and Dan knows that she knows this, etc., it becomes common ground that they are on good terms and that he didn't take her remark as rude.

Now consider a variant on the case. Suppose that Dan did in fact take Clara's remark as being rude. Though he didn't say so at the time, Clara knows he was annoyed. Nevertheless when she next sees Dan, she doesn't want to bring up their previous interaction. She wants to avoid the potential conflict if she can. So she acts as if everything is copacetic, even though she knows that it isn't. However, Dan doesn't want to go along with Clara's behavior. He *could* object by making their clash in attitudes explicit. He might say something like, "Why are you acting as if everything is okay between us? Don't you remember what you said?" Or perhaps, "I know you're just trying to get everything back to normal, but, listen, it isn't." But Dan needn't object in this way. Instead he simply acts aloof. In return Clara might continue to act amiably, hoping that he will eventually respond in kind. Clara and Dan can thus manage their assumptions about the status of their relationship without explicitly raising the issue.

My point in working through these examples is to highlight how commonplace a certain sort of reasoning about context is. The appropriateness of our actions often requires that circumstances are a certain way. *In acting*, we can thus exploit our mutual world knowledge and general pragmatic reasoning skills to communicate information and manage our assumptions about these circumstances. This can streamline collaborative action. The lesson is this: *by acting in such a way that is ap-*

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fail to give any account of precisely what these mechanisms are. They claim *that* speakers negotiate about the values of contextual parameters and "pragmatically advocate" for their proposed values in using normative language (e.g., pp. 13–19, 28); but no substantive explanation is given as to how precisely this happens, given the contextualist's semantics, or why normative expressions contrast with paradigm context-sensitive expressions in their tendency for this kind of use.

propriate only if the context is a certain way, one can implicitly propose that the context be that way. If the other party accommodates by proceeding in like manner, it can become taken for granted that the context is that way. If she doesn't, this can lead to negotiation over the state of the context. Crucially this can all happen without explicitly raising the issue of what the context is like.

I suggest that the linguistic case — the case of linguistic action, discourse, and interpretation — is a special instance of these phenomena. I propose the following structure for a contextualist account of deontic modals:

Discourse Contextualism (outline):

1. *Compositional semantics:* Deontic modals are semantically associated with a contextual normative standards parameter i.
2. *Interpretive constraints:* Utterances of deontic modal sentences (*a*) assume that the conversational situation determines a value for i that would make the utterance appropriate, and (*b*) assert something about the world given this value.
3. *Discourse-oriented effects:* Assuming that speakers' assumptions about the value of i are readily retrievable, speakers can manage the value of i by using deontic modals — e.g., in direct affirmations and denials.

Call a contextualist account that has these components *Discourse Contextualism*. The strategy of Discourse Contextualism is to derive the distinctive linguistic behavior of deontic modals from a particular sort of contextualist semantics — one that associates them with a relevant contextual variable (or variables) — along with general pragmatic principles. The aim of the remainder of the paper is to develop this outline of a contextualist semantics and pragmatics for deontic modals.[11]

4 Deontic Modals in Discourse.
The Basic Account

In the following sections I will argue that a particular contextualist implementation of a standard semantics for modals generates constraints on the interpretation of deontic modals in context and predicts their behavior in discourse. This section develops the basics of a Discourse Contextualist account of deontic modals and applies the account to several examples. In §5 I argue that the basic Discourse Contextualist account developed in this section solves the contextualist's problems with

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[11]See *suppressed for anonymous refereeing* for applications of this style of contextualist account to other types of expressions which have figured in recent contextualism-relativism debates.

discourse disagreement and elucidates various aspects of the meaning and use of deontic modals.

4.1 Components 1 and 2:
From formal semantics to interpretive constraints

The compositional semantic component basically comes for free. It is standard in linguistic semantics to treat modals as semantically associated with a parameter or variable **P** that ranges over sets of premises (propositions). Very roughly, 'Must ϕ' says that ϕ follows from these premises, and 'May ϕ' says that ϕ is compatible with these premises.[12] This contextually supplied set of premises determines the reading of the modal (epistemic, deontic, teleological, etc.). Deontic readings call for a premise set that encodes the content of a body of norms. For instance, a moral premise set might include propositions like that no one steals, that everyone keeps their promises, etc. Different types of deontic readings are associated with different deontic premise set variables.

It is common to include in a model of context a parameter representing (roughly) the norms accepted for the purposes of conversation.[13] In conversation we not only share information in coordinating our beliefs about the world. We also express our normative views and coordinate our plans. Inquiry is, in part, inquiry about what to do. It is thus natural to link the premise set variable **P** with this discourse-level normative standard parameter, at least in the uses of deontic modals we have been

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[12]I will use boldfaced type for parameters/variables, and italics for their values in context. I treat 'ϕ', 'ψ', etc. as schematic letters to be replaced with declarative sentences. For convenience I sometimes refer to the possible worlds proposition expressed by 'ϕ' by dropping the single quotes — e.g., using 'ϕ' as short for '$[\![`\phi$' $]\!]^c$', where $[\![ `\phi$' $]\!]^c = \{w : [\![`\phi$' $]\!]^{c,w} = 1\}$.

On the standard semantic framework for modals, see esp. KRATZER 1977, 1981, 1991; see also VAN FRAASSEN 1973, LEWIS 1973, VELTMAN 1976. The premise semantic implementation adopted in this paper is equivalent (LEWIS 1981) to the perhaps more familiar implementation in KRATZER 1981, 1991 which uses a set of propositions (ordering source) to induce a preorder on the set of accessible worlds. Kratzer's semantics makes use of two premise sets, calculated as a function of the world of evaluation: a premise set F (a "modal base") that describes some set of relevant background facts and a premise set G (an "ordering source") that represents the content of some ideal. These complications won't be relevant here. For simplicity I will assume our premise sets are consistent.

For concreteness I will assume that premise set parameters are syntactically realized as variables (for discussion, see PARTEE 1989, VON FINTEL 1994, FRANK 1996, STANLEY 2000, SCHAFFER 2011). It is common in linguistic semantics to treat variables as receiving their values from a contextually supplied assignment function (e.g., HEIM & KRATZER 1998). My talk about context supplying values for variables can be understood as short for talk about contextually supplied assignment functions.

