**The Language of Reasons and Ought**

**Aaron Bronfman and J.L. Dowell**

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**I. Introduction**

Here we focus on two questions: What is the proper semantics for deontic modal expressions in English? And what is the connection between true deontic modal statements and normative reasons? Our contribution towards thinking about the first, which makes up the bulk of our paper, considers a representative sample of recent challenges to a Kratzer-style formal semantics for modal expressions,[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as the rival views—Fabrizio Cariani’s contrastivism, John MacFarlane’s relativism, and Mark Schroeder’s ambiguity theory—those challenges are thought to motivate. Here we argue that a Kratzer-style view is able to meet all of the challenges we’ll consider. In addition, we’ll identify challenges for each of those rival views. Our overall conclusion is that a Kratzer-style semantics remains the one to beat.

With this assumption in place, we then ask how we should understand the relationship between true deontic modal statements and normative reasons. Should, for example, we hold that the truth of such a statement entails the existence of a normative reason for some agent to comply? Here we argue that, in many cases, acceptance of Kratzer’s semantics for deontic modals leaves open for substantive normative theorizing the question of whether an agent has a normative reason to comply with what she ought to do.

**II. Kratzer’s Modal Semantics**

On Angelika Kratzer’s canonical semantics for modal expressions, such expressions are themselves semantically neutral; they make a single contribution to the determination of a proposition on every occasion of use. What modulates the type of modality expressed—teleological, bouletic, deontic, epistemic or alethic—is the context of use. The plausibility of the resulting view lies in part in its power, its ability to provide simple and highly unified explanations of a wide range of language use. Together with broad cross-linguistic support, the simplicity of Kratzer’s semantics has made it the view to beat.

What’s distinctive of a Kratzer-style semantics is its treatment modal expressions as quantifiers over possibilities. Typically, those domains of quantification are restricted and when the needed restriction isn’t represented explicitly in the linguistic material, it’s provided by context. The contextual supplementation is twofold. First, context determines a modal base, *f*, a function from a world of evaluation to a set of worlds, the modal background.

Modal bases may be epistemic or circumstantial. An epistemic modal base is a function that takes a world of evaluation *w* and returns the set of worlds consistent with the body of information in *w* that has some property or properties. Which properties are relevant is determined by which *f* is contextually selected; for example, that function may take the information that has the property of being the speaker’s at a designated time in the world of evaluation as an argument and give us the set of worlds compatible with that information. Or it may take the speaker’s and that of her interlocutors. In principle, any number of different *f*s might get selected by context. A circumstantial modal base is a value for *f* that takes a world of evaluation as an argument and delivers a set of worlds circumstantially alike in particular respects. Here, too, what makes a circumstance among the relevant ones at a world of evaluation will depend upon which *f* is contextually selected; for example, a particular value for *f* may make circumstances that determine causal relations between actions and outcomes at the world of evaluation relevant. The modal background in that case would be the set of worlds alike with respect to those circumstances.

A second source of contextual supplementation is an ordering source, a function *g* from a world of evaluation *w* to the set of best worlds in the modal background. Which features of a world *w* in the modal background put it among or not among the best worlds depends upon the value for *g*. For example, *g* might rank *w* depending upon how well some salient agent acts in accordance with the reasons she has or the obligations that apply to her in *w*. Or it might rank *w* in terms of how well it approximates some impartial ideal. The resulting best worlds make up the modal’s domain. ‘Ought’, the modal of concern here, functions like a universal quantifier over its domain of quantification: ‘ought p’ comes out true at a context-world pair just in case all of the best worlds as determined by that context and world are *p*-worlds.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One set of challenges to Kratzer’s semantics we’ll consider below stems not from its contextualism, but from its commitment, real or apparent, to the validity of two formal principles, Inheritance and (what we’ll call) ‘if p, ought p’, so it will be helpful to discuss the connection between those principles and her semantics here. Inheritance says that whenever *p* entails *q*, *ought p* will entail *ought q*. To see that Kratzer’s semantic validates Inheritance, suppose that *p* entails *q* and that ‘ought p’ is true. In that case, since all the best worlds are *p*-worlds, all the best worlds will be *q*-worlds as well. So, ‘ought q’ will also be true.

If we combine Kratzer’s semantics with her antecedent-restrictor theory of the indicative conditional,[[3]](#footnote-3) prima facie at least, we also validate ‘if p, then ought p’. Here’s why: On the antecedent-restrictor theory of conditionals, the function of the antecedent is to restrict the domain of a covert necessity modal in the consequent. So, to see whether a conditional of the form ‘if p, then q’ is true, we see whether every (relevant) *p*-world is also a *q*-world. If it is, then the conditional is true. If we assume that in a conditional of the form ‘if p, ought q’, ‘ought’ displaces the covert modal,[[4]](#footnote-4) then Kratzer’s semantics for modals and indicatives validates ‘if p, then ought p’. The antecedent of such conditionals restricts the modal background of ‘ought p’ to *p*-worlds. However the worlds in that background are ordered, the best ones will also be *p*-worlds. So, ‘if p, ought p’ will be true for any *p*.

A second type of challenge, one that is a challenge to Kratzer’s contextualism, stems from cases in which it seems that the truth of a statement expressed using a deontic modal must be information-sensitive in some way. Parfit’s miners scenario is a much-discussed recent example. In that scenario, ten miners are all trapped in a single shaft of a flooding mine, either Shaft A or Shaft B. The agent in the scenario (‘Agent’) does not know which they’re in; each is equally likely to contain the miners. Agent has just enough sandbags to fully block the water from flooding one shaft. Blocking A will save all the miners, if they’re in A, but kill them all, if they’re in B. Blocking B will save all the miners, if they’re in B, but kill them all, if they’re in A. Doing nothing, in contrast, distributes the water evenly between the shafts. In that case, exactly one miner will be killed and the remaining saved. In considering this case, most report that “Agent ought to do nothing” seems true. Notice, though, that its truth requires some form of information-sensitivity. After all, there’s an option that is guaranteed to do better than doing nothing, namely, blocking the shaft the miners are in. The problem, of course, is that blocking the shaft the miners are in is not an action Agent can knowingly perform. Given her limited information, it is better that she do nothing.

We discuss the challenge information-sensitive ‘ought’s may seem to pose to contextualism in some detail in our section on John MacFarlane’s work. Here we merely note the way to mark the distinction between information-sensitive and information-insensitive deontic modals that we’ll rely on in that discussion for the purposes of concreteness. (There may, of course, be other, better ways of marking that distinction within a Kratzer-style framework.)

**Subjective ‘Ought’:** So-called ‘subjective’ deontic modals have information-sensitive ordering sources. Such ordering sources treat bodies of information as features of worlds relevant for their comparative ranking.

**Objective ‘Ought’:** So-called ‘objective’ deontic modals have information-insensitive ordering sources. Such ordering sources treat bodies of information as irrelevant to a world’s comparative ranking.

**III. Cariani’s Contrastivism**

Not all challenges to Kratzer’s canonical semantics are challenges to its contextualism. Fabrizio Cariani’s contrastivist view, for example, can be given a contextualist construal (2013: 538). A contrastivist view about some range of sentences of the form ‘A ought to φ’ is any that holds that the truth of an utterance of such a sentence at some context-world pair is determined by a comparison, in light of some salient norms, between *φ*-ing and a restricted range of A’s alternative options. Cariani’s contrastivism in particular departs from Kratzer’s own view by denying that “ought” and “must” are best treated as universal quantifiers over sets of restricted possibilities. Instead, on his view, *A ought to φ* comes out true just in case all of A’s best options, according to the salient norms, are ways of *φ*-ing and no way of *φ*-ing is below the relevant benchmark, a cut off point in the ranking over options those norms induce. The benchmark’s role is to distinguish permissible from impermissible options (540). On a contextualist construal of this view, the range of options, their ranking, and the benchmark in that ranking would all be selected as a function the context of use.

