Ethical Copula, Negation, and Responsibility Judgments

Prior's Contribution to the Philosophy of Normative Language

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Abstract Prior's arguments for and against seeing 'ought' as a copula and his considerations about normative negation are applied to the case of responsibility judgments. My thesis will be that responsibility judgments, even though often expressed by using the verb 'to be', are in fact normative judgments. This is shown by analyzing their negation, which parallels the behavior of ought negation.

Keywords Prior · ought · negation · responsibility

1 Introduction

This paper critically engages with one of Prior's contributions to ethics and the philosophy of normative language: the analysis of 'ought' in *The Ethical Copula* (1951), and applies some of his ideas to responsibility judgments.

This paper is split in *three* parts: *first*, in Sect. 2, I critically summarize Prior's arguments for and against seeing 'ought' as a copula. *Second*, in Sect. 3, I focus on his notes about 'ought' and negation. His seminal considerations proved of great importance for the contemporary metaethical debate; I put them to the test with a case study: that of responsibility judgments.

My thesis will be that responsibility judgments, even though often expressed by using the verb 'to be', are in fact normative judgments. This is shown by analyzing their negation, which parallels the behavior of ought negation (in Sect. 3).

This paper is theoretical in scope, and it is not concerned with historical matters. I will adopt a *synchronic*, rather than *diachronic*, perspective, and thus I will not be concerned with tracking the evolution of Prior's ideas on

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the topic, nor with how they did or did not influence others regarding this particular debate.

2 Prior on the Ethical Copula

Is 'ought' in any relevant respect similar to the copula?[1] Prior discusses this question, that — for his purposes — is equivalent to "is 'ought' an expression of a modality?" So, is it possible to speak of "an ethical copula"?

Yes and no. The description of 'ought' as a copula is "illuminating in some ways and misleading in others (p. 142)." Prior discusses *three* parallelisms between 'ought' and the copula, and *two* disanalogies.

The *first* parallelism of 'ought' with modalities is the behavior of the negation: "It is obligatory that I should not do X" is rather different from "It is not obligatory that I should do X". Here the fact that 'should' shows up in the scope of the obligation is a bit confusing, but Prior has nonetheless a point (see *infra* at Sect. 3.), since the negation of (English) modal verbs is syntactically different from the negation of non-modal verbs.

The *second* parallelism of 'ought' with modalities is their expression "*cum dicto* (with a modal adjective predicated of an inner dictum or proposition)" and "*sine dicto* (with a modal adverb modifying the copula — p. 141, 143)". In both more ancient and more modern parlance, this strikes me as the metaphysicians' and modal logicians' talk of *de re* and *de dicto* modality: the fact that (*de dicto*) "it is obligatory that someone should wash up (p. 143)" doesn't say that there is in fact (*de re*) a particular individual that should wash up.[2]

The *third* parallelism of 'ought' with modalities is in (at least) one of their patterns of implication: subalternation. An example is the fact that "A is not obliged to do B" is implied by "A is obliged not to do B" (p. 143-4).

But alongside parallelisms there are also some important differences. I will report *two*.

First, against the idea that 'ought' may be seen as copula stands the fact that, while "is-propositions" may be universal (every), particular (some) and singular (this), and modal propositions "apodictic [must be], problematic [may be], and assertoric [in fact is] (p. 145)" this does not seem the case with "ought-propositions": "there is no moral word, then, which is related to 'ought' as 'in fact' is related to the non-moral 'must be', or as 'this' is related to 'every' (p. 146)."

Second, against the idea that 'ought' may be seen as copula there is the question of iterated modalities. Prior writes that we can reiterate "existential" and alethic modalities, but "only acts can be obligatory: obligations themselves [...] cannot be obligatory—it cannot be obligatory that is should be obligatory

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[1] A convention on the use of quotation marks: quotation marks are simple (' ') *only* for terms used *in suppositione materiali*; quotation marks are double (" ") for all other uses: scare quotes, irony, etc. Here it is an example: 'When talking about "use", use 'use'.'

[2] Barcan schema dates back to 1946, but Prior's well-known discussion of it is — as far as I know — later than his [15].

that A should do X (p. 146)." (I believe this reasoning to be wrong, but this question lies beyond the scope of this paper.)

3 Prior on Normative Negation

Prior notes (p. 138) a parallelism between 'ought to' and 'is obliged'. While

(1) 'He ought to do X' is equivalent, Prior writes, to
(2) 'He is obliged to do X'.