[13]See esp. PORTNER 2007; see also LOCHBAUM 1998, STARR 2010, CHARLOW 2011.

considering (more on this in §5.5). These uses call for a deontic premise set variable $\mathbf{P_d}$ that represents the norms endorsed in the conversation. This reflects the paradigmatic role of deontic modals in communal planning and deliberation. (Complications to these natural moves will follow in due course. There may be reasons to treat the norms parameter as consisting of a sequence of premise sets, representing different types of norms that may be relevant in the conversation (*cf.* PORTNER 2007). Since we are focusing on moral readings, I bracket this complication in what follows. Unless otherwise noted I will assume that the discourse normative standard variable is $\mathbf{P_m}$, representing the body of specifically moral norms endorsed in the conversation. I will sometimes use $\mathbf{P_d}$ when abstracting away from the particular type of norm that is relevant.)

Treating deontic modals as semantically associated with a contextual parameter places interesting constraints on their felicitous use and interpretation. Deontic modal sentences include a variable for a deontic premise set, i.e. body of norms or normative standard. When this variable is free, a value must be contextually supplied in order for the sentence to have a specific interpretation in context. So, for communication to be successful, the hearer must be able to retrieve the speaker's intended value; the hearer must be able to infer how the speaker takes the discourse context to be such that it determines such-and-such content for the speaker's utterance. Uttering 'The baby is laughing' assumes that context supplies a salience ordering on which some individual b is the most salient baby, and asserts that b is laughing. Likewise an utterance of deontic 'Must (/May) ϕ' assumes a value for $\mathbf{P}$, say P_{m_c}, and asserts that ϕ follows from (/is compatible with) P_{m_c}.

To be clear, I am *not* claiming that the standard semantic framework for modals calls for contextualism about deontic modals.[14] All parties in the debate about deontic modals — contextualists, relativists, expressivists, invariantists — can accept that the modal verbs themselves are context-sensitive, in the sense that the context of utterance determines what type of reading the modal receives. What is at issue is whether, given a specific type of normative reading for the modal (e.g., moral), some particular body of norms supplied by the context of utterance figures in the sentence's semantic content, where what norms are supplied may vary across contexts in the same world. Non-contextualist accounts deny this.[15]

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[14]On this I disagree with, e.g., VON FINTEL & GILLIES 2008, BJÖRNSSON & FINLAY 2010, DOWELL 2011, 2012, BRAUN 2013, MACFARLANE 2014: 284.

[15] For the invariantist, a specific body of norms figures in the semantic content, but it is treated as determined by the world of evaluation. To capture this in the standard framework one might posit a substantive lexical constraint on (e.g.) moral premise sets that they be determined solely by the world of evaluation. For the relativist/expressivist, no particular body of norms figures in the

4.2 Component 3:
Agreeing and disagreeing with deontic modals

Before turning to disagreement cases I would like to look at cases where communication proceeds successfully. The preoccupation in the literature on non-ideal examples — e.g., where communication fails, where there is disagreement, or where speakers aren't even involved in the same conversation — can obscure how deontic modals typically function in discourse. Starting with prototypical collaborative cases will better illuminate the phenomena. This can demystify what goes wrong in the non-ideal case.

Suppose there is an annual charity drive for starving children coming up, and we are deliberating about how much to give. We are modestly well off, but not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. We are generally financially comfortable, though the stability of our jobs is not entirely secure. We must exercise care in planning for our children's education, ensuring the bills get paid, and so on. I ask you how much you think we are to give, in light of our financial, personal, and family situations, on the one hand, and the severe plights of the poor, on the other. You say:

(12)   We must give 10% of our incomes for the children.

Given the grammatical properties of deontic modals, your utterance assumes a body of norms relevant for the particular task at hand, namely, resolving an issue you placed on the conversational table: how much we are morally required to give. Since our plans depend on how this question is resolved, you ought to make available to me your grounds for answering it as you do. So you continue as in (13).

(13)   We must give 10% of her income for the children. That should leave us with more than enough for ourselves and our own families. The starving children need it more anyway.

Recognizing your communicative intentions (more on which below), I successfully restrict the range of possible interpretations for 'must', the basis for your utterance of (12) becomes common ground, and we plan for giving 10%.

The body of norms assumed by your utterance of (13) can affect the interpretation of subsequent utterances. This delimits the interpreter's computational task of

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semantic content. To capture this in the standard framework one might treat what context supplies for interpreting a modal as a function from judges (centers, individuals, groups) to premise sets. What would be special about (e.g.) moral readings is that the supplied function interestingly depends on the value of the judge.

determining the intended contents of future uses of deontic modals, and facilitates a more efficient exchange of information and coordination of plans in future collaborative endeavors (n. 17).[16] Suppose we turn to the case of Sue, and consider how much we should give if we were in her shoes. Her financial situation is a bit more uncertain than ours. Her specialized health problems incur additional and sometimes unpredictable medical expenses, and her job security is more precarious. Still she could make do with less, and her medical treatments aren't strictly necessary. I ask how much Sue should give. You reply:

(14)   I'm not sure. Sue may give 10% too. But maybe, given her medical and financial situation, she only has to give 5%.

The norms that served as the basis for your utterance of (12) prompt my further question about the newly raised case of Sue. Though you cannot resolve this question, you raise additional considerations which are plausibly normatively relevant. Our common normative views are refined so as to be compatible with Sue's giving 10% (perhaps among other things), and we plan accordingly.

These commonplace examples highlight an important point. Deontic modal utterances presume an implicit, semantically unspecified body of norms. Nevertheless, utilizing general principles of pragmatic reasoning, speakers and hearers can integrate relevant features of the (past, present, and projected future) conversational situation to interpret deontic modals and coordinate on an evolving normative view. The *semantics* for deontic modals generates constraints on the *interpretation* of uses of deontic modals in particular contexts. By reasoning from these constraints speakers can effectively share information and coordinate action.

With this in mind, let's reconsider the discourse disagreement with Alice and Bert in (4).

(4)   *Alice:*   Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.
        Bert: No, Sally doesn't have to give that much. She can give less.

Alice and Bert are discussing our moral obligations to the poor. They consider the specific case of Sally. Alice utters (3) 'Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor'. Upon hearing Alice's semantically underspecified utterance, Bert might reason roughly as follows (where *g* is the proposition that Sally gives 10% of her income to the poor):

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[16]*Cf.* Farkas & Bruce 2010 on the importance of representing projected future states of the conversation in discourse models.