The fundamental difference between Cariani’s view and Kratzer’s own is in the role the benchmark plays in determining the truth of ought statements. To see this, notice that one sort of value Kratzer’s ordering source can take is one that would rank each world *w* in the modal background in terms of what an agent does in *w*, for example, how well what an agent does in *w* can be expected to be promote some value or whether the agent’s act in *w* conforms to some salient rule. Such a ranking would have the effect of ranking all worlds in which the agent performs the same action the same. This would mean that such an ordering source would, in effect, rank options, in Cariani’s sense.[[5]](#footnote-5) Since these core aspects of contrastivism are representable within a Kratzerian framework, we’ll focus here on Cariani’s contrastivism and its feature not representable in that framework, namely, its benchmark.

Why introduce a benchmark? Cariani argues that the canonical quantifier view is unable to provide plausible explanations for three puzzle cases because those cases involve apparent failures of principles any Kratzer-style semantics is committed to. Inheritance, recall, holds that if *p* entails *q*, then ought *p* entails ought *q*. Cariani considers two rather famous puzzles for Inheritance: Ross’s puzzle and Professor Procrastinate. The addition of the benchmark allows Cariani’s contrastivism to reject Inheritance, and thus, he argues, to provide plausible explanations of our judgments in those cases.

In addition, he considers a puzzle from conditional ought statements of the form ‘if p, then ought p’, which a Kratzer-style semantics appears to validate. The addition of the benchmark, he argues, also allows his contrastivism to better fit with our judgments about uses of sentences with that form.

**The Puzzles and Cariani’s Contrastivism**

Consider first Cariani’s version of Ross’s puzzle. In his case, we are discussing Joan, who has paid “hefty fees to go to a famous school” (535). In such a case, it seems true to say:

(ATTEND) Joan ought to attend her classes.

But if (ATTEND) is true and Inheritance holds, the following is also true:

(ATTEND OR BURN) Joan ought to either attend her classes or burn down the philosophy department.

And the trouble, Cariani suggests, is that ATTEND OR BURN appears to be false since it appears to communicate “the categorical information that Joan has two ways of doing what she ought to” (535). The benchmark earns its keep by providing principled grounds for accepting ATTEND, while rejecting ATTEND OR BURN: ATTEND comes out true because every relevant, best option is a Joan-attends-class option, while no relevant way of attending class is impermissible. ATTEND OR BURN, in contrast, comes out false, since there is a way of Joan’s attending-or-burning, namely, burning, that we may assume is impermissible relative to salient norms, and so falls below the benchmark.

Professor Procrastinate seems to pose a second challenge to Inheritance. In Cariani’s version of Jackson and Pargetter’s famous case, Professor Procrastinate is invited to write a review for a book he is uniquely well qualified to review. However, Procrastinate suffers from a tendency to leave projects incomplete. So, if he accepts, it is extremely likely he will not write the review. If he declines, someone else will write the review, albeit someone less qualified than himself. What should he do? Here, many find themselves inclined to regard ACCEPT AND WRITE as true:

(ACCEPT AND WRITE) Procrastinate ought to accept and write.

At the same time, many also regard ACCEPT as false:

(ACCEPT) Procrastinate ought to accept.

This poses a prima facie problem for fans of Inheritance, as “accept and write” entails “accept”, so ACCEPT AND WRITE’s truth would seem to entail ACCEPT’s. In contrast, Cariani argues that his view is able to explain these intuitions. In deliberating about what Procrastinate should do, accepting without writing is a salient option that is presumably ranked below the threshold of permissibility. So, ACCEPT comes out false because there is a way of accepting, namely, accepting and not writing, that is impermissible. In contrast, ACCEPT AND WRITE comes out true, as all of the best options are accepting-and-writing options, while no way of accepting and writing is ranked below the benchmark.

Finally, Cariani argues, acceptance of the standard antecedent-restrictor theory of conditionals plus Kratzer’s semantics “implies the logical validity of the schema ‘if p, ought p’” (536). If that’s right, then the Kratzerian is committed to the truth of statements such as:

(POISON) If you drink a bucket of poison, you ought to drink a bucket of poison.

But POISON seems, at the very least, awkward to assert. In contrast, Cariani suggests, “what suffices to explain the falsity of [POISON, and so its awkwardness] on my view is that ‘drinking a bucket of poison’ is an impermissible relevant option—it is not only antecedently impermissible, but it is also conditionally impermissible” (541).

**Assessing Cariani’s Contrastivism and Expanding the Range of Cases**

How should a Kratzerian respond to these puzzles? One way to comparatively assess semantic theories is to see how well each fits with speakers’ reactions not only in the puzzle cases, but also in neighboring cases. Does it fit with speakers’ reactions in those cases? If so, does it require additional explanatory resources to secure that fit? Absent a story about how the benchmark gets set for particular cases independently of generating results that fit with the data, it’s hard to say definitively what Cariani’s semantics predicts for particular, neighboring cases. Here we note a few such cases that place pressure on Cariani to revise his contrastivism in ways that make it more closely resemble Kratzer’s canonical view.

First, it’s important to notice that Cariani’s view allows for suboptimal options that are above the benchmark.[[6]](#footnote-6) This creates room for a case like his Joan example, but in which the suboptimal option is above the benchmark. Here’s one candidate for such a case: Imagine, as before, we’re wondering what Joan should do, given that she’s paying hefty fees to attend a famous school. There’s no assignment due tomorrow, nor is there an exam or a review for an exam. It still seems one can truly say:

(ATTEND) Joan ought to attend her classes.

But consider:

(ATTEND OR WATCH) Joan ought to either attend her classes or stay home and watch cartoons.

In a conversational context in which the value of Joan’s educational opportunities is emphasized, asserting ATTEND OR WATCH is somewhat awkward, at least for one who holds that disjunctions such as ATTEND OR BURN and ATTEND OR WATCH communicate the information “that Joan has two ways of doing what she ought”. Here, staying home and watching cartoons does not seem to be a way of doing what Joan ought. Even so, it may be that staying home, while suboptimal, is permissible. After all, Joan has no assignment due tomorrow, nor does she have an exam or an exam review. If so, then with the benchmark set as Cariani proposes, as the cut off for permissibility, staying home will be a suboptimal option above the benchmark. But this will make ATTEND OR WATCH true, on his view: Every optimal option is a way of either attending classes or staying home and no way of attending classes or staying home is below the benchmark. Cariani will then need a non-truth-conditional explanation for why ATTEND OR WATCH is awkward to assert. Indeed, as we’ll see, this is the Kratzerian’s preferred option. For now, though, notice that, for Cariani, this is an explanation that fails to pattern with and requires different resources from his truth-conditional explanation for our willingness to assert ATTEND while being unwilling to assert ATTEND OR BURN.

Alternatively, Cariani might endorse a somewhat higher standard for the benchmark, placing it above staying home but below optimality. While this would render ATTEND OR WATCH false, and hence avoid the need for a non-truth-conditional explanation of its awkwardness, it stands to regenerate the issue for other sentences involving a suboptimal disjunct above the benchmark. For example, if attending her classes while occasionally texting is suboptimal, but above the benchmark, then:

(ATTEND OR TEXT) Joan ought to either attend her classes while paying close attention or attend her classes while occasionally texting.

will come out true. But this latter sentence remains awkward to assert in a context where the value of Joan’s educational opportunities is emphasized, and so a non-truth-conditional explanation of its awkwardness will again be needed.

Cariani could avoid this kind of difficulty by setting the benchmark at optimality. However, this way of thinking of the benchmark already has a representation in Kratzer’s framework: The ordering source already distinguishes best from non-best worlds in a modal background. So addressing the problem in this way brings Cariani’s view closer to Kratzer’s own.

