

# Moral Contextualism and the Problem of Triviality

(This is a postprint of the article with bad formatting. Footnotes are in red, often found in the middle of the page.)

*Abstract* Moral contextualism is the view that claims like ‘A ought to X’ are implicitly relative to some (contextually variable) standard. This leads to a problem: what are fundamental moral claims like ‘You ought to maximize happiness’ relative to? If this claim is relative to a utilitarian standard, then its truth conditions are trivial: ‘Relative to utilitarianism, you ought to maximize happiness’. But it certainly doesn’t seem trivial that you ought to maximize happiness (utilitarianism is a highly controversial position). Some people believe this problem is a reason to prefer a realist or error theoretic semantics of morals. I argue two things: first, that plausible versions of all these theories are afflicted by the problem equally, and second, that any solution available to the realist and error theorist is also available to the contextualist. So the problem of triviality does not favour noncontextualist views of moral language.

## 1 Moral Contextualism

Contextualists about moral language believe that moral statements are implicitly relative to standards or ends. Indexical contextualists think the relativization is semantic in the sense that standards (ends etc.) are involved in the meaning of a moral statement.<sup>1</sup> This is because words like ‘ought’ and ‘wrong’ would behave like indexical expressions such as ‘I’ and ‘now’. The contribution of these words to the proposition expressed varies with context.

<sup>1</sup>There are also forms of nonindexical contextualism, described with respect to predicates like ‘is tall’ in MacFarlane (2005). Both indexical and nonindexical contextualists relativize some relevant item to the speaker’s perspective (or that of a group to which the speaker belongs), whereas relativists do it to a judge or assessor. See MacFarlane (2007) for an accessible presentation of a relativist view about judgements of taste.

Most moral contextualists believe that moral terms introduce standards or ends into the proposition and that the relevant standards can vary with speakers.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I will take ‘contextualism’ to refer to the indexical variety.

Contextualism is distinct from relativism in that contextualists believe that moral propositions are true or false simpliciter, whereas relativists believe that moral statements have truth values only relative to an assessor or judge.<sup>3</sup> This latter idea allows that speakers with different moral standards could express the same propositions.<sup>4</sup> But contextualists are committed to the idea that the speaker’s standards are part of the meaning of a moral statement. According to them, ‘A ought to X’ roughly means the following: ‘Relative to standard S, A ought to X’.

The idea that the relevant standards (can) vary with speakers leads to the familiar problem of disagreement, but I am interested in the claim that moral propositions involve a relation to standards.<sup>5</sup> This leads to what I shall call the problem of triviality. The problem pertains to statements about our most fundamental moral obligations (or permissions).<sup>6</sup> (Fundamental) here

means that they cannot be derived from other (deeper) moral principles. They form the moral bedrock. The problem can be illustrated as follows.

Mill believes that the most fundamental moral obligation is to maximize happiness. Now suppose he says:

(1) You ought to maximize happiness.

To what standard is this statement relative? If Mill's most fundamental moral commitment is utilitarianism, it is hard to see how it could be relative to anything other than utilitarianism. But then (1) should mean:

(1\*) Relative to utilitarianism, A ought to maximize happiness.

But (1\*) is trivial! Utilitarianism is the doctrine that tells you to maximize happiness. Of course you ought to maximize happiness relative to a standard that tells you to maximize happiness!<sup>7</sup> The problem is that fundamental moral claims like (1) do not seem trivial. Take, for example, Jonas Olson:

<sup>2</sup> Examples are Harman (1975), Wong (1984), Price (2008), Finlay (2009) and Björnsson and Finlay (2010). Copp (1995) thinks they vary with societies. Dreier (1990) thinks that moral statements are relativized to the speaker's motivational states.

<sup>3</sup> Relativism about moral language is defended in Kolodny and MacFarlane (2010) and for discourse about taste by MacFarlane (2007). Max Kölbel (2002) also defends a form of relativism about certain kinds of evaluative language.

<sup>4</sup> Thereby avoiding the problem of disagreement. However, Francén (2010) argues that relativists cannot secure deep disagreement. For an argument that relativists cannot keep standards out of normative propositions, see Daan Evers (unpublished) *Relativism and Normativity*.

<sup>5</sup> For some recent discussion of the problem of disagreement, see MacFarlane (2007), Brogaard (2008), López de Sa (2008) and Björnsson and Finlay (2010).