(15)   "Alice is intending to say something about the deontic status of g. In order to do so, given the grammatical properties of modals, a set of premises must be contextually supplied. Since Alice wouldn't intend to say something false, she must be assuming a premise set P that entails g. Since Alice is cooperative, her utterance of (3) must be relevant and realize an intention to provide an answer to the present question under discussion, namely, how much of Sally's income morality requires her to give to the poor. Assuming P as a value for $\mathbf{P_m}$, P_{m_c}, would do so by ensuring that the moral norms endorsed in the conversation entail that Sally gives 10%. So, Alice must be assuming a value for $\mathbf{P_m}$, P_{m_c}, and have meant that P_{m_c} entails g."

Rather than formalize this reasoning here, let's simply observe its principal features.[17] The appropriateness of Alice's linguistic act of uttering (3) requires that the discourse-level moral standard entail g that Sally gives 10% of her income to the poor. Since it is mutually presupposed that Alice is obeying the conversational maxims (GRICE 1989), in uttering (3) Alice implicitly proposes that it become taken for granted that the common ground is that way. In accepting an utterance one normally accepts what the speaker committed to in uttering it. So, since it is common knowledge that Alice can expect Bert to undergo an abductive reasoning process like in (15), it is also common knowledge that he will object if he has different moral views, given their common goal of settling on what moral views to accept. So if Bert doesn't object, this will confirm that the context is as the appropriateness of Alice's act requires, and the discourse-level moral standard parameter $\mathbf{P_m}$ can be set to a value that entails g.

However, since Bert accepts an incompatible moral view, he ought to object.[18] Suppose he replies as in (4). For reasons parallel to those above, his doing so is appropriate only if the discourse moral standard is compatible with Sally's giving less than 10%. As he expects, Alice goes through an analogous abductive reasoning

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[17]For rigorous formalizations in artificial intelligence and logic, see, e.g., HOBBS ET AL. 1993, ASHER & LASCARIDES 2003, THOMASON ET AL. 2006. As these literatures have extensively documented, we are quite skilled at inferring one another's intended context and coordinating interpretation, action, and planning accordingly. Research in psycholinguistics also establishes the ease with which speakers coordinate on linguistic meaning and use, both at the level of individual conversations in establishing local sub-languages (entrainment) and at the level of groups and communities in establishing more stable linguistic conventions (e.g., CLARK & WILKES-GIBBS 1986, GARROD & DOHERTY 1994).

[18]The fact that Alice and Bert disagree doesn't imply that they aren't engaged in a "cooperative" conversation, in the sense relevant for interpreting their utterances. Rejection and denial are compatible with Gricean cooperativity (ASHER & LASCARIDES 2013).

process and infers that he must wish to take for granted that the discourse moral standard is that way. By assuming a contrary value for the contextual variable $\mathbf{P_m}$, Bert fails to accommodate Alice's implicit proposal about the conversational situation, and exerts conversational pressure on Alice to accommodate her instead. If Alice accepts Bert's justification for his denial, it can become taken for granted that the context is as their present actions mutually require. If she doesn't, further negotiation can ensue over the state of context. This can all happen even if what is explicitly being put forward on the conversational table are propositions about logical relations between propositions and premise sets. By producing utterances that assume incompatible values for the contextual variable $\mathbf{P_m}$ — i.e., by acting in ways that would be appropriate only if the moral standard parameter $\mathbf{P_m}$ was assigned such-and-such contrary values — Alice and Bert can negotiate over what body of moral norms to accept. In using deontic modals Alice and Bert can exploit their mutual grammatical knowledge, along with general pragmatic reasoning, to manage their assumptions about the conversational situation itself.

5   Features

Various discourse properties of deontic modals are already elucidated by this basic Discourse Contextualist account. §§5.1–5.3 reconsider the central desiderata for a contextualist account of discourse disagreement discussed in §2. §§5.4–5.5 examine several additional features of the meaning and use of deontic modals.

5.1   Justified use

First, Discourse Contextualism captures the justified use condition from §2: it explains how Alice and Bert are in a position to make their deontic modal claims. Since Alice can reasonably expect Bert to undergo the sort of pragmatic reasoning in (15) and retrieve her intended interpretation, she needn't be overstepping her epistemic bounds in using deontic 'must' and assuming a value for the discourse-level normative standard parameter. Relatedly, since Bert knows that Alice has similar semantic and pragmatic competencies, he can express his disagreement with Alice's assumption by means of a direct denial. In assuming a value for the contextual variable $\mathbf{P_m}$ one needn't believe that the assumed body of norms is (already) commonly accepted in the context. The relevant attitude toward the proposition that the context is thus-and-so isn't belief but acceptance for the purposes of the conversation (e.g., STALNAKER 1974, THOMASON 2002). Given how skilled we are at inferring one an-

other's intended context (n. 17), we can use deontic modals as a way of testing one another's normative views, inviting them to object if they accept different norms.

5.2 Locus of disagreement

The account captures the second desideratum from §2 — the disagreement condition — as well: it makes sense of how speakers can reasonably disagree with one another's deontic modal claims, and locates a precise sense in which Alice and Bert disagree. Sequences of assertion, denial, and counter-assertion — the sorts of discourse moves we see in dialogues like (4) — needn't be analyzed in terms of incompatibility of semantic or asserted content. For all I have said, neither Alice nor Bert need be asserting anything false (more on which in §7). At minimum, the intended contents of their utterances may be compatible. It may be the case both that Alice's assumed value for $\mathbf{P_m}$, P_A, entails g (the proposition that Sally gives 10% of her income to the poor), and that Bert's assumed value for $\mathbf{P_m}$, P_B, is compatible with $\neg g$. Even so we can locate a precise sense in which Alice and Bert disagree: they disagree over the grammatically backgrounded content of what value for the contextual deontic premise set variable $\mathbf{P_m}$ is determined by the concrete conversational situation. Their utterances carry incompatible assumptions about what body of moral norms is operative in their context. The locus of Alice and Bert's disagreement concerns the very contextual features which determine the contents of their deontic modal utterances. This gives precise expression to the informal intuition from §2 that Alice and Bert are disagreeing about what sort of context to be in.

5.3 Discourse-oriented effects

Discourse Contextualism elucidates the informal ideas from §2 concerning the function of deontic modals in managing what norms to accept. Following Stevenson (1937, 1944, 1963a), Allan Gibbard (1990) observes that when making a normative assertion, the speaker "is making a conversational demand. He is demanding that the audience accept what he says, that it share the state of mind he expresses" (172) — albeit in a "more subtle, less fully conscious way" than by issuing an explicit imperative (STEVENSON 1937: 26). In making normative assertions we *make claims on* our interlocutors. Discourse Contextualism locates this feature of normative discourse in the presuppositions of normative utterances.