Consider now Professor Procrastinate and a few neighboring cases. In the original case, Cariani suggests, the ranking of the options is:

“Accept and write > do not accept > benchmark > accept without writing” (541).

In that case, ACCEPT AND WRITE seems true, though ACCEPT false (or at least awkward to assert) because it is extremely unlikely that Professor Procrastinate would write the review. What, though, about asserting:

(DECLINE) Procrastinate ought to decline.

Or what about asserting:

(NOT THE CASE ACCEPT) It’s not the case that Procrastinate ought to accept.

Certainly, when we are hearing ACCEPT as awkward to assert, DECLINE and NOT THE CASE ACCEPT sound fine, indeed, arguably more than fine, the right sort of things to say. But, both will come out false in the context as described by Cariani, as none of the best options are declining options or not accepting options. This is puzzling: It’s false that Procrastinate should accept, that it’s not the case that he should accept, and that he should decline. Is there no fact of the matter, in this case, about what he should do? Setting the benchmark at optimality won’t help here: DECLINE and NOT THE CASE ACCEPT will each still come out false, both because it is still true that none of the best options are declining/not accepting options and now also because declining/not accepting will fall below the benchmark.

Or what about a case in which it’s very likely that Procrastinate *would* write, though not impossible that he wouldn’t? If the options, ranking, and benchmark for this case are the same as in Cariani’s original, ACCEPT will still come out false, as it will still be true that there is a way of accepting, i.e. accepting and not writing, that is a relevant option below the benchmark. But, in contrast to the original case, asserting ACCEPT here seems fine; indeed, the right thing to assert.

Or imagine, again in a case in which it is very likely that Procrastinate would write, one says:

(ACCEPT-AND-WRITE OR DECLINE) Procrastinate ought either to accept and write or to decline.

Here, holding the ranking, options, and benchmark fixed, ACCEPT-AND-WRITE OR DECLINE will come out true, on Cariani’s account. But ACCEPT-AND-WRITE OR DECLINE seems awkward, as it seems to communicate, counterintuitively, that declining is a way for Procrastinate to do as he ought. Here, too, one response would be to join forces with the Kratzerian and provide some non-truth-conditional explanation for its awkwardness to assert. Or Cariani could hold that one of the benchmark, ranking, or options in this variation differ from those in the original case in some way that makes ACCEPT come out true here, e.g. by holding that accepting and not writing is no longer a relevant option. But absent an independently plausible story about how those values get selected, and given that the possibility of his accepting and not writing has been raised and is being taken into account in his deliberations, such a response seems a bit ad hoc. Given the similarity of the cases, a more unified explanation would seem preferable.

Finally, recall Cariani’s conditional ought sentence,

(POISON) If you drink a bucket of poison, you ought to drink a bucket of poison.

POISON is false on his view, because drinking a bucket of poison is impermissible and so below the benchmark. Consider now a variation on POISON:

(PAINLESS POISON) If you drink a bucket of poison, you ought to drink a bucket of painless poison.

Here, PAINLESS POISON seems true (though in some cases not advisable to assert). But if we assume in a normal case that drinking a bucket of poison is impermissible, then drinking a bucket of painless poison would seem to be impermissible as well. If that’s so, then PAINLESS POISON will be false, on Cariani’s view.

Cariani does have additional resources to distinguish the two, however. Elsewhere he considers a different variation on POISON that would also seem to come out true, on his view:

(COFFEE) If you drink a cup of coffee, you ought to drink a cup of coffee.

That’s because drinking coffee is generally permissible. To explain the apparent awkwardness of asserting COFFEE, Cariani considers an antecedent restrictor view of conditionals together with a diversity condition. A diversity condition would require that for ‘you ought to φ’ to be true, A must have non-φ options. Putting these together, in order for ‘if p, you ought to φ’ to be true, there must be a non-φ option compatible with *p* (553). This would allow him to explain the awkwardness of asserting POISON, in contrast to asserting PAINLESS POISON, by noting that POISON, given an antecedent restrictor view of conditionals, would fail to satisfy that diversity condition. PAINLESS POISON, however, would meet it: After we have thrown out all of the non-poison drinking options, one still might have both painless and painful poison drinking options. Notice, however, that this explanation of our unwillingness to assert POISON is one in which no appeal to the benchmark is made. The benchmark, though, is what marks the crucial difference between a Kratzerian view and Cariani’s. This means that the most plausible explanation available from within Cariani’s explanatory resources for why PAINLESS POISON sounds fine, in contrast to POISON, is equally available to the Kratzerian. This deprives iffy-‘ought’s such as POISON of their status as a source of evidence for Cariani’s contrastivism over Kratzer’s.

**Kratzerian Solutions**

What should a Kratzerian say about these other cases? As just noted and as Cariani acknowledges, a Kratzerian could equally appeal to a diversity condition to explain the awkwardness of asserting POISON in contrast to PAINLESS POISON.

Next, consider Joan, who has paid hefty fees to attend a famous school. As Cariani stipulates, attending class is an option that excludes the others; if she attends class, she will not stay at home, neither will she burn the department down. Consider the original case, in which ATTEND seems true. For this to be so, on Kratzer’s view, all of the best worlds will need to be worlds in which Joan goes to class. This will mean that all of the best worlds will be worlds in which Joan goes to class or in which she burns down the philosophy department (or in which she stays home and watches cartoons). So, relative to the parameter values that make ATTEND true, ATTEND OR BURN and ATTEND OR WATCH will be true as well. But, if we hold that, to be a way of doing what one ought, an option must be represented among the best worlds, then neither burning down the department, nor staying at home watching cartoons will be ways of doing as one ought. The explanation, then, for why ATTEND OR BURN and ATTEND OR WATCH seem awkward to assert is that, as Cariani notes, they seem to communicate that “Joan has two ways of doing as she ought”. But she doesn’t, on this way of thinking about what it takes for something to be ‘a way of doing as one ought’.

So, while the Kratzerian is committed to the truth of ATTEND OR BURN and ATTEND OR WATCH, she isn’t committed to the truth of all that asserting ATTEND OR BURN or ATTEND OR WATCH would communicate. In particular, accepting with Cariani the assumption that ‘ought’-disjunctions communicate that an agent has two ways of doing as she ought, we have a short explanation for why asserting ATTEND OR BURN is awkward: It communicates, falsely, that burning down the philosophy department is a way for Joan to do as she ought. Prima facie, though, there is something further for the Kratzerian to explain that Cariani needn’t. On Cariani’s view, the reason why ‘ought p or q’ communicates that an agent has two ways of doing as she ought is that it is part of the truth-conditions for such sentences. Since, as we’ve seen, it isn’t part of the truth-conditions of such sentences on Kratzer’s semantics, we’ll need some pragmatic explanation.

Providing a compelling case for the pragmatic explanation we favor is beyond the scope of this paper. In particular, Cariani himself provides several arguments against a pragmatic strategy that would need to be addressed to fully mount such a case.[[7]](#footnote-7) Here we merely sketch the view we favor. But recall first that the above considerations suggest that, absent revision of how we are to think of the benchmark, Cariani’s own view seems to require some non-truth-conditional explanation for the awkwardness of asserting disjunctions such as ATTEND OR WATCH or ACCEPT-AND-WRITE OR DECLINE.

Grice’s first maxim of quantity enjoins speakers to make their assertions as informative as is ‘required for the purposes of conversation’, while his second maxim of quality forbids them from asserting that for which they lack evidence. One way implicatures may be generated, he suggests, is when a speaker’s providing as much information as the conversational purposes require would require asserting what she is not in a position to. In Grice’s example,

A is planning with B an itinerary for a holiday in France. Both know that A wants to see his friend C, if to do so would not involve too great a prolongation of his journey:

A: Where does C live?