<sup>6</sup> I use 'obligation' in a loose sense, comprising whatever is expressed by 'ought' and 'must' claims. I take it that 'ought' is in some sense weaker than 'must'.

<sup>7</sup> Another problem that may occur to you is the following. If contextualism is a claim about the meaning of 'ought' and other terms, then it is not very illuminating to say that 'ought' statements are relative to standards which themselves involve the concept of ought (as I have done in (1\*)). But I did this only for convenience. Although utilitarianism is commonly formulated using 'ought', we can imagine (1) to be relativized to the imperative 'Maximize happiness!' instead of the claim that one ought to do this (and there are other options). That way, a contextualist account of 'ought' can be informative.

'Many moral philosophers, as well as many ordinary speakers, believe their fundamental moral claims are informative, often unobviously true, and perhaps even highly controversial. But the [contextualist] approach implies that these beliefs [...] are false.' (2010. pp. 75–76)<sup>8</sup>

(1\*) is, after all, pretty obvious and hardly controversial.

For Olson, the problem of triviality is one reason to prefer an error theory of moral

language. So he clearly believes that it avoids this problem. But I think this is not obvious. It is also natural to think that realists avoid it. Realism can be defined as the view that morality is objective,

that what is right or wrong does not depend on variable standards, ends, rules or desires of human beings and/or institutions. Although realism is a metaphysical view about the nature of morality, it is usually paired with a semantics according to which moral statements are true in virtue of the objective moral facts.

In this paper, I argue for two claims: first, that the reason to think the problem afflicts contextualism (i.e. standard-relativity) equally applies to plausible realist and error theoretic views. Second, that the resources to solve the problem are equally available to contextualists, realists and error theorists. If so, then the problem does not count in favour of a noncontextualist semantics.

## 2 The Problem of Triviality

In this section I will distinguish the problem of triviality as clearly as I can from the problem of disagreement.

Many contextualists think that the correct way to relativize sincere moral statements is to the standards of the speaker. If they are mostly right about the standards that they hold, then many moral statements will be true. Suppose that John the vegetarian says:

(2) You ought not to have chicken.

If the truth conditions of John's statement involve a vegetarian standard, then it is true. But if

Sue's statement

(3) It's ok to have chicken

is relative to a nonvegetarian standard, then her statement is true as well. This leads to the problem of disagreement. The problem here is that Sue's statement seems to contradict John's (they seem to disagree). But if the contextualist is right, then this isn't really so, since their respective statements are about the requirements of different standards.

The problem of triviality is the problem that fundamental moral statements are trivial. 'Trivial' here means more than 'necessarily true'. Necessary truth is not a problem, since few would object to the claim that if arbitrary torture is wrong, then it is necessarily wrong.<sup>9</sup> The

<sup>8</sup> Olson wields this as an objection to Stephen Finlay's (2009) end-relational view of moral language in particular, but I think the problem is quite general for contextualist views. It should be noted that the problem of triviality is not the main focus of Olson's paper, which is primarily concerned with a defence of the error theory.

<sup>9</sup> Given this assumption, it is also not problematic that all moral statements are necessarily true in a standard-relative framework (an objection raised by Judith Thomson in Harman and Thomson 1996). If it is necessary that arbitrary torture is wrong, then it is necessary that if something is a case of arbitrary torture, it is wrong. This is not the same as saying that it is necessary that some act is a case of arbitrary torture. But a standard-relative account does not imply that all actions have their right- or wrong-making properties necessarily.

problem of triviality is the problem that fundamental moral truths are obvious and uninteresting. It is an objection to the idea that fundamental moral claims like 'You ought to maximize happiness' are obvious, uninformative truths. Utilitarianism is, after all, highly controversial. But it is not controversial that you ought to maximize happiness relative to/in light of/given utilitarianism.<sup>10</sup>

The problem of triviality pertains only to fundamental (or high-level) moral statements, not particular ones. It needn't be obvious what moral standards entail with respect to particular acts.

The reason why this is often unobvious is that the facts can be unclear. Are the consequences really as dire as they seem? What is the content of people's intentions? This may be hard to establish. But it is obvious that a utilitarian standard requires the maximization of happiness (no matter what the facts are like).

Strictly speaking, the problem referred to by Olson is distinct from the problem as I put it (his problem is also discussed by Brogaard 2008). When Olson talks about 'fundamental' moral claims, he means claims about the correctness of moral standards like 'Standard S is the correct moral standard'. I, on the other hand, mean first-order moral claims like 'You ought to maximize happiness'. Insofar as claims about the correctness of standards are also true or false in virtue of a relation to standards, then some of them have trivial truth conditions. So the problem of triviality may apply both to certain first-order moral claims and to statements about the correctness of moral standards.