Though the truth conditions of deontic modal sentences are ordinary representational contents, speakers can use deontic modals to communicate normative

claims about what norms to accept. It is common to treat discourse moves like assertions as proposals to update the conversational common ground (e.g., Stalnaker 1978, Farkas & Bruce 2010). Since deontic modal sentences require a value for a contextual variable in order to express a proposition, the assignment of such a value is a precondition for making a discourse move at all. Making a deontic modal assertion creates a new discourse context in which that precondition is taken for granted, this even prior to the acceptance or rejection of the proposal which constitutes one's assertion.[19] Failing to object to a deontic modal assertion thus typically communicates that one accepts the value for P_m which it requires. This puts pressure on the hearer to conform her normative views to the assumed deontic premise set. In cooperative conversations this conversational demand will be able to be backed by some normative justification (see, e.g., (13)) or epistemic story about why it would be reasonable to treat one as relevantly authoritative on the issue in question. One implicitly suggests that it would be reasonable for others in the group to rely on the relevant presupposed norms in the conversation and to give them weight in their own deliberation. This can promote normative consensus. Consensus isn't always in the offing, but that is no different from the ordinary non-normative case.[20]

The paucity of the truth conditions of deontic modal sentences may help explain the apparent primacy of this discourse-oriented contribution of deontic modals. The asserted contents of deontic modal utterances are propositions about logical relations between propositions and premise sets. Such logical matters can be at issue when working out the specific content of a general normative ethical view given the non-normative facts. But this isn't the usual case in normative inquiry. What is typically interesting in a speaker's deontic modal utterance is what value is being assumed for the discourse-level normative standard parameter, i.e. what norms the speaker is presuming to be endorsed in the conversation. Given the ease with which we can retrieve one another's intended values for P_m (as described above), using a deontic modal affords an efficient means of managing our assumptions about these norms. General pragmatic principles concerning efficiency and effectiveness in communication call for us to do so (cf., e.g., Levinson 1987, Heim 1991). So, it wouldn't be surprising if the primary function of deontic modals in discourse came to be to facilitate coordination on a body of norms. An ability to capture this is often

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[19]Compare Stalnaker (1978) remarking on the "commonplace effect" of speech acts: "the context on which an assertion has its ESSENTIAL effect is not defined by what is presupposed before the speaker begins to speak, but will include any information which the speaker assumes his audience can infer from the performance of the speech act" (86; cf. Thomason et al. 2006, Murray 2014).

[20]For further discussion, see especially Gibbard 1990: Part III; cf. Brandom 1994.

taken to be a distinctive advantage of relativist, expressivist, and dynamic theories.[21] Discourse Contextualism captures it in terms of a static contextualist semantics and general pragmatic effects of using sentences with this semantics.

5.4 Expressing states of mind

A common complaint against contextualist theories is that they incorrectly treat normative sentences as *reporting*, rather than *expressing*, speakers' states of mind.[22] Discourse Contextualism avoids this worry. Common characterizations of contextualism notwithstanding,[23] on the present account deontic modal utterances aren't fundamentally about a relevant individual or group. They make simple logical claims *given* a certain deontic premise set. In uttering a deontic modal sentence the speaker assumes a value for the contextual variable P_m, and asserts something about how the world is given that value. The speaker thus expresses her state of mind in the sense of performing an act that is appropriate only if she is in that state of mind (*cf.* BACH & HARNISH 1979). Alice's utterance of (3) *assumes* a value for P_m which entails that Sally gives 10% to the poor. Given their common goal of settling on what moral norms to accept, Bert can then reasonably infer from Alice's act that she accepts a moral view that requires Sally to give 10%. Alice's utterance expresses her state of mind via what it presupposes, not what it asserts. Discourse Contextualism can capture the core expressivist claim that using a deontic modal expresses, rather than reports, the speaker's state of mind.

5.5 Normative uses and open questions

Consider (16).

(16)   Ernie has to be home by 10. Aren't his parents stupid? I'd stay out if I were him.

Intuitively, in (16) it is consistent for the speaker to dismiss the act of getting home by 10 because she isn't endorsing the norms that require it — the rules in Ernie's

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[21] See, e.g., STEVENSON 1937, 1944, GIBBARD 1990, PORTNER 2007, YABLO 2011; *cf.* also RICHARD 2004, YALCIN 2011, SWANSON 2012.

[22] This was one of the main motivations for early emotivist theories against cognitivist speaker subjectivism (e.g., AYER 1936, STEVENSON 1937). For related contemporary discussion, see, e.g., GIBBARD 1990, KÖLBEL 2004, YALCIN 2011, MACFARLANE 2014; see also note 27.

[23] E.g., SILK 2013: 212–213, MACFARLANE 2014: 146–147, a.m.o.

household. She is simply reporting what these norms require. The claim in (16) can be naturally paraphrased with an explicit 'according to' phrase, as in (17).

(17)   According to Ernie's parents' rules, Ernie has to be home by 10.

It is common to distinguish what we can call *expressive* uses of modals, like in (4), from *non-expressive* uses, like in (16). Adapting terminology from Lyons 1977, say that a modal is used *expressively* if it presents the speaker as endorsing the considerations with respect to which the modal claim would be true. And say that a modal is used *non-expressively* if it does not. (Non-expressive uses are compatible with the speaker's endorsement; they simply fail to present it.) Applied to deontic readings, a deontic modal is used expressively, in this sense, if it presents the speaker as endorsing the norms that would justify it, and non-expressively if it doesn't. Call expressive uses of deontic modals *normative* uses, and non-expressive uses of deontic modals *non-normative* uses.[24]

We can capture the distinction between normative uses of deontic modals, like those in (4), from apparent non-normative uses, like in (16), while giving them a uniform type of analysis. In both kinds of uses the deontic modals are interpreted with respect to a contextually supplied set of premises. The difference lies in what premise set variable is supplied. A non-normative use like in (16) calls for a variable P_{hr} that refers to Ernie's parents' house rules. These rules may be endorsed in the discourse context, but they may not be. What distinguishes intuitively normative uses — uses which resist being paraphrased in terms of an explicit 'according to'-type phrase — is that they call for a discourse-level contextual variable which represents norms commonly accepted in the conversation. Normative uses don't simply say what is permitted, required, etc. according to a given body of norms. They assume that the relevant norms are endorsed in the discourse context.