B: Somewhere in the South of France.

(Gloss: There is no reason to suppose that B is opting out; his answer is, as he well knows, less informative than is required to meet A’s needs. This infringement of the first maxim of Quantity can be explained only by the supposition that B is aware that to be more informative would be to say something that infringed the second maxim of Quality. “Don’t say what you lack adequate evidence for,” so B implicates that he does not know in which town C lives.) (Grice 1989: 33)

In general, in asserting ‘p’ when *p* is less informative than *q* and settling *whether* *q* is relevant for conversational purposes, a speaker implicates that she is not in a position to assert ‘q’. On Kratzer’s semantics, ‘ought p’ is more informative than ‘ought p or q’, since the former entails the latter, but not vice versa. If a speaker knew that *p* were the only way of doing as one ought, she would be in a position to assert ‘ought p’. In asserting the weaker ‘ought p or q’, a speaker implicates that she is not in a position to flat out assert either ‘ought p’ or ‘ought q’. So, if the speaker may be assumed to be knowledgeable about the situation, she implicates that neither *p* nor *q* is the sole way of doing as one ought, i.e. that they are each ways of doing as one ought. Moreover, if a speaker is in a position to assert ‘ought p’, she should do so instead of asserting ‘ought p or q’ as in that case it is a more helpful instruction for doing as you ought.

One advantage of this explanation over Cariani’s own is its unity: The explanation for why ATTEND OR BURN and ATTEND OR WATCH are awkward to assert is the same.In contrast,given his account of the benchmark as a cut off for permissibility, Cariani would seem to hold that ATTEND OR BURN is awkward because false, while ATTEND OR WATCH and ACCEPT-AND-WRITE OR DECLINE are awkward for some non-truth-conditional reason.

Finally, what should a Kratzerian say about Professor Procrastinate? One thought would be that, when we are hearing ACCEPT AND WRITE as true, we are hearing it as an answer to a deliberative question like, “Which action, of the actions Professor Procrastinate could perform during the time it would take him to accept and write, can be expected to be most professionally responsible?” The Kratzerian can accommodate that: In such a case, she holds that a world *w*, in the modal background for ACCEPT AND WRITE, gets ranked on the basis of how well Procrastinate can be expected to discharge his professional responsibilities, given the action he performs in *w* during the relevant time period. All the best worlds in this ranking are worlds where Procrastinate accepts and writes, since given that Procrastinate accepts and writes, he is expected to perfectly fulfill his professional responsibilities, while no other course of action has this property. Because all the best worlds in the modal background for ACCEPT AND WRITE are accept and write worlds, ACCEPT AND WRITE comes out true.

In contrast, when we hear ACCEPT as false, we are hearing it as a candidate answer to a different question like, “Which action, of the actions Procrastinate could perform during the time it would take him to accept, can be expected to be most professionally responsible?” Here, a world *w* gets ranked on the basis of how well Procrastinate can be expected to discharge his professional responsibilities, given the action he performs in *w* during the time it would take him to accept. None of the best worlds in this ranking are worlds where Procrastinate accepts, since given that Procrastinate accepts, it is very unlikely he will go on to write. Instead, the best worlds are all worlds where he declines. So, ACCEPT is false, while the following are each true:

(DECLINE) Procrastinate should decline.

(NOT THE CASE ACCEPT) It is not the case that Procrastinate should accept.

Of course, abandoning his explanation of this case and accepting ours is compatible with Cariani’s semantic framework. But, since neither the benchmark nor a failure of Inheritance figures in that explanation, this would deprive him of appeal to Procrastinate as a source of evidence for Cariani’s contrastivism over Kratzer’s.

Summing up, we’ve suggested that, while Cariani’s original view is able to fit with speakers’ reactions to the original puzzle cases, it does much less well when we widen our scope to consider neighboring cases. In contrast, Kratzer’s view, we’ve argued, plausibly fits with our reactions to the full range of cases. If we revise Cariani’s account of how the benchmark is set, treating the new benchmark as a cut off point for optimality rather than permissibility, the resulting view does much better. In particular, it is now able to provide truth-conditional explanations for the awkwardness of asserting ATTEND OR WATCH and ACCEPT-AND-WRITE OR DECLINE. But since such a cut off point is already implicitly represented in Kratzer’s framework, this way of making the view more plausible in effect brings it closer to her own.

Revising Cariani’s contrastivism so that the benchmark is treated as a cut off point for optimality does leave one remaining difference between the two views: Are ATTEND OR BURN and ATTEND OR WATCH awkward to assert because false or because they each generate a false implicature? Assessing the comparative merits of these two views may rest on the ability of each to satisfy more general methodological principles, such as simplicity.

**IV. MacFarlane’s Relativism**

John MacFarlane, based on joint work with Niko Kolodny, defends a relativist account of how the truth of deontic modal sentences is determined.[[8]](#footnote-8) On a contextualist semantics for some term, once the features of the context of utterance have been fixed, we need only a world to determine a truth-value for a declarative sentence containing it. In contrast, on a relativist account, we need something further. In the case of deontic modals, on MacFarlane’s view, the further parameter value we need is a body of information. Parfit’s miners scenario discussed above provides an illustration. On MacFarlane’s view, a context-world pair is insufficient to determine a truth-value for “Agent ought to do nothing”. In addition, we need a body of information, for example, Agent’s information at the time of her deliberations. Different bodies of information will yield different truth-values, even holding a context and world fixed. For example, if the relevant body of information includes the information that the miners are located in Shaft A, “Agent ought to do nothing” will come out false; relative to that body of information, “Agent ought to block A” seems true. Which body of information is relevant for determining truth is determined as a function of the context of assessment, the context from which the truth of a deontic modal utterance is assessed. If the information relevant from the context of assessment that Agent occupies when she asserts, “I ought to do nothing” is just her information, then, relative to that context of assessment, what she’s said is true. However, if the information relevant at a different context of assessment is that of an assessor who knows the miners are in A, then, relative to that context of assessment, what Agent has said is false.

The information relevant at a context of assessment needn’t be the assessor’s, though. The variety of relativism MacFarlane defends is flexible: The body of information that partly determines the truth of a deontic modal sentence is that *relevant* at a context of assessment (318). In some cases that information will be the assessor’s, but in others it may be the information of the subject of the modal claim (357).

For a contextualist, the relevance of bodies of information will be fixed by the context of utterance’s contribution to the determination of content. Relativists, in contrast, are semantic invariantists; on their view, there can be no difference in the content of different uses of the same deontic modal sentence, at least not any traceable to the contribution of the modal.[[9]](#footnote-9)

MacFarlane’s case for relativism has a negative and a positive component. First, he hopes to show that no well-worked out rival to relativism fits with speakers’ reactions to the full range of cases. Then he argues that relativism does. So, relativism is to be preferred as providing the best explanation of speakers’ uses of such sentences.

Here our primary focus is on MacFarlane’s challenges to contextualism. We’ll argue that a suitably flexible, contextualist, Kratzerian view is able to fit with the full range of speakers’ reactions to the challenge cases. We’ll then briefly discuss his relativist-friendly explanations of some of the cases discussed, noting some somewhat surprising features of those explanations. Finally, we’ll note one common phenomenon that, we’ll suggest, a contextualist view is better poised to explain. As we’ll see, central to his case against the contextualist is the claim that contextualism can’t explain the phenomenon exhibited by the much-discussed cases of faultless disagreement. Interestingly, though, the phenomenon his flexible relativism seems ill-suited to explain bears all of the hallmarks of such disagreement.