If you like the idea that the semantics of statements about the correctness of moral standards is different from the semantics of first-order moral statements, then the problem of triviality in this form may not apply to contextualism.<sup>11</sup> But Olson argues that we should resist a disunified semantics. If he is right about this, and I am right that adequate realist and error theoretic views also involve relationality, then both (plausible versions of) contextualism, realism and error theory face the problem of triviality in either of its guises. In what follows, I focus on first-order moral claims, but I think it will be clear that my proposed solutions cover both versions of the problem.

I hope it is now reasonably clear what the problem of triviality amounts to. In the next Section, I will look at the semantics of modals in order to motivate my claim that the reason the problem arises for contextualism also applies to plausible realist and error theoretic views.<sup>12</sup>

### 3 The Semantics of Modal Auxiliary Verbs

It is uncontroversial that moral statements can be expressed by sentences like: (4) You must (= have to) not torture puppies.

<sup>10</sup> Notice that triviality in the sense of obviousness needn't always be a problem either. It seems pretty obvious that arbitrary torture is wrong, but it is not a requirement on an adequate semantics for this sentence that it is unobviously true. The problem of triviality is really a problem about the source of obviousness. Even though it may be obvious that arbitrary torture is wrong, it does not seem obvious in virtue of the quasi-tautological nature of the content of the sentence.

<sup>11</sup> This seems quite possible to me, as claims like 'Standard S is correct' do not involve any modal auxiliary verbs and have a completely different structure.

<sup>12</sup> An anonymous referee for this journal pointed out that many philosophers think there may be no non-circular justification for fundamental moral principles. For example, Mill wonders whether ethical principles admit of proof at all (2004, introduction). The referee thinks this probably means that few ethicists would consider the problem of triviality to be very troubling. However, this seems to me to conflate issues of justification with issues concerning the meaning of moral statements. It may be impossible to prove the validity of induction without presupposing it. But that does not mean that a statement describing an inductive principle is akin to a tautology, which is what the problem of triviality is all about. Fundamental moral claims do not seem to be akin to a tautology and very few ethicists make claims to this effect.

(5) You may keep the money.

(6) You ought to help the poor.<sup>13</sup>

These sentences contain the modal auxiliary verbs ‘must’, ‘have to’, ‘may’ and ‘ought’. Other examples are ‘need to’, ‘might’, ‘can’, ‘could’ and ‘should’. Many linguists and philosophers observe that most modal auxiliaries have both normative and nonnormative readings (with the possible exception of ‘needs to’).<sup>14</sup> Take:

(7) Edward has to go to his cell.

(8) Edward may go to his cell.

These can both be read as claims about what is ruled out/in by the evidence (epistemic) or as claims about what Edward is required/permitted to do (deontic). And there are further ambiguities. Within deontic readings, for example, we can distinguish between moral, prudential and legal ones (among many others). The fact that the same ambiguities are displayed by modals in many languages other than English is strong reason to suspect they are not accidental, like the ambiguity between ‘bank’ in the sense of river edge and ‘bank’ in the sense of financial institution.<sup>15</sup> In other words: there is probably a common core, not just between normative and nonnormative readings of the same modal, but also between different modals.

Angelika Kratzer has developed “the standard” account of this semantic core. According to Kratzer (1977), modals express a relation between a proposition and certain background assumptions. If you say that it must rain tomorrow, you mean that the evidence is not compatible with its being dry tomorrow. When you say that it might rain tomorrow, you mean that the evidence is compatible with its being dry tomorrow.

Different modal flavours are generated by varying the background assumptions (or modal base). Epistemic modals express relations between propositions and the evidence. Deontic modals express relations between propositions and certain standards. For example ‘You must return the money’ means that certain relevant standards are incompatible with keeping it. The difference between legal and moral ‘must’s can then be explained by varying the standards that figure in the background.

Kratzer’s idea explains how words like ‘must’ and ‘may’ can have the same meaning in moral and epistemic contexts: they always denote the same relation. Differences in modal flavours are due to (contextually determined) differences in the relation.