This way of representing the distinction between normative and non-normative uses of deontic modals provides a useful framework for further theorizing about the apparent distinctive features of normative language. First, analytic naturalists aside, it is often accepted that normative concepts are irreducible to non-normative concepts. Our semantics reflects this. Even if, say, classical utilitarianism is correct at the substantive normative level, competent speakers can coherently accept (18) without accepting (3); (3), unlike (18), presupposes a body of norms endorsed in

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[24]This distinction has been noted under various descriptions in a range of areas. See, e.g., Hare 1952, Hart 1961/1994, von Wright 1963, Raz 1975, Lyons 1977, Lasersohn 2005, Verstraete 2007, Nuyts et al. 2010. For critical discussion, see *suppressed for anonymous refereeing*.

the context.[25]

(3)   Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

(18)   Sally's giving 10% of her income to the poor maximizes happiness.

However, given a context in which the "bridge" principle in (19) is accepted, (3) is accepted iff (18) is.

(19)   What maximizes happiness is what must be done.

More generally, given a bridge principle like (19) that identifies the content of the relevant norms accepted in the context, there will be some associated non-normative sentence 'ψ' such that 'Must ϕ' is accepted iff 'ψ' is accepted. Discourse Contextualism can capture the intuition that we shouldn't build particular substantive normative assumptions into the conventional meanings of deontic modals,[26] while also capturing how deontic modals, given their conventional meaning, can be used to express speakers' particular normative views.

   I have suggested that what distinguishes intuitively normative uses of deontic modals from non-normative uses of language is (perhaps *inter alia*) their interpretation with respect to a contextual variable that represents the norms endorsed in the conversation. This provides a precise way of framing questions about the special roles played by different types of normative language. We can locate these questions in terms of *what it is* to accept different types of norms and to make discourse moves that presuppose such acceptance. Does accepting a system of moral norms (alternatively: prudential norms, norms of rationality, all-things-considered norms, etc.) essentially involve being in a certain motivational state, or having certain emotional capacities? What must a concrete discourse context be like for a deontic modal utterance to call for being interpreted with respect to a discourse-level norms parameter? Must the use play a regulative, directive role in the planning and practical reasoning of the speaker or group? Questions about the apparent distinctive practical character of normative language can thus be situated in a broader metasemantic, indeed metaethical, account — e.g., concerning what must be the case for different types of deontic premise set variables to be called for in concrete discourse contexts, what these variables and associated contextual normative parameters represent, and

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[25] A notion of acceptance in a context can be defined as usual (simplifying by identifying the context *c* with the context set): A sentence *S* is *accepted* in a context *c* iff for every world *w* ∈ *c*, *S* is true in *c* at *w*.

[26] See Lewis 1978: 85–86, Stalnaker 1988: 151, *suppressed for anonymous refereeing*; *cf.* Gibbard 1990: ch. 1, 2003: ch. 2.

what makes it the case that a given (unsaturated) deontic premise set constitutes the value for the relevant variable and (perhaps) represents the norms endorsed in a conversation. Discourse Contextualism provides a framework for further theorizing about the distinctive features of intuitively normative uses of language (more in this vein in §§6.2, 7).

5.6 Recap

Let's take stock. I have argued that we can derive various seemingly problematic discourse properties of deontic modals from a contextualist semantics and general conversational principles. The strategy of Discourse Contextualism is to start with a particular contextualist interpretation of a standard semantic framework for modals, and then show this semantics generates constraints on the interpretation of deontic modals in context and predicts their behavior in discourse. Semantically, normative uses of deontic modals are associated with a contextual parameter representing the norms endorsed for the purposes of conversation. Pragmatically, the "metacontextual" effects of such uses arise via general pragmatic reasoning from (*inter alia*) the requirement that a value for this parameter be assumed as input to semantic interpretation. In *using* deontic modals, speakers can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, along with general pragmatic reasoning, to manage an evolving body of norms.

6 Attitude Ascriptions and Normative Thought

So far we have focused on developing an improved contextualist account of various discourse properties of deontic modals — how context affects the interpretation of deontic modals, on the one hand, and how deontic modals are used to change the context and manage what norms to endorse, on the other. In this section I will extend the Discourse Contextualist account developed in §§4–5 to respond to a second main challenge to contextualism: attitudes and attitude ascriptions. I will focus on what I take to be the most pressing objection in this area: that contextualism mischaracterizes what state of mind you are in when you have a normative attitude (belief, hope, etc.). This isn't the only worry that might be raised concerning deontic modals in attitude ascriptions, or in embedded contexts more generally. But the following discussion should give a flavor for the kinds of explanatory resources available to the Discourse Contextualist. These may be integrated in a more comprehensive Discourse Contextualist account (see *suppressed for anonymous refereeing*).

I will argue that the proposed account of deontic modals in belief contexts constitutes an attractive framework for further theorizing about the nature of normative thought.

6.1   First-order states of mind

Call an attitude ascription like (20) with a deontic modal sentence as its complement clause a *normative attitude ascription*.

(20)   Alice thinks Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

Insofar as contextualism treats the contextually relevant norms as figuring in the content of a deontic modal sentence, contextualism seems to treat the normative attitude ascription in (20) as ascribing to Alice the belief that the her normative standards require Sally to give 10% of her income to the poor. The worry is that this incorrectly treats normative attitudes as states of mind about what norms one accepts.[27]

Consider the following example from Silk 2013 (207–208; *cf.* Yalcin 2007: 997):

> Suppose you encourage Gabriel, your infant brother, to put his fingers into the electrical outlet. Gabriel, smart chap that he is, recoils; his mother has repeatedly scolded him not to do so. You say:
>
> [(21)]   Gabriel knows he shouldn't put his fingers into the outlet.
>
> This seems true; you are attributing a certain normative belief to Gabriel. But it is implausible that [(21)] is true only if Gabriel has a belief about his, or anyone else's, normative views. He's just a baby.

As Silk (2013: 208) puts it, "Whether one can represent or take a certain perspective on normative standards is independent of whether one can *have* a normative standard."

Likewise, (22) doesn't ascribe to Bert the sort of attitude ascribed in (23):

(22)   Bert fears that he must give 10% of his income to the poor.

(23)   #Bert fears that his/our/whomever's moral views entail that he gives 10% of his income to the poor.

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[27] In the broader literature, see, e.g., Stanley 2003: 277–280; Kölbel 2004: 303–304; Yalcin 2007: 997; Yablo 2011: 271; Silk 2013: 207–208. *Cf.* Egan 2011: 226; Braun 2012.