The fundamental problem with contextualism, MacFarlane argues, is that it does not explain the phenomenon of faultless disagreement between deliberators and advisors (or third party assessors) in cases of modal sentences whose truth requires that they are information-sensitive in some way. We may think of MacFarlane’s challenge as posing a dilemma for the contextualist. Disagreement requires a common subject matter. So when speakers share a strong sense that two parties sensibly disagree with their uses of “A ought to φ” and “no, A ought not to φ”, a contextualist must hold that there is a single body of information each claim is sensitive to. But in some cases, namely, those involving eavesdroppers of whose existence a speaker is unaware, it won’t be plausible for both utterances to be sensitive to the same body of information. That’s because holding that the body of information that the speaker’s utterance is relative to includes that of the eavesdropper would make that speaker’s assertion unwarranted. But the cases in question are those in which the speaker’s utterance sounds fine. Since the eavesdropper’s assertion is also fine, their disagreement is “faultless”.

A contextualist could hold that the speaker’s ‘ought’ claim isn’t relative to a body of information that includes the eavesdropper’s and so is warranted, but only on pain of losing a common subject matter and, hence, an explanation for our sense of disagreement. In short, the contextualist may either capture the faultlessness of their respective claims or their disagreement, but not both.

Here is MacFarlane’s example of such a case. Suppose you are deciding whether you ought to bet on Blue Blazer or Exploder, two horses in an upcoming race. You know that, in the past, Blue Blazer has proven itself the faster horse. In light of this you conclude,

(BLAZER) I ought to bet on Blue Blazer.

Suppose, though, that, unbeknownst to you, I am eavesdropping on your conversation from behind a bush. Unlike you, I know that today Blue Blazer will be suffering from the effects of a drug. MacFarlane holds that here “it makes sense for me to think that you are wrong, and to say”,

(EXPLODER) “No, you ought to bet on Exploder” (342).

MacFarlane suggests that here I am sensibly disagreeing with you, but that your utterance can’t have its content determined relative to a body of information that includes mine. If it were, your assertion of BLAZER would have been unwarranted. But your assertion seems just fine. If instead we hold that your assertion of BLAZER isn’t relative to a body that includes my information, then you and I aren’t disagreeing. So, whether the contextualist holds that your assertion is or isn’t relative to a body of information that includes mine, there will be some feature of eavesdropping cases she won’t be able to explain.

MacFarlane’s own explanation of such cases requires that both the speaker’s and the assessor’s utterances are true evaluated at their own contexts of assessment. Uttering BLAZER is warranted because BLAZER is true evaluated at your context of assessment, while it “makes sense for me” to utter EXPLODER because it is true evaluated at mine. Finally, his view explains how the two disagree by positing a semantically invariant proposition, that you ought to bet on Blue Blazer, which is affirmed by your assertion of BLAZER and denied by my assertion of EXPLODER (343-344).

What should the contextualist say here? Notice first that the case is quite sketchy. Some ways of filling it out contextualism can easily explain. Here’s one such case: Imagine as before, I am eavesdropping on you behind some bushes. Before you utter BLAZER, I hear you say,

(WIN) Let’s see; Blue Blazer has always won in the past. So, Blue Blazer will win.

Here it’s natural to hear BLAZER as expressing an objective ‘ought’, that given the circumstances, you ought to bet on Blue Blazer. If that’s so, and I know that you are mistaken about what the circumstances are, I’m in a position to deny the very proposition the contextualist holds you have expressed. So long as your belief about what the circumstances are is reasonable, what you say with BLAZER is warranted, what I’ve said with EXPLODER is warranted, and our assertions express disagreement with one another. The availability of this way of filling out MacFarlane’s bare case means that one possible explanation for our judgment that BLAZER and EXPLODER are both warranted and that EXPLODER expresses disagreement with BLAZER is that we’re responding to the availability of just such a way of filling out the case.

Given that this case leaves open an objective reading, we think this isn’t the best example for pressing MacFarlane’s case. A better example would be an eavesdropper scenario in which the deontic modal gets a forced, information-sensitive reading, such as Parfit’s miners scenario or Jackson’s drug case.[[10]](#footnote-10) Given space constraints, here we can only sketch what we take to be the strongest version of such a case for relativism and a few contextualist strategies in response.

Notice first that MacFarlane’s Blue Blazer scenario leaves it open whether the original speaker can hear EXPLODER. If we consider an information-sensitive, eavesdropper scenario in which the eavesdropper either communicates the information the original speaker failed to have at the time of her utterance or the latter has some other means of acquiring it before action, then it is easy for a contextualist to suggest that the eavesdropper’s information is included in the domain-determining body of the original speaker’s utterance. In such a case, the eavesdropper’s denial will be a denial of the very proposition that the original speaker expressed, and so they are disagreeing.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The hardest case for the contextualist will be one in which the agent is unable to obtain the eavesdropper’s information prior to the time of her action. Here it’s important to distinguish two types of cases. One type of case would involve additional set up before the original utterance, of the kind provided by WIN in the above supplementation of MacFarlane’s bare case. For example, we might imagine an original speaker, Patient, who is deliberating about whether to have an operation, explicitly reasoning in terms of expected outcomes, and surrounded by medical experts. Suppose, on the basis of information she found on a prima facie reliable source on the Internet, she announces to the experts, “I ought to have the operation”. Imagine our eavesdropper is himself a medical expert who knows that Patient’s information is misleading. In fact, the expected outcomes in Patient’s case of having the operation are much bleaker than Patient believes. Here we clearly hear it as fine for the eavesdropper to say out of earshot, “That’s false. Patient shouldn’t have the operation.” But from the set up of such a case, it’s clear that Patient intends to be speaking to the question of what can be expected to have the best medical outcome, having the operation or not, given the information of medical experts. The eavesdropper’s information is expert information and so in the domain-determining body she plausibly intends. This can be so even if none of the experts in fact provide correction. So, the contextualist may plausibly hold that the eavesdropper is denying the very proposition that Patient expressed.

The second type of case is, like those found in much of the literature on information-sensitive deontic modals, a bare case in which we are given few clues about a speaker’s intentions. In such cases, it can be unclear which proposition, from those compatible with the clues provided, is the one a speaker intended to express. There are a number of contextualist-friendly explanations that can in principle be given for these cases.[[12]](#footnote-12) In order to know whether these cases are at the end of the day more relativist- than contextualist-friendly, though, we would need to know much more than we currently do about patterns in speakers’ reactions to them.

MacFarlane sees a second puzzle for flexible contextualist proposals.

[T]he contextualist could take the contextually relevant body of information to be the information the speaker now possesses plus any information she will acquire before having to act. To see why this won’t work, suppose that I am trying to decide whether to offer my advice or just let you waste your money on Blue Blazer. According to this account, if I decide not to offer my advice, then I should take your “ought” claim to be true… but if I do offer my advice, then I should think that what you said is incorrect. This is… a bizarre prediction (342-343).

Here, MacFarlane is floating one clear option for a contextualist. Another option would be a more flexible proposal which would allow that some contexts select the information of the agent at the time of action; others, the best available to her by some designated time; and still others, the information she should have by some designated time. But MacFarlane could make a similar point about this revised proposal. Suppose the only way for an agent to acquire a potential advisor’s information by the designated time is for Potential Advisor to give it to her. The question is: Is it really so bizarre to allow that Potential Advisor has the ability to make what Agent says either true or false? Consider a case just like MacFarlane’s Blue Blazer case, but one in which, instead of BLAZER, Agent says,

(BLAZER′) Given the information I’ll have by the time I place my bet, I ought to bet on Blue Blazer.

Here, in this case very like MacFarlane’s own, it is utterly unsurprising that Potential Advisor can make what Agent says true or false by choosing to share or withhold his information.

What about MacFarlane’s positive case for the claim that his flexible relativism fits with speakers’ reactions in the full range of cases? Consider first his discussion of an additional case.