In Kratzer’s framework, ‘ought’ expresses a relation between a proposition and a modal base. It is controversial whether ‘ought’ is always propositional.<sup>16</sup> Angelika Kratzer (1977, 1981), Bernard Williams (1981), and Stephen Finlay (unpublished) *Confusion of Tongues: a Theory of Normativity*, believe there is only one propositional sense of ‘ought’, but others disagree. Peter Geach (1982) and Mark Schroeder (2011) allow an agential sense of ‘ought’ as well, in which it takes actions instead of propositions. But I don’t think this matters for my point. Even if there is an agential sense of ‘ought’, there is a difference between what you

<sup>13</sup> Of course, not all moral statements involve modal auxiliary verbs (or are equivalent in meaning to such statements). One can also express moral claims in terms of reasons or value. I discuss the relevance of these possibilities to the problem of triviality in Section 4.

<sup>14</sup> Examples are Kratzer (1977), Von Stechow and Iatridou (2008) and Finlay (2009, *Confusion of Tongues: a Theory of Normativity* (unpublished, available upon request at <http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~finlay/>).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g. Von Stechow and Iatridou (2008). The point is not contentious among linguists and drives Kratzer’s famous theory of modal discourse in (1977) and (1981).

<sup>16</sup> Although this discussion is often explicitly about ‘ought’, it is equally relevant to words like ‘must’ and

'may'. I take it that if 'ought' sometimes takes actions instead of propositions, the same is true of 'must' and 'may'.

legally ought<sub>AGENTIAL</sub> to do, etiquetically ought<sub>AGENTIAL</sub> to do, morally ought<sub>AGENTIAL</sub> to do, etc. So even if there is an agential sense of 'ought', it too is probably relative to (something like) a modal base.<sup>17</sup>

The take-home message is as follows: there is little hope for a theory according to which moral modals are completely unrelated to other modal language. For this would make it a massive coincidence that so many languages allow moral concepts to be expressed by the same words that also express nonmoral normative concepts (as well as nonnormative ones). A plausible semantics will explain why modals can be used in so many different ways without postulating an infinity of separate meanings. This raises the likelihood that they often denote a relation between a (variable) entity and (variable) background assumptions. Variations in the background assumptions can explain why deontic modals have different normative flavours (moral, prudential, legal, etc.).

#### 4 Moral Realism and the Problem of Triviality

Section 3 constitutes an argument for the idea that any plausible account of moral modals will treat them as relational terms. And it is very natural to think that moral statements (and normative statements more generally) are relational to standards. This does not by itself rule out moral realism. We can take realism to be the claim that there are uniquely correct, objective moral standards, and that moral statements are true or false in virtue of their relation to the objective moral standards (more on this below).<sup>18</sup> But this does, of course, raise the problem of triviality.

For suppose that utilitarianism is the content of the uniquely correct moral standards. If so, then 'You ought to maximize happiness' is relative to utilitarian standards. Since these require exactly what it's said you ought to do, why should this statement not be trivially true?

Of course, the exact way in which fundamental moral statements will seem trivial depends on the details of the semantics of modals. But so long as the idea of a background is retained relative to which moral statements are true, the problem is likely to arise.<sup>19</sup>

I will briefly illustrate this by means of three different takes on the semantics of modals. The first is Kratzer's own in (1981). According to it, what you ought to do is relative not just to a set of background assumptions, but also to a standard which orders the worlds compatible with it. More specifically, what you ought to do is what is the case in all possible worlds which that standard ranks the highest. Suppose this standard is utilitarianism. It will rank highest all those worlds in which you maximize happiness. So: 'You ought to maximize happiness' expresses the proposition that you maximize happiness in all those worlds which conform most to the standard of maximizing happiness. That seems fairly trivial. But even if

<sup>17</sup> John Broome (2004) argues that 'ought' means the same in expressions like 'morally ought' and 'prudentially ought' as when it occurs unqualified (for example in all-things-considered judgments). My remarks about cross-linguistic ambiguities between different readings of modals is consonant with and supports this idea. The ambiguities suggest not only that normative readings of 'ought' share a common semantic core with non-normative readings and other modal auxiliary verbs; they also suggest that 'ought' denotes the same relation when used in a moral or some other normative context (including all-things-considered judgments).

<sup>18</sup> My claim is not that moral realists usually think that moral statements are implicitly relative to (uniquely correct) standards. Rather, my claim is that a plausible version of realism will involve this kind of relativity.