Bert's fear is about the moral status of his giving 10% to the poor, not about himself or the stringency of his moral views.

Contextualism thus seems to have trouble capturing what your state of mind is when you have a normative attitude. Normative attitude ascriptions don't seem to ascribe meta-attitudes about a relevant individual/group or their normative standards. They characterize the subject's first-order normative views themselves. It is (24b), not (24a), with which (20) has an important semantic connection.[28]

(24)   a.   ⌗Alice thinks that, according to her/our/whomever's moral views, Sally must give 10% to the poor.
       b.   ≈According to Alice's moral views, Sally must give 10% to the poor.

(20) characterizes Alice as accepting moral norms which require Sally to give 10% to the poor. The challenge is to capture this within a contextualist semantics.[29]

According to Discourse Contextualism, there is no reference to the discourse context or to "the relevant norms," considered de dicto, in the content of the attitude ascribed in (say) (20). (20) ascribes to Alice the logical belief that $\bigcap P \subseteq g$, i.e. that a certain set of propositions P entails the proposition g that Sally gives 10% to the poor (*cf.* §5.3). But how does treating (20) as ascribing to Alice this sort of logical belief capture the intuition that (20) characterizes Alice's normative standards themselves? I suggest that we capture this intuition in terms of the communicative upshot of *locally accommodating* a value for the deontic premise set variable.

It is well known that many presuppositions can be *locally* satisfied: they can be satisfied in a context other than the discourse context. In (25), use of the proper name 'Ursula' (or the definite description 'the unicorn') is felicitous even though the presupposition that a suitable discourse referent exists isn't "globally satisfied," i.e. entailed by the discourse common ground.

(25)   There are no unicorns, but Fred thinks there are. In fact, he thinks he has a pet unicorn named 'Ursula'. He thinks Ursula (/the unicorn) can fly.

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[28]This isn't to say they are equivalent; *cf.* HARMAN 1996: 13, 14, 19 on how an agent's moral standards (to use my terminology) can come apart from her explicit beliefs about morality.

[29]Note that the objection concerns normative uses of deontic modals. In attitude ascriptions these are uses in which the relevant norms are assumed to be endorsed by the attitude subject (see below in the main text). Non-normative uses of deontic modals in attitude contexts raise no special problems. Modifying our unembedded example in (16), (i) does ascribe a belief about a certain body of norms: (i) ascribes to the speaker a belief that Ernie's parents' rules require Ernie to be home by 10.

(i)   I think Ernie has to be home by 10. Aren't his parents stupid?

The existence presupposition associated with 'Ursula' (or 'the unicorn') is satisfied in the expression's *local* context: it is satisfied in the context of (what we are presupposing are) Fred's beliefs (Stalnaker 1988, Heim 1992, Geurts 1998). This licenses using the name (or description).

Similarly, the Discourse Contextualist can say that the presupposition of a suitable value for the deontic premise set variable in a normative attitude ascription can be satisfied in the local context of the subject's attitude state. Normative uses of deontic modals presuppose a body of norms endorsed in the context. In attitude ascriptions the relevant context is the *local* context of the attitude state; the locus of endorsement is the subject of the attitude. What is interesting and informative about a normative attitude ascription is the assumption that the subject's state of mind is such that locally accommodating such-and-such value for $\mathbf{P_m}$ is appropriate. In using (20) one assumes that Alice's normative views are such as to determine a value for the deontic premise set variable $\mathbf{P_m}$, P_A, that makes the belief ascription true. The total communicative import of (20) is thus that Alice endorses a body of norms that requires Sally to give 10% to the poor. Ascribing to Alice the belief that P_A entails g via (20) communicates something about Alice's first-order normative views because of how the presuppositions of the deontic premise set variable are assumed to be locally satisfied. We can capture the intuition that normative belief ascriptions describe the subject's normative views.

6.2 Cognitivism and non-cognitivism

This account of deontic modals in attitude contexts lends itself to an attractive picture of normative thought, one which may capture intuitions from both cognitivist and non-cognitivist camps.

For a normative attitude ascription like (20) 'Alice thinks Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor' to be true, two things must be the case. First, Alice must accept some body of norms or other. This ensures that locally satisfying the presupposition associated with the normative standard variable is licensed at all. Second, this body of norms must entail that Sally gives 10% to the poor. This ensures that the ascription correctly characterizes Alice's normative views.

The truth in cognitivism is that the *content* of Alice's belief is an ordinary representational content. Suppose Alice accepts classical utilitarianism. Then Alice's belief is true iff Sally's giving 10% maximizes overall happiness. However, having the normative belief isn't simply a matter of being in this representational state. Alice must also *accept* the norms in question. Believing that Sally must give 10% isn't equivalent in general to believing that Sally's giving 10% maximizes overall happi-

ness, since the content of the former belief varies across subjects who accept different norms. Moreover, these beliefs aren't identical even for someone who accepts classical utilitarianism. A precondition for having the specifically normative belief is that one be in a certain state of norm-acceptance. The normative belief, unlike the non-normative belief, requires accepting a certain body of norms (*cf.* §5.5).

This latter component makes room for a way of capturing the common intuition that normative judgment isn't reducible to non-normative judgment. Normative attitude ascriptions are interpreted with respect a body of norms that are assumed to characterize the subject's normative views. This suggests that we situate questions about the apparent distinctive practical character of normative judgment in a broader metasemantic account of constraints on the correctness of such assumptions — specifically, in a metaethical account of the psychology of accepting a certain body of norms. (No doubt Gibbard 1990 will be relevant here.) For instance: What makes it the case about an agent that such-and-such deontic premise set characterizes her normative state of mind? Do facts about the agent's conative, practical, or motivational state play an essential role in this sort of content determination? If so, what role and which facts? Does accepting a body of norms essentially involve having certain motivational dispositions or emotional capacities? These questions will plausibly receive different answers for different types of norms.