Suppose Fatma is investigating a murder case. She has gathered a considerable amount of evidence pointing to the butler… and the gardener… has a credible alibi. We, however, have some evidence Fatma does not, and this evidence establishes conclusively that the gardener committed the murder and tried to frame the butler. Question: ought Fatma to believe that the gardener committed the murder? (356)

Here he offers two answers. First, he says, “in normal contexts of deliberation and advice, the relevant information state will be the information possessed by the assessor” (357). If the above is such a case, then we should conclude that Fatma ought to believe, against her evidence, that the gardener committed the murder. This seems counterintuitive; however, the flexibility of MacFarlane’s relativism makes room for a second response. He also says that when an assessor’s concern is whether an agent acted reasonably, the information relevant at her context of assessment “may shift to the agent’s information. That is what happens when we say things like, ‘Don’t beat yourself up over it. You believed then just what you ought to have believed, even though it turned out to be false’”. (357)

His discussion here raises a question about a type of case he does not consider. As background, first consider an extension of another of MacFarlane’s cases:

If you ought to administer the medicine and… you don’t administer the medicine, because you have been told it is poison and you want to help the patient, then you have an excuse for not doing what you ought to have done (356-7).

Imagine that we know that the medicine is not poison and that it will cure the patient. But imagine also that we know that Agent has no way of learning this prior to the time at which you must administer the medicine for it to be effective. We’ve seen that MacFarlane’s view predicts that in contexts in which we’re wondering whether someone has acted reasonably, it can be fine to say to them something like, ‘Too bad you didn’t know the medicine wasn’t poison. But you did as you ought; you shouldn’t have given Patient the medicine’.

Imagine an elaboration of this case. Professor is lecturing a group of medical students about cases in which the patient presents symptoms just like Patient’s and, indeed, is using Patient as her case study. Here, it seems fine for her to say about the doctor in that case,

(OUGHT) Doctor ought to have given Patient the medicine.

Imagine also that, a short time later that same day, Professor, who is on the hospital’s review board, attends their meeting reviewing hospital procedures in cases like Doctor’s. When Doctor’s case comes up for discussion, it seems fine for Professor to say,

(OUGHT NOT) Doctor acted reasonably; she ought not have given Patient the medicine.

We can easily imagine here that Professor has not changed her mind. She still believes as she did when giving her lecture. Is Professor disagreeing with or contradicting herself here, on MacFarlane’s view? Notice that the case would seem to have both of the hallmarks of so-called “Faultless Disagreement”, the type of disagreement eavesdropper cases were crafted to illustrate and which was intended to motivate the transition from contextualism to relativism.[[13]](#footnote-13) First, Faultlessness requires that each utterance conform to the “constitutive norms governing assertion”, which are “keyed to accuracy relative to the asserter’s… context of assessment” (134). That condition is met here. OUGHT NOT is true, evaluated in a context of assessment in which it was uttered. In that context, the reasonability of Doctor’s action was in question, making Doctor’s information relevant. In contrast, in the classroom, the reasonability of Doctor’s action is not in question, its advisability is. So, the context of assessment in which OUGHT is uttered is one in which Professor’s information is relevant, making it true at that context. Second, OUGHT NOT and OUGHT meet the condition for disagreement, in MacFarlane’s sense. In that sense, disagreement is preclusion of joint accuracy; both cannot be accurate at any single context of assessment. At a context that makes the assessor’s information relevant, OUGHT is true, but OUGHT NOT is false, while at a context that makes the agent’s information relevant, OUGHT is false and OUGHT NOT is true. Indeed, since MacFarlane is an invariantist about the propositions expressed by “A ought to φ” and “A ought not to φ”, there will be no context of assessment at which OUGHT and OUGHT NOT or any other pairs of sentences with these forms, will both be true. This means that, given his own account of Faultless Disagreement, he is committed to holding that this case and others like it are cases of intrapersonal ‘disagreement’. But that doesn’t seem like the right thing to say. A person who asserts both OUGHT and OUGHT NOT need feel no conflict at all. In contrast, a suitably flexible contextualist theory can easily explain this. Since the contents expressed by OUGHT and OUGHT NOT are perfectly consistent, there is no intrapersonal disagreement.

**V. Schroeder’s Ambiguity Theory**

A central claim of Kratzer-style contextualism is that ‘ought’ always takes a proposition as one of its arguments, in addition to a modal base and a ranking. So in the sentence “It ought to be that it is raining”, ‘ought’ would take the proposition *it is raining* as an argument. The sentence “Mary ought to walk”, would have a similar structure, with ‘ought’ taking the proposition *Mary walks* as an argument.

But “Mary ought to walk” also suggests an alternative structure. Perhaps ‘ought’ need not always take a proposition as an argument; perhaps it sometimes expresses a relation between an agent and an action. On this alternative view, the form of “Mary ought to walk” could be *ought(A, ϕ*), rather than *ought(p)*.

Mark Schroeder (2011) defends this alternative view.[[14]](#footnote-14) On his version of the view, there is a crucial deliberative sense of ‘ought’ that relates an agent and an action. Schroeder grants that there are other senses of ‘ought’ (epistemic and evaluative, for example) that do function as propositional operators. But ‘ought’ has its deliberative sense if and only if it expresses a relation between an agent and an action. Thus on Schroeder’s view, the sentence “Mary ought to walk” is ambiguous between an evaluative reading, which would have the form *oughteval(Mary walks)*, and a deliberative reading, which would have the form *oughtdelib(Mary, to walk)*.

We consider four of Schroeder’s arguments for the claim that the deliberative ‘ought’ expresses a relation between an agent and an action. As above, our focus is on whether these arguments pose challenges to Kratzer-style contextualism. We first explain Schroeder’s distinction between the deliberative and evaluative senses of ‘ought’.

Schroeder characterizes the evaluative sense of ‘ought’ as the one that says, “roughly, that were things ideal, some proposition would be the case” (1). His motivating example involves Larry, a deserving man who has suffered numerous recent misfortunes. One might say “Larry ought to win the lottery” to express the idea that, ideally, Larry would come into some money to help him cope. This, however, is not meant as a deliberative claim about what Larry ought to do. It does not imply that Larry should act in such a way that he will win, or try to win, the lottery. For example, it does not imply that Larry should purchase lottery tickets.

Schroeder offers five “hallmarks” to characterize the deliberative sense of ‘ought’, holding that each occurs in all and only those cases where ‘ought’ has its deliberative sense (17). First, the deliberative sense “matters directly for advice”. In offering advice, one may take into account the evaluative question of how things ideally ought to be, but this is distinct from what advice it is right to offer, as illustrated by the case of Larry. Second, the deliberative sense “is the right kind of thing to close deliberation”. As Schroeder says, “knowing what one ought to do, in the deliberative sense, settles the question of what to do”. Third, one is “accountable” for doing what one ought to do in the deliberative sense; that one does not do what one deliberatively ought to do is a “legitimate criticism”. Fourth, it must be in one’s “power to do” what one deliberatively ought to do. Fifth, the deliberative sense is “more closelyconnected” to the notion of obligation, though not perfectly so, since, for example, it may be that one deliberatively ought to do something, even though one is not obligated to do it (9-10). The details of these hallmarks are controversial, but we take them to draw a reasonably clear distinction between deliberative and evaluative ‘ought’s.