First, it is not clear what kind of equivalence this would be: Synonymy, co-extensionality, co-intensionality? *Second*, this equivalence seems to suggest the further question of whether (deontic) normativity is best expressed as an operator or as a predicate.[3]

Although this sounds plausible, it can be criticized on the following basis: 'ought' is a *weak* modal (like 'should'), whereas 'obliged' and 'obligation' should correspond to *strong* modals, such as 'must' and 'have to'. Thus, while 'I ought to X, but I'm not obliged' is acceptable, '*I must X, but I'm not obliged' would be awkward, if not contradictory, exactly like '*I am obliged to X, but I'm not obliged'.

The equivalence between 'ought' and 'obliged' ceases when these sentences are negated.

(1n) 'He ought *not* to do X' is not the same as
(3) 'He is *not* obliged to do X', but rather to
(2n) 'He is obliged *not* to do X'

This is a known phenomenon and it is explained differently by linguists (the peculiar nature of Germanic modal verbs; neg raising, etc. — cf. [14], [12].) and philosophers (where it has to do with external and internal negation of an intensional operator).[4]

The negation of extensional contexts such as:

(4) The King of France is *not* bald
can be given two readings,[5] usually paraphrased as follows:[6]

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[3] On the modality *vs* predicate approach to necessity, see [10],[11]. Geach questioned the operator approach for deontic modality in [9].

[4] [16, §§31-2] noticed this with direct reference to deontic logic. It's possible that external negation in this flavor is non-classical. I thank Olivier Roy for discussion on this point. I don't know of any discussion of internal and external negation in hyperintensional contexts. In recent work ([6]) I have maintained that 'ought' creates *hyperintensional* contexts, not just intensional ones. By hyperintensional I mean anything finer than intensionality (defined either in terms of metaphysical or logical equivalence), ie. co-intensional expressions are not equivalent in ought contexts. The hyperintensionality of ought appear to require a stronger notion of equivalence for normative expressions, which I generically call co-hyperintensionality.

[5] Cf. [17]. As far as I am aware, Frege (for instance in [8]) did not notice this phenomenon.

[6] For instance by [12, §6].

(4a) INTERNAL: The King of France is *not*-bald (is *un*-bald);

(4b) EXTERNAL: It is *not* the case (true)[7] that the King of France is bald.

The former (4a) is usually read as an example of *internal* negation; whereas the latter (4b) is usually read as an example of *external* negation.[8]

In propositional logic for every "descriptive" sentence with a definite truth-value, internal negation and external negation are equivalent, that is, they both equally invert the logical value of a given sentence, or assign it its complement.[9]

So, for instance:

(5) Plato is blond

changes its truth-value both in (5a) and (5b), examples of internal negation and external negation, respectively:

(5a) INTERNAL: Plato is *not* blond;

(5b) EXTERNAL: It is *not* the case (true) that Plato is blond.

Provided some minimal conditions are met, (5)'s presuppositions (the existence of something like Plato, the fact it can be said to be bald, etc.) are shared by (5a) and (5b). Neither (5a) nor (5b) cancels (5)'s presuppositions.[10]

So while internal negation and external negation are equivalent in descriptive sentences, internal negation and external negation are not equivalent in normative sentences, as Prior notices.[11] The next section is devoted to put at use Prior's distinction between internal and external negation of "oughts".

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[7] 'True' was proposed by [13].

[8] [12, Ch. 6] questions the use of 'true' and underlines how *no* known natural language employs two distinct negative operators corresponding directly to internal and external negation, even if a given language employs two (or more) negative operators, for instance (former: *declarative* negation; latter: *emphatic* negation): Ancient Greek: 'ou' *vs.* 'mē'; Modern Greek: 'den' *vs.* 'me'; Hungarian: 'nem' *vs.* 'ne'; Latin: 'non' *vs.* 'nē'; Irish: 'nach' *vs.* 'gan'; Sanskrit: 'na' *vs.* 'mā'. There is another 'un-' in English which is not a negative operator, but it is analogous to German 'ent-' as in '*un*-fold', '*ent*-falten'. See Horn's interesting list of languages with distinct negative operators at p. 366.

[9] But *duplex negatio affirmat* only in classical logic and some natural languages, for instance contemporary standard English. Both in Old and Middle English, along with contemporary languages such as Italian, Portuguese and many others, *duplex negatio n e g a t*.

[10] This cancellability feature seems to distinguish presuppositions from Gricean implicatures. Cf. [3, §3]. For a cutting-hedge survey on the pragmatics/semantics debate on presuppositions, see [18]

[11] As a matter of fact this was known at least from Anselm of Canterbury. Cf. [1, p. 36] and for a translation and discussion of the difference between Anselm's *debere non peccare* [have not to sin] and *non debere peccare* [don't have to sin] cf. [7, Appendix A].

Negation and Responsibility Judgments

In this section, I apply Prior's results to judgments of responsibility, in order to evaluate an argument for the thesis that responsibility judgments are normative, and namely an argument "from negation".