Discourse Contextualism thus makes perspicuous how both representational and motivational elements might be built into having a normative belief — the former in the content of the belief, and the latter in psychological preconditions for its counting as normative, or its being ascribable in normative terms. Putting the point in terms of normative belief ascriptions, we can locate the representational component in the *semantics* — i.e., in the semantic content of the complement clause, given that its presuppositions are (locally) satisfied; and we can locate the practical component, depending on one's broader metaethical views, in the *metasemantics* — i.e., in what makes it the case about the subject that such-and-such way of satisfying those presuppositions is correct. A broader account of normative judgment developed along these lines may thus be able to capture intuitions driving "hybrid" expressivist views while avoiding some of their apparent counterintuitive commitments — e.g., that everyone who has a certain normative belief must accept the same representational claim (e.g., Boisvert 2008), or that all normative beliefs of a certain type must involve the same motivational attitude (e.g., Ridge 2006, 2007, Boisvert 2008).[30]

To be clear I am not claiming that Discourse Contextualism commits one to substantive views about the nature of normative judgment. It doesn't. It doesn't com-

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[30]See Schroeder 2009 for extensive discussion of hybrid theories.

mit one to internalism, or to saying that normative beliefs are essentially practical in ways that non-normative beliefs are not. These are extra-semantic issues in philosophy of mind and psychology. Discourse Contextualism provides a framework for clearly articulating further metaethical questions about the distinctive features of normative language and judgment; it doesn't itself require particular answers to them (*cf.* §5.5).

7   Normative Truth

In §§5.5 and 6.2 I suggested that we situate questions about the practical character of normative language and judgment in broader philosophical and social-psychological accounts of what normative parameters represent, the nature of norm-acceptance, and constraints on assignments of values to different types of deontic premise set variables in unembedded and embedded contexts. In this section I will briefly consider one additional way in which the Discourse Contextualist framework can fruitfully integrate with broader normative and metanormative theorizing.

As the reader may have noticed, nowhere in our developments of Discourse Contextualism have we appealed to intuitions about the truth values of deontic modal sentences. This is surprising: truth value judgments are often taken to be one of the primary types of data for semantic theorizing. But it is no accident.

There is a distinction which has cropped up at various points in the previous sections, and it is important to introduce it explicitly. I take it that the primary questions for a formal semantics and pragmatics — an account of the conventional meaning and use of language — are the following:

- *Compositional Semantics:* Given an assignment of values to context-sensitive expressions, what are the conventional contents of expressions of the language, and how are the conventional contents of complex expressions calculated as a function of the conventional contents of their parts?

- *Formal Pragmatics:* Given a compositional semantics for the language, how do individual utterances and sequences of utterances change the discourse context? How should we model the dynamics of uses of language with this semantics in conversation?

Crucially, compositional semantics *takes as given* an abstract representation of context that assigns values to variables and other context-sensitive expressions. This *abstract* context represents speakers' *concrete* discourse context, or conversational situation (*cf.* Lewis 1975).

Call the question of what makes it the case that a certain abstract context represents a concrete conversational situation a question of *metasemantics*:

- *Metasemantics:* What makes it the case, for a given concrete discourse context, that such-and-such abstract context c represents it, i.e. that such-and-such values are assigned to free variables and other context-sensitive expressions?

We have been able to address the semantics and pragmatics of deontic modals without taking a stand on the metasemantics of deontic modals; we haven't needed to commit to a particular story about what in fact determines the value for the deontic premise set variable in given concrete contexts. However, settling on this metasemantic issue is necessary for assessing the truth values of deontic modal utterances. One cannot evaluate a deontic modal utterance as true or false without making assumptions about what value for the variable $\mathbf{P}$ is determined by the concrete discourse context in which the utterance was produced. We can capture core features of the conventional meaning and discourse function of deontic modals while remaining on neutral on which deontic modal utterances are true or false.

Recall our account of Alice and Bert's discourse disagreement in (4) from §§2–5: Given the semantics of modals, the truth of 'Must ϕ' requires an assignment to the premise set variable $\mathbf{P}$ that entails ϕ. So, accepting Alice's utterance would result in a context set c_A in which, for all worlds in c_A, the concrete context determines an abstract context that supplies a value for $\mathbf{P_m}$ that entails g that Sally gives 10%. Correlatively, accepting Bert's utterance would result in a context set c_B in which, for all worlds in that set, the concrete context determines an abstract context that supplies a value for $\mathbf{P_m}$ that doesn't entail g. This locates a precise sense in which Alice and Bert disagree: they have incompatible assumptions about the conversational situation, specifically about what body of norms is in force. But notice that we can say all this without taking a stand on whether the actual world is in c_A or c_B, or on whether Alice or Bert, or both, spoke truly. The dynamics of Alice and Bert's conversation can be captured in terms of facts about the compositional semantics, about what their utterances assume about the (concrete and abstract) context, and thus about the intended contents of their utterances given those contextual assumptions.

This has several interesting upshots. First, settling on the truth or falsity of normative sentences in a "neutral" or informally described discourse context may be less critical in capturing our semantic competence with normative language than we initially thought. The issue of what the correct metasemantic story is for deontic modals is highly contentious, and the correct story, whatever it is, is likely highly complex. There are a range of factors that are plausibly relevant to fixing the

value of the contextual variable $\mathbf{P_d}$ (for some type of norm d) — e.g., speaker intentions, previous utterances and discourse moves, information structure, features of the concrete conversational situation, substantive normative principles, and so on. And the ways in which these factors, whatever they are, interact to determine the relevant value are plausibly highly complex, and even variable across utterances. Detailed descriptions of concrete discourse contexts will likely fail to specify all the contextual features that might be relevant to determining the value of $\mathbf{P_d}$. Even given a complete description of any plausibly relevant features of context, speakers may disagree about how the value for $\mathbf{P_d}$ is determined as a function of these features. This possibility is made all the more likely in light of how substantive normative considerations, and not simply interlocutors' beliefs about them, may bear on what body of norms is operative in a given conversation. Speakers may thus arrive at diverging truth value judgments on the basis of substantive normative differences and other metasemantic differences, rather than on the basis of anything concerning conventional meaning. Nothing less than a stipulation of a value for $\mathbf{P_d}$, i.e. of what norms are relevant, may suffice for delivering truth-value judgments that are stable across speakers and reflect genuinely *semantic* competence with deontic modals. But this amounts to the point implicit in the Compositional Semantic question above: that a semantics for deontic modals — an account of their conventional meaning, a representation of speakers' semantic competence — *takes as given* an abstract representation of context.

In this way Discourse Contextualism can avoid building substantive normative views into the conventional meaning of deontic modals. Semantic competence with normative language doesn't presuppose some particular view on how to live (*cf.* §5.5). Maintaining this sort of neutrality is often taken to be a distinctive feature of relativist and expressivist theories,[31] but we can now see that contextualism can capture it as well. One needn't be a moral saint to understand moral language.