<sup>19</sup> It should be borne in mind that when I say that the problem will arise (or that the realist ‘faces’ this problem), I don’t mean that the correct semantics for moral language will definitely make fundamental moral statements obvious or uninteresting (after all, I think there is a solution to the problem of triviality). What I mean is that the same considerations which make this problem seem pressing for contextualists apply to all plausible semantics.

you think it is not completely trivial, it is by no means as controversial as utilitarianism is among ethicists.

The second is Stephen Finlay’s (2009 and unpublished, *Confusion of Tongues: a Theory of Normativity*). According to Finlay, ‘A ought to X’ is implicitly relative to a background including ends, so it really means ‘A ought to X in order that E’. This in turn is interpreted in terms of probability. It means: ‘Given that E, it is most likely that A X-es.’ Now take (1) ‘You ought to maximize happiness’. If Mill’s most fundamental moral end is the maximization of happiness, it would mean: ‘Given that you maximize happiness, it’s most likely that you maximize happiness’. This is clearly trivial.

The third theory is that of Matthew Chrisman (unpublished), *On the Meaning of Ought*. According to him, ‘A ought to X’ means ‘A’s X-ing is recommended by system of standards S’, which in turn is interpreted as: ‘In all the worlds compatible with the background conditions, in all those worlds consistent with what the relevant normative standards recommend, A X-es’ (p. 14) Now suppose the relevant standards are utilitarianism. ‘You ought to maximize happiness’ then (roughly) means that you maximize happiness in all the worlds where you do what is recommended, namely to maximize happiness. That’s true, but no one will be shocked to hear it.

If even realists face the problem of triviality, then they cannot use it as an argument against a contextualist semantics of morals. But have I established this conclusion?

You may think that my reasoning depends too much on the choice of standards. Perhaps a utilitarian standard would create the problem of triviality for realists too. But why should the standard have such a content in the first place?

This objection should not be misconstrued. My argument does not depend on the example in the following sense: all first-order ethical theories provide high-level standards which can be used to illustrate my point. For example, a well-known principle of Kantian ethics tells us never to treat humanity merely as a means. This makes no difference to my point, since the proposition expressed by ‘You never treat humanity merely as a means in all those worlds which conform most to the standard of never treating humanity merely as a means’ is as trivial as the proposition expressed by ‘You maximize happiness in all those worlds which conform most to the standard of maximizing happiness’. Similar points could be made about various criteria of rightness proposed by virtue ethicists and contractualist accounts of wrongness.

So my point does not depend on any particular first-order ethical theory. But you may think that the standard needn’t reveal which ethical theory is correct in the first place. For example, the realist might say that the standard which figures in the modal base tells one to do that which is best supported by moral reasons, or that which the moral reasons favour. It is not trivial that you ought to maximize happiness in light of a standard that tells you to do what is best supported by moral reasons. Given this choice of standard, only the statement ‘You ought to do that which is best supported by moral reasons’ will have trivial truth conditions. But that does not seem bad. After all,

many philosophers believe there are conceptual links between statements involving 'ought' and statement about the balance of reasons.

However, I doubt that the standard which figures in the modal base could involve the notion of a reason. This presupposes that reasons are conceptually prior to notions like 'ought' and 'must', which is dubious.<sup>20</sup> Nor is this universally accepted by realists or error

<sup>20</sup> See also footnote 24.

theorists. For example, John Broome believes that reasons are facts which play a certain role in explaining why one ought to do something (2004). Similarly, Olson believes that reasons are 'facts that explain why some agent ought (pro tanto) to behave in certain ways, or why some form of behaviour would be (in)correct or (im)permissible' (footnote 7). I think such views are natural, since there is linguistic evidence suggesting that the notion of a reason is related to the notion of explanation (see Broome 2004 and especially Finlay (unpublished) *Confusion of Tongues: a Theory of Normativity*, chapter 5). So it makes sense to think that reasons play a role in explaining why one ought to do something, or why it is permissible or wrong. But if so, then the modal base of moral judgments cannot involve standards which involve the notion of a reason. For this would introduce a problematic circularity into the analysis of modals.

To see this, note that the realist cannot simply say that moral modals are relative to the moral facts or something like this. For (at least some) moral facts can be expressed by sentences with 'ought' and 'must' and 'may'. What is clear is that if standards are involved in the modal base of moral judgments, then they cannot be propositions containing concepts expressed by 'ought', 'must' and the like. For their semantics is itself explained in terms of a relation between a background and a proposition or an action. Such a story would be unexplanatory if it presupposed that their semantics was already understood.