I shall show that when one denies responsibility, what happens is (a) what happens when one denies normative statements; but (b) it is still to be proved this is the case *only* when normative entities are concerned.

Now, let's take a normative statement:

Internal negation $O(\neg w)$ (6): 'You ought not to pay your income tax!'

Note that (6) and its "positive"

(6a) You ought to pay your income tax

share a presupposition of normativity, that is, they both are binding, or command-transmitting, or whatever our metatheory tells us normativity is, provided some other conditions are met (pragmatic and otherwise, such non-reportative use and the like).

Now, (6a)'s external negation:[12]

External negation $\neg O(w)$ (7a) 'I do not accept that I ought to pay my income tax'/ (7b) 'I do not accept the command 'Pay your income tax''/ (7c) 'I don't care'.[13]

instead, rejects (cancels) the presupposition of normativity that both (6) and (6a) shared, that is, (7) tells us (6) is not normative (binding, command-transmitting, or whatever our metanormative theory says) anymore.[14]

For descriptive sentences it is *internal* negation that might change their truth-value (from truth to false and viceversa); viceversa, for normative (imperative, in this case) sentences, it is *external* negation that changes their normativity-value, by rejecting their presupposition of normativity.

Now, let's apply this test to responsibility. I do not provide a formal definition of what a judgment of responsibility is, but rather employ an intuitive and generic sentence like "(R) You are responsible for killing A". This is enough for my purpose here, provided some minimal conditions are met (felicitous assertion, non-reportative use, etc.)

Internal negation (8) "You are not responsible for killing A, because..."

vs.

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[12] External negation need not to be realized linguistically. It can also be realized metalinguistically. I discuss at length these concerns about various kinds of negation and their different uses in [7, Ch. 5].

[13] Of course I am aware these are only some possible paraphrases — there might be many more. The most important fact is that internal and external negation can be consistently kept separable.

[14] That external negation of a norm is not a norm anymore (roughly) is quite pacific a thesis among moral and legal philosophers (cf. [4, p. 151-2], [19, pp. 121-2], [20, pp. 138-9]), but contentious in deontic logic.

External negation (9) "It is not the case that you are responsible for killing A, because..."

Now, if (8) stands to (5a) as (9) stands to (5b), we can confidently conclude that (8) and (9) are statements analogous to (5a) and (5b), that is, non-normative.

Quite on the contrary, if (8) stands to (6) as (9) stands to (7), we can confidently conclude that (8) and (9) are statements analogous to (6) and (7), that is, broadly normative.

It turns out, unfortunately, that you cannot really tell if (8) — internal negation of responsibility — tells us something significant, for the very simple reason that its interpretation already requires an understanding of responsibility. If you think responsibility is an objective state-of-affairs, that can be somehow empirically ascertained, then you would interpret (R) as a descriptive statement, whose truth-value is to be checked against the world; and viceversa.

Therefore, let's turn to (9) to seek some clarification of the matter.

I take advantage of the paradigm excuse *vs.* justification developed in [2]. My hypothesis is that a statement such as (8) stands for a justification; while (9) stands for an excuse.

With a justification, I maintain, we remain in the domain of the normative: we accept A, and even add some *reasons* for it. The presupposition of normativity is kept.[15]

On the contrary, an excuse, in a way, suspends what was going on, makes "normativity freeze" because it refers to conditions other that the very act A, conditions that (by definition) rule out responsibility (duress, infancy, mental incapacity, maybe psychopathy for moral responsibility). The presupposition of normativity is canceled.

In the words of Austin:

[i]n the one defence [= justification], briefly, we accept responsibility but deny that it was bad: in the other [= excuse], we admit that it was bad but don't accept full, or even any, responsibility ([2]).

it is not quite fair or correct to say baldly "X did A". We may say it isn't fair just to say *X* did it; perhaps he was under somebody's influence, or was nudged. Or, it isn't fair to say baldly he *did* A; it may have been partly accidental, or an unintentional slip. Or, it isn't fair to say he did simply *A* — he was really doing something quite different and A was only incidental, or he was looking at the whole thing quite differently ([2, p.2]).

First, excuses are *denial* of responsibility because, in giving excuses, a person contests or opposes a previously ascribed responsibility, by rejecting

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[15] It's plausible that (normative) justifications are hyperintensional. This would nicely explain also the use of 'because' in giving justifications. I thank Paul McNamara for discussion on the point.

constitutive elements of the accusation: for instance, by denying having committed anything. He simply denies that the previous ascription of responsibility is sound.

Second, excuses are *rhetic* (and not thetic) negations (denials) of responsibility because they do not seek to cancel or nullify responsibility, since they assume that there is *no* responsibility whatsoever. Absence of responsibility is constitutive of excuses: if