Delineating questions about the metasemantics of deontic modals suggests precise ways of posing various substantive normative and metaphysical questions, and of locating them in an overall metaethical theory. For instance: What property, if any, do all and only morally required actions have? Do any normative facts hold independently of the evaluative attitudes of the creatures to whom they apply? Fundamentally, what, if anything, makes it the case that certain actions are (say) morally required? For such-and-such type of contextual norm variable (moral, evaluative, etc.), is a single value determined by all contexts? Or can the relevant standard vary across contexts? Metaethicists can all accept Discourse Contextualism in giving

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[31] *Cf.*, e.g., Gibbard 1990: ch. 1, 2003: ch. 2; Chrisman 2007: 243; Silk 2013.

their compositional semantics for normative language. Where they will differ is on these sorts of further normative and metanormative issues.

To take one example, consider ethical debates about the universality of morality. To capture common "relativist" claims, one could say that different contexts can determine different moral standards. Conflicting moral judgments about a particular case could thus both be true. If the alternative moral standards are also equally good, and nothing privileges one over another, such conflicting judgments could be equally valid as well. Those who defend the objectivity of morality — or at least the objective purport of moral language — would deny these claims. They could treat the moral standard variable as representing the correct moral norms in force in the conversational situation, determined independently of speaker intentions. If a universal moral standard was correct in all contexts, the same body of moral norms would be supplied in all contexts. This would be a substantive normative matter rather than something built into the conventional meaning of moral language (as on an invariantist semantics (n. 15)). Questions about the objectivity or universality of moral truths can thus be teased apart from the semantics, and located in the metasemantics of what determines the value of the moral standard variable in concrete discourse contexts.

For all that I have said, in some cases there may nothing in the world, independent of our intentions and what we accept in our conversation, that determines precisely which body of norms is supplied. Even if there isn't, this needn't undermine normative disagreement. Suppose the disagreement between Alice and Bert is such a case. Alice might have good reason to persist in her original claim that Sally must donate 10% of her income. As we have seen, previously accepted norms can serve as a basis for interpreting subsequent normative claims. Alice might think, "Why is Bert being so lax? Sally is so much better off than nearly everyone in the world. Would Bert be so stingy if he were in Sally's place? I don't want to live in a world where people think someone in her shoes can't spare 10%. I'm not letting this one slide." If Bert comes to agree with Alice, perhaps he won't learn any facts that held independent of their conversation (again, for all I have said thus far). But what norms he accepts will have changed — arguably for the better. Persisting disagreement needn't imply realism.[32] What norms we accept matters to us.

I want to emphasize that even if deontic modals are interpreted with respect to a varying body of norms, Discourse Contextualism doesn't itself have any untoward "relativist" or "subjectivist" normative implications. It doesn't imply that normative matters are merely "matters of taste," that normative disagreement is es-

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[32]On this I disagree with the sentiment expressed in Cappelen & Hawthorne 2009: 117–120.

sentially "faultless" (§2), or that people cannot be normatively mistaken. Discourse Contextualism is a soberly linguistic framework. It offers a way of representing the conventional meanings of deontic modals (at a relevant level of abstraction), and of modeling how uses of deontic modals conventionally change the context. It doesn't tell us what context to be in.

In these ways, a variety of Discourse Contextualist-based accounts of normative thought and talk are possible depending on one's broader philosophical commitments. This isn't a trivial feature. Modifying a point of Kaplan's in a related context, by delineating various issues concerning the meaning of deontic modals and the nature of normativity, normative uses of language, and normative judgment, "the result can only be healthy for all… disciplines" (1989: 537). This can motivate clearer answers and a more refined understanding of the space of possible views.

8   Conclusion

This paper has motivated and developed a framework for contextualist semantics and pragmatics, called *Discourse Contextualism*, and has applied this framework to the case of deontic modals. Discourse Contextualism resolves two of the central challenges facing contextualist accounts: capturing the behavior of deontic modals in discourse disagreements and in normative attitude ascriptions. The strategy of Discourse Contextualism is to derive various features of the meaning and use of deontic modals from a contextualist formal semantics and general principles of interpretation and conversation. First, I argued that various agreement and disagreement phenomena with deontic modals can be understood in terms of speakers' assumptions about what body of norms is determined by their conversational situation. Normative uses of deontic modals conventionally presuppose a lexically unspecified value for a discourse-level parameter representing a body of norms operative in the conversation. In using deontic modals speakers can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, and general pragmatic reasoning skills, to manage the value of this parameter and coordinate on evolving normative view. Second, I suggested that normative attitude ascriptions be treated in terms of independently attested mechanisms of local interpretation: a normative belief ascription characterizes the subject's normative views by assuming a locally accommodated value for the normative standard variable which represents those views and makes the ascription true. These accounts provide perspicuous ways of posing further normative and metanormative questions about the nature of normativity, normative language, and normative thought. Discourse Contextualism constitutes an empirically adequate

and theoretically attractive basis for a broader account of normative language, discourse, and judgment.

My primary aim in this paper has been modest: to begin to develop an improved contextualist account of deontic modals, and defend it against some of its most pressing objections. The development and defense of Discourse Contextualism offered here is far from complete. Our discussion has been limited in various ways. For instance, I have focused on context-sensitivity in the specifically normative aspect of the interpretation of deontic modals, i.e. in which body of norms is supplied. But there is a prominent second respect in which deontic modals appear to be sensitive to context: they appear to be sensitive to a contextually relevant body of information or evidence. We can ask not only what one ought to do in light of all the facts, known and unknown, but also about one ought to do in light of the evidence. In using deontic modals speakers can manage evolving bodies of norms *and* ordinary information about the world. Second, for concreteness I have focused on applying the Discourse Contextualist framework to the specific case of deontic modals. However, normative uses of language aren't limited to modal verbs. There are normative adjectives ('right', 'wrong'), nominals ('obligation', 'requirement'), and so on. Though these types of expressions may also seem apt for a Discourse Contextualist treatment, they differ in important respects. It is a non-trivial question how precisely to implement a Discourse Contextualist account in each case. Though I think there are natural ways of extending the account developed in this paper to capture these additional phenomena, I won't attempt to defend this claim here. Thorough investigation of similarities and differences among types of normative language, other expressions that have figured in recent contextualism-relativism debates, and paradigm context-sensitive expressions will be necessary, along with detailed comparison with alternative accounts. Integration with the literatures on epistemic modals, conditionals, gradable adjectives, and predicates of personal taste promises fruitful avenues to explore. I leave developments of a more general Discourse Contextualist account of normative language, as well as broader applications of the Discourse Contextualist framework, for future research.

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