Could the realist appeal to a standard which tells one to maximize value or something along these lines? Can the notion of value not be independent of that of a reason, ought and must? I admit that there is no obvious reason why the notion of value should not be independent of ought and related modals. But this suggestion reintroduces the problem of triviality, because the idea that one ought to maximize value is itself a substantive normative commitment (which is apparent from the fact that Kantians and virtue ethicists alike reject this claim).

Furthermore, if the realist can appeal to an independent notion of value, then the contextualist can do so too. Of course, their accounts of the nature of value will be different (more and less objectivist, respectively). But why should that matter? A standard involving the notion of value will remove the appearance of triviality from the truth conditions of fundamental moral statements (this same point holds if they can appeal to an independent notion of a reason). So either realists share the problem with contextualists, or this problem disappears for both of them.

Can the realist resist my conclusion by denying that moral statements are relative to standards in the first place?<sup>21</sup> This is of course possible without denying that modal auxiliary verbs are relativized to modal bases. It's just that these needn't involve anything like standards. This may give the realist an advantage over the contextualist with respect to triviality.

Notice, though, that one needn't mean anything in particular by 'standard' in order for the problem to arise. Finlay relativizes to ends, which are possible states of affairs, but his theory has the problem too.<sup>22</sup> Chrisman refuses to analyse the notion of a standard, but no matter

<sup>21</sup> Not that many realists deny their existence. Shafer-Landau (2003) even defines realism in terms of moral standards. According to him, ‘Realists believe that there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective’ (2003, p. 15). And I take it that any generalist (nonparticularist) is not opposed to them in principle. Robert Audi (2004) believes that there are self-evident basic moral principles. Although Audi is not committed to the idea that their self-evidence is due to their semantics, I suggest that he think so.

<sup>22</sup> From a normative perspective, there isn’t much reason to object to standards either. Suppose we interpret them as ends. This is flexible enough to allow any moral view that I can think of. Kantians believe that you are required to act in accordance with universalizable maxims. So they can think of moral judgments as relative to the end of acting in conformity with them. Aristotelians believe that what is morally right is what is conducive to (or constitutive of) human flourishing. They can index moral judgments to the end of promoting human flourishing.

what analysis you choose, the structure of his theory ensures that the problem will arise. In fact, any theory with the following features seems to encounter it:

- (a) Modals tell us something about the relation of an entity (proposition, act, etc.) to a background (or background plus ordering source).
- (b) The background of normative modals involves standards, ends, desires, rules, etc.
- (c) The relation of the entity to the background is relevant to the proposition expressed by a sentence with a modal auxiliary verb.<sup>23</sup>

If the realist wishes to deny any of these claims, then the burden is on her to explain how moral language works while respecting its relation to other modal discourse. For now, (a)–(c) have pretty good credentials.

It might be suggested that the background of moral statements includes nonmoral facts from which the correctness of moral standards can either be deduced or on which the moral facts depend. For example, if various moral truths followed from the fact that human beings have a certain essence, then the modal base of moral statements could include facts about our essence. It does not seem as if something like the problem of triviality would arise for such a view.

However, this would make ordinary moral statements curiously philosophical. No lay person could reasonably be aware of the fact that s/he is relativizing to essences (or whatever else philosophers think determine the moral facts). In response, one could say that it is rare for people to be able to articulate the modal base of any modal statement anyway. But if you take this line (if you embrace a certain amount of semantic blindness), it becomes unclear why the contextualist couldn’t equally appeal to it: fundamental moral claims don’t seem trivial because we are not conscious of the modal bases of our modal claims (I think this line is in fact highly plausible and will return to it in Section 6).

So I don’t see any obvious way for the realist to avoid the problem of triviality by denying that moral modal bases involve standards (or at least not in such a way that any advantage would remain against contextualism).

You might think the problem of triviality is greater for the contextualist than for the realist, since the former relativizes to the speaker’s moral standards. This means that there are more trivial fundamental moral truths than the realist allows. For the realist, only those fundamental moral claims which state the requirements of the uniquely correct moral standards are trivial. For the

contextualist, any moral claim which states the requirements of the standards to which it is relative will be trivial.

This is true, but the problem of triviality doesn't really depend on the idea that the standards are variable. Furthermore, the solutions to the problem that I give in Section 6 undermine the idea that it is important how many moral statements are trivially true.

## 5 Error Theories and the Problem of Triviality

I've argued that any plausible account of modals in moral contexts seems to face the problem of triviality. For this problem is due not to the variation in the reference to standards which contextualists allow, but rather to the claim that moral statements are relative to standards at all (whether variable or not). And this idea is plausible.