The first of Schroeder’s arguments we consider is an argument against one version of the view that ‘ought’ always expresses a propositional operator. This version of the view denies that distinct readings, senses, or flavors of ‘ought’ are needed to explain the distinction between deliberative and evaluative ‘ought’ statements. Instead, the very same reading, sense, or flavor of ‘ought’ figures in all deliberative and evaluative ‘ought’ statements. On this view, as long as we are within the deliberative/evaluative domain, “Mary ought to walk” is equivalent to “It ought to be that Mary walks”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Schroeder objects to this view on the basis of the following example, due to Broome:

It is Father Murphy’s job to baptize everyone in the parish who needs to be baptized, Colleen is in the parish and needs to be baptized, but it is in Colleen’s interests to be baptized by the holiest priest she can find—who is Father O’Grady, not Father Murphy. (20)

The objection proceeds as follows. Both of the following claims seem plausible: (i) Father Murphy ought to baptize Colleen, and (ii) Colleen ought to see to it that she is not baptized by Father Murphy (but rather by Father O’Grady). Translating these into their supposed equivalents, we get: (i) It ought to be that Father Murphy baptizes Colleen, and (ii) It ought to be that Colleen sees to it that she is not baptized by Father Murphy. But now we are committed to saying that inconsistent things evaluatively ought to be the case. This, Schroeder says, is implausible: we should not expect there to be conflicts in the evaluative ‘ought’.

A contextualist view, though, can avoid this consequence while maintaining that ‘ought’ always expresses a propositional operator.[[16]](#footnote-16) The deliberative ‘ought’ statement “Father Murphy ought to baptize Colleen” will have the structure *oughtf,g(Father Murphy baptizes Colleen)*, where the ranking *g* associated with *ought* ranks worlds on the basis of the deliberative appropriateness of Father Murphy’s actions. This might amount to ranking worlds by the extent to which Father Murphy’s actions are consistent with the proper exercise of his agency, or by how well Father Murphy complies with the reasons and obligations that apply to him. Similarly, the deliberative ‘ought’ statement “Colleen ought to see to it that she is not baptized by Father Murphy”, will involve a different value for the parameter *g*, one that ranks worlds on the basis of the appropriateness of *Colleen’s* actions. Statements about what evaluatively ought to be the case will involve yet another value for the parameter *g*, one that ranks worlds by how well they approach some impartial ideal. By distinguishing the different rankings involved in different uses of ‘ought’, a contextualist view can accept that agents may be deliberatively at odds with each other, while maintaining a single evaluative harmony.

A second argument of Schroeder’s picks up on the fact that views on which ‘ought’ is a propositional operator will tend to validate Principles of Inheritance. In particular, Schroeder is concerned with a version of Inheritance according to which “if B is a necessary consequence of A, and it ought to be that A, then it ought to be that B”, where the necessity invoked may be merely causal (20). He argues that the deliberative ‘ought’ does not obey this kind of principle in cases where one foresees, but does not intend, a consequence of one’s actions. Consider the case of Strategic Bomber, who can drop a bomb that would decimate an ammunition factory, although this would unavoidably also decimate a nearby elementary school. Suppose circumstances are such that Strategic Bomber ought, in the deliberative sense, to decimate the factory. Even so, Schroeder finds it implausible that Strategic Bomber ought, in the deliberative sense, to decimate the school.

One reason Schroeder offers appeals to the first hallmark of the deliberative ‘ought’, which is that the deliberative ‘ought’ “matters directly for advice” (9). He says, since “you should not *advise* Strategic Bomber to decimate the elementary school”, it cannot be that Strategic Bomber deliberatively ought to decimate the elementary school (21). It is true that one generally should not advise Strategic Bomber to decimate the school. But this may be merely because this advice would be misleading if an unforeseen opportunity to decimate the factory without decimating the school were to arise. If it is clear that this possibility is being put aside, the advice seems to be good:

Strategic Bomber: I am having doubts about my mission tomorrow. If I decimate the factory, I will thereby decimate the school. Ought I really decimate the school?

Advisor: Yes. Under these unusual circumstances, you ought to decimate the school.

Schroeder might object that the advice here cannot be deliberative, since Strategic Bomber “shouldn’t reason toward an intention” to decimate the school in his deliberations (21). While it is true that Strategic Bomber shouldn’t reason toward this intention, that does not preclude the advice from being deliberative. One who accepts the advice appears to be committed to ruling out any course of action, of those actually available, that does not involve decimating the school. In this way, accepting the advice can settle the question of what to do. In any case, it is plausible that there is a general disconnect between deliberative ‘ought’s and what intentions one should reason towards. One ought, in the deliberative sense, not steal one’s colleague’s lunch, but most of us will comply with this without forming an intention to comply with it, and so plausibly we shouldn’t bother reasoning toward such an intention.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Schroeder’s third argument makes a positive case for the claim that the deliberative ‘ought’ has an argument-place for an agent. Schroeder argues that certain ‘ought’ sentences cannot express deliberative readings at all, or can only do so for certain agents. If the evaluative and deliberative ‘ought’s were both propositional operators, with no argument-place for an agent, this would be puzzling. But if, unlike the evaluative ‘ought’, the deliberative ‘ought’ requires an argument-place for an agent, this pattern would be well-explained. The ‘ought’ sentences that cannot express deliberative readings, or that can only do so for certain agents, would be precisely those that do not make the relevant agent available to fill the argument-place required by the deliberative ‘ought’.

Schroeder considers four types of ‘ought’ sentences in support of this: (i) passive sentences, like “Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill”, (ii) sentences with expletive (non-referring) subjects, like “It ought to be assumed that he is capable”, (iii) sentences with idiomatic subjects, like “The cat ought to get his tongue”, and (iv) sentences with non-agential subjects, like “The meeting ought to start at noon”. All four types of sentences, Schroeder holds, can be understood evaluatively, as making claims about how things ideally would be. But types (ii) – (iv) cannot be read deliberatively. And if type (i) can be read deliberatively at all, it cannot be read as deliberative for the agent in the ‘by’-clause. These patterns would be well-explained if the deliberative reading, unlike the evaluative reading, has an argument-place for an agent.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We do not share Schroeder’s intuition that these types of sentences cannot carry deliberative readings.[[19]](#footnote-19) Consider passive sentences, as in (i). Suppose there are three children in a family: Lucy, Bill, and Mary. Lucy is the youngest, and each night, either Bill or Mary is obligated to kiss her goodnight. Bill and Mary are arguing about which one of them has this responsibility tonight. Finally, the two of them approach their father for an answer:

(i) Mary: Which one of us ought to kiss Lucy?

Father: Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill.

Father’s answer is most naturally read as a deliberative use of ‘ought’. It seems directly responsive to the deliberative question that Bill and Mary face. Schroeder might interpret Father’s answer as an evaluative ‘ought’, indirectly relevant to the deliberative question. But we do not hear Father as being committed to anything beyond the deliberative claim about who ought to kiss Lucy. For example, Father could consistently have answered, “In an ideal world, Mary would kiss Lucy, but as things are, Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill”.

Other cases suggest deliberative readings are possible for sentence types (ii) – (iv):

(ii) Driving Instructor: If a car is moving erratically, it ought to be assumed that the driver is drunk.

(iii) New Hire: What should I say at the meeting?

Mentor: The cat ought to get your tongue.

(iv) Daughter: You may lie when it’s in your interest to do so.

Mother: That’s wrong! You ought not lie unless it’s necessary for the good of all concerned.

Grandmother: Call me old-fashioned, but in my opinion, lies ought *never* be told.

The utterances of Instructor, Mentor, and Grandmother appear to have all the hallmarks of the deliberative ‘ought’. They appear to matter directly to advice. If accepted, they appear to settle the question of what to do. They have some connection to obligation, and we would expect criticism for non-compliance. We may also imagine that the speakers are disposed to withdraw or qualify their ‘ought’ claims if they ever come to think that compliance is impossible.

Sentence types that de-emphasize agents, as all of Schroeder’s types tend to do, also tend not to receive deliberative readings. On a Kratzer-style contextualism, this would not be surprising, since emphasis on an agent can bring to salience a ranking of worlds in terms of how well that agent acts.[[20]](#footnote-20) But the main issue here turns on the *possibility* of the deliberative readings of sentence types (i) – (iv). If these readings are possible, as we believe they are, then these sentences do not support positing a distinctive argument structure for the deliberative ‘ought’.

Schroeder offers a fourth argument, intended to show that the deliberative ‘ought’ has an argument-place for an action, rather than for a proposition. This argument is directed, at least in the first instance, against views that already accept Schroeder’s contention that the deliberative ‘ought’ has an argument-place for an agent.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The Basic Problem with the propositional view is that it is too powerful… 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. (24)

Insofar as Kratzer-style contextualism holds that the deliberative ‘ought’ is a propositional operator, it may appear to be susceptible to a version of this objection. But we believe it is not. Schroeder emphasizes that there is little sense to be made of sentences like “You ought that I exercise daily” (33). But similar sentences with other propositional operators are also anomalous. For example, ‘seems’ is typically taken to be a propositional operator, and “You seem that I exercise daily” is anomalous. A view on which ‘ought’ is a propositional operator is not committed to making any more sense of “You ought that I exercise daily” than “You seem that I exercise daily”.

But there is another way in which Schroeder’s objection could apply. We suggested above that Kratzer-style contextualism could account for the deliberative ‘ought’ by tying the ranking *g* to a salient agent. Such a view would be expected to allow this deliberative ‘ought’ to take propositions *not* involving the salient agent. Thus if *f′* and *g′* are the relevant parameter values for a given deliberative use of ‘ought’, with Mary as the salient agent, the proposition *oughtf′,g′(Bill exercises daily)* would be predicted to make sense. This proposition, though, simply says that in all the worlds in the modal background given by *f′* that rank highest according to, say, how well Mary fulfills her responsibilities as an agent, Bill exercises daily. This proposition does make sense. What would be implausible would be to go on to claim that this proposition is expressed by “Mary ought that Bill exercise daily”.

**VI. Normative Reasons**

We have focused thus far on determining the proper semantics for deontic modal expressions. We have argued that Kratzer-style contextualism can meet the various challenges that have been raised against it and that rival views face challenges of their own. We now turn to the implications of Kratzer-style contextualism for the relationship between true deontic ‘ought’ statements and normative reasons. It turns out that this approach imposes no general relationship between them. Instead, particular true deontic ‘ought’ statements may relate, and fail to relate, in various ways to normative reasons. We give four possibilities below.

First, a true deontic ‘ought’ statement may issue a recommendation that an agent has no normative reason to comply with. Consider Foot’s (1972) example of the club secretary who informs a member of the club rules by instructing him: “You ought not bring ladies into the smoking room” (308). With the right choices for *f* and *g*, this sentence comes out true. It may be that (i) the modal background given by *f* consists of worlds available to the agent through his actions, including some in which he complies with the club rules and some in which he does not, and (ii) the ranking given by *g* ranks worlds by whether the agent complies with the club rules, with all those where he complies being tied for best, and all those where he does not comply being tied for worst. These choices make the sentence true, since it is true that in all the *g*-best worlds available from *f*, the agent does not bring ladies into the smoking room. Even so, nothing about the situation requires that the agent have any normative reason not to bring ladies into the smoking room. The ‘ought’ statement ranks worlds on the basis of club rules that need not have any normative force.

Second, true deontic ‘ought’ statements may systematically, but contingently, line up with the agent’s reasons. Suppose now that the club follows legitimate procedures that *do* give the agent some reason to comply with its rules: the fact that an action complies with the club rules counts, to some extent, in favor of it. Using the above choices for *f* and *g*, if one *oughtf,g* to ϕ, then ϕ-ing complies with the club rules, and so the agent has some reason to ϕ. Thus there is a systematic connection between these ‘ought’ statements and the agent’s reasons. The connection, however, is contingent. In a circumstance where the club’s procedures were not legitimate, these ‘ought’ statements, with the very same values of *f* and *g*, could be true without the agent having any reason to comply.

Third, there may be a necessary connection between the truth of a particular deontic ‘ought’ statement and a claim about reasons. Suppose it is a necessary truth that agents never have sufficient reason to contravene the requirements of morality. Consider an ‘ought’ statement with *f* and *g* chosen so that (i) the modal background given by *f* consists of worlds available to the agent through his actions, including some in which he complies with morality and some in which he does not, and (ii) the ranking given by *g* ranks worlds by whether the agent complies with morality, with all those where he complies being tied for best, and all those where he does not comply being tied for worst. With these choices for *f* and *g*, a statement “S ought not to ϕ” is true only if S would contravene morality in ϕ-ing. If the above supposition is correct, then necessarily, if the statement is true, the agent does not have sufficient reason to ϕ.

Fourth, a particular deontic ‘ought’ statement may, in virtue of meaning alone, entail a claim about reasons. Suppose that it is not only necessarily true, but also true in virtue of meaning alone, that agents never have sufficient reason to contravene the requirements of morality. This could be so if the correct conceptual analysis of moral requirements identifies them as a type of requirement that one never has sufficient reason to contravene. Then ‘ought’ statements with the above choices for *f* and *g* would not only necessitate but also analytically entail claims about reasons.

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1. For the canonical statement of such views, see Kratzer (1977), (1981), (1991a), and (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kratzer (1991a). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kratzer (1991b). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This assumption is controversial. For reasons to think the covert modal remains and takes scope over the overt one, see von Fintel and Iatridou (ms). Of course, if von Fintel and Iatridou are right, it is much less clear that Kratzer’s semantics for modals and indicative conditionals validates ‘if p, ought p’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Finlay and Snedegar (forthcoming) provide an example of a contrastivist view fully representable in a Kratzer-style framework. For an example of a contrastivist view not representable in such a framework, see Jackson (1985) and Jackson and Pargetter (1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, in the case of Professor Procrastinate, he allows that the ranking of the options is “accept and write > do not accept > benchmark > accept without writing” (541). Here “do not accept” is a suboptimal option above the benchmark. (In his footnote 23, however, he discusses a variant of his view that does not have this feature. We discuss that variant below.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For some reasons to doubt the force of Cariani’s arguments against a pragmatic strategy, see von Fintel (ms). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See MacFarlane (forthcoming), ch. 11; Kolodny and MacFarlane (2010) and (ms). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This characterization of MacFarlane’s view is rough. For expository purposes, we overlook aspects of his more complex view not at issue in the discussion here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jackson (1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For details on one way to make that case, see Dowell (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a few such strategies applied to parallel cases involving epistemic modals (SNAIL and TOTAL IGNORANCE), see Dowell (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. MacFarlane (forthcoming), ch. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Earlier defenders include von Wright (1951), Harman (1973), and Geach (1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Chisholm (1964) for this view. Chisholm would deal with the case of Larry by distinguishing between “Larry ought to win the lottery”, which would be true, and “Larry ought to bring it about that Larry wins the lottery”, which would be false. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Schroeder holds that the “most straightforward” reading of Kratzer (1977) and (1981) rules this out, by limiting us to a single parameter value for *g* to account for all deliberative and evaluative ‘ought’ sentences (2). Those articles do not specifically address the question, but given that they emphasize the wide variation in parameter values, we find this reading unmotivated. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A more precise view of the rational link between deliberative ‘ought’s and intentions is given by the requirement of *Krasia* in Broome (2006), which holds, “Rationality requires of *N* that, if *N* believes she ought to *F*, and if *N* believes she will *F* only if she intends to *F*, then *N* intends to *F*” (183). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Radford (2009) for more on these syntactic patterns and what they would show about the argument structure of a verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Chrisman (2012) and Finlay and Snedegar (forthcoming) also do not share Schroeder’s intuition on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Finlay and Snedegar (forthcoming) offer a more detailed pragmatic explanation of why certain sentence types tend to receive evaluative readings. Their explanation proceeds in a contrastivist framework, but parallel strategies are available to other contextualist views. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schroeder cites Broome (1999) and Wedgwood (2006, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)