<sup>23</sup> I take it that relativists deny at least (c), though possibly all three. If so, I fail to see what proposition they believe is expressed by normative sentences. See Daan Evers (unpublished) *Relativism and Normativity*.

But remember that Olson thinks an error theory evades the problem. According to him, error theorists accept the following conceptual claim (also accepted by Mackie 1977 and Joyce 2001): Moral claims are or entail claims about categorical reasons.

But since they also accept the ontological claim that There are no categorical reasons in reality

Olson concludes that all first-order moral claims are false (2010, p. 62).

A categorical reason is defined as follows:

'A fact F is a categorical reason to  $\phi$  just in case F matters normatively irrespective of agents' desires, aims, or roles.' (Olson, p. 71)

Olson further takes reasons to be 'facts that explain why some agent ought (pro tanto) to behave in certain ways, or why some form of behaviour would be (in)correct or (im)permissible' (footnote 7).

<sup>24</sup> If reasons explain why some act would be (in)correct or (im)permissible, then what it amounts to for an act to be (in)correct can hardly be that there are conclusive reasons for or against it. For else reasons would be facts which explain why there are reasons (not) to do certain things, which seems problematically circular. So it seems better to say that an act is (in)correct in virtue of some standard. Reasons can then be facts which explain why some standard applies (requires or forbids something). But if this is what reasons are, then what makes them problematic? Once we have the standards, there will be facts which explain why they apply.

Olson would say that moral reasons are more than facts which explain why some standard applies: they also matter normatively irrespective of desires, aims or roles. But he needs such information to be entailed by moral claims, like 'X is incorrect'. If the incorrectness of an act is determined by its relation to standards, then it would be unclear how 'X is incorrect' could entail anything about reasons that matter absolutely, unless 'incorrect' itself meant some- thing like 'forbidden by standards that matter absolutely'.

So I think the error theorist should say that moral reasons are problematic in virtue of the standards whose application they explain. So I will say that moral error theorists accept

The truth of moral claims requires the existence of absolute<sup>25</sup> standards and

There are no absolute standards in reality.

From the combination of these claims, it does not follow that all first-order moral claims are false. But it does follow that no first-order moral claims are true. I think this is preferable, because the error theory is often described as the claim that moral language involves a false presupposition. In some cases of presupposition failure, the proposition expressed lacks a truth value.

<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that Olson defines a reason as a fact which explains why an act has a certain moral status. This is justified for reasons of linguistic uniformity. After all, we talk about reasons why the light is off, why I am late for work, as well as reasons why something would be good or bad, or ought to be done (whether morally or not). In all these cases, reasons seem to be facts. This makes it plausible that normative reasons are also facts: facts which explain why something is good or bad or why we ought to act a certain way (see Finlay (unpublished), *Confusion of Tongues: a Theory of Normativity*, chapter 5.) Similarly, reasons of uniformity suggest that the semantics of modals in moral contexts is not completely different from the semantics of modals in other normative contexts.

<sup>25</sup> I take 'absolute' here to mean that these standards matter normatively irrespective of desires, aims or roles. I think this is no more obscure than Olson's idea that moral reasons matter normatively irrespective of desires, aims or roles.

My rendition of Olson's error theory should make it plain why the problem of triviality arises for his view as well. On this theory, moral statements involving 'ought', 'must' and 'may' are claims about the requirements of absolute standards. This is preferable anyway, since it allows the error theorist to explain the relation between moral and nonmoral uses of modals. Now suppose the speaker believes the content of the absolute moral standards is utilitarianism. And suppose she says: 'You ought to maximize happiness.' From the speaker's perspective, what she says is that you ought to maximize happiness relative to the absolute utilitarian standard. That seems pretty trivial as well.

26

## 6 The Solution to the Problem of Triviality

So far, I've argued that if there is a problem of triviality for contextualism, then plausible versions of realism and the error theory face it too. But I also think there are some (fairly obvious) solutions. Let me first state the problem as I see it in two assumptions:

- . (i) If the semantics of morals is relational, then the truth conditions of fundamental moral claims are trivial.
- . (ii) But they don't seem trivial.

Some would (and have) draw(n) the conclusion that the semantics of morals is not relational. But I have argued against this. What I will do is offer an explanation of (ii) which is compatible with a relational semantics for fundamental moral claims.

The fact that the content of fundamental moral claims does not seem trivial may be due to the way the moral standards are introduced into the modal base. So far, I have been writing as if the standards are supplied in such a way that their content is immediately obvious, as in:

(9) Relative to utilitarian standards, you ought to maximize happiness.

But this needn't be the case. Take the following way of introducing standards:

(9\*) Relative to the most fundamental moral standards, you ought to maximize happiness.

It needn't be obvious that the most fundamental moral standards are utilitarian.

This solution can be adopted by contextualists, realists and error theorists alike. In order to allow that many moral statements can be true, contextualists will favour a paraphrase like (9\*), which is neutral about the metaphysical status of the most fundamental moral standards (they can either be objective or subjective). An error theorist will favour a paraphrase like:

(9\*\*) Relative to the absolute fundamental moral standards, you ought to maximize happiness.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> An anonymous referee for this journal wonders whether fictionalist versions of the error theory might evade the problem of triviality. Fictionalists believe that although moral statements involve expressions which refer to or presuppose non-existent entities, moral claims are not asserted by ordinary speakers (i.e. they are not made with the purpose of representing reality). Instead, they are made for various practical purposes, but this does not commit them to the existence of the relevant entities (see, e.g. Joyce 2001, chapter 7 or Kalderon 2005). However, it is obscure how this might prevent the problem of triviality, as this problem concerns the meaning of moral language. It does not seem to be the case that the meaning of fundamental moral claims involves something akin to a tautology. This problem is independent of the question whether ordinary speakers assert those claims or not.

<sup>27</sup> See Dowell J (unpublished) A Flexible Contextualist Account of 'Ought' for a similar suggestion about the way to formulate an absolutist moral semantics.

What realists favour will depend on whether they would like the semantics of morals to be neutral about the metaphysical status (absolute or otherwise) of moral standards.<sup>28</sup>

The idea that the standards are supplied by oblique description may help to explain why fundamental moral claims do not seem trivially true, even if there is a sense in which their truth conditions are trivial. The explanation would be that the standards are thought about (or presented to the subject) in such a way that their contents are not transparent. In other words: the cognitive significance of a sentence in which the content of a standard is described differs from the cognitive significance of a sentence in which it is not.<sup>29</sup>

This solution is neutral about the correct account of cognitive significance. Frege thought the cognitive significance of a sentence was a function of the senses of its constituent words. Since different words with the same reference could nonetheless have distinct senses, this explained why a rational person could simultaneously accept the sentence 'Hesperus is Hesperus', but reject 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' (Braun 2002).

The proposed solution to the problem of triviality does not require the existence of descriptive senses. Differences in cognitive significance may be due to something else, like different Kaplanian characters that determine the same Kaplanian contents (where 'character' is a function from a context to a referent). In that case, moral contextualists can say that the character of 'the utilitarian moral standards' is distinct from the character of 'the most fundamental moral standards'. All that the solution requires is that there is such a thing as differences in cognitive significance. This would suffice to explain why fundamental moral claims don't seem trivial to speakers, even if their truth conditions are.

Of course, we can reasonably doubt that such a sophisticated solution is required in the first place. If what I have argued in Section 3 is right, then it's very likely that modal auxiliaries are relational terms. But no ordinary speaker can be expected to be aware of this (that is why Kratzer's semantics is held in such high esteem). But if it's not clear to competent speakers that 'ought' statements are

relational, then they are not aware of the existence of a modal base at all. That by itself would be enough to explain why it does not seem to us as if our fundamental moral statements are trivial in any way. So the solution to the problem of triviality is overdetermined.

## 7 Conclusion

Since the most promising way of unifying modals treats them as terms expressing relations between entities and backgrounds, any view which allows the background to make a difference to the proposition expressed will (probably) face the problem of triviality. This means that it is not peculiar to contextualism. Plausible realist and error theoretic views face it equally. However, there are several solutions to the problem: first, the content of the fundamental moral standards needn't be apparent from the way in which the standards are introduced into the modal base. Second, the fact that modal terms are relational at all is not apparent to ordinary speakers in the first place. So the problem of triviality is not a good reason to prefer realist or error theoretic views of moral language over contextualist ones.

<sup>28</sup> Of course realists will need some kind of reference hook to ensure that everyone who uses moral vocabulary refers to the same moral standards.

<sup>29</sup> And the cognitive significance of either is different from that of a sentence in which the standard is not supplied by description at all, but in some other way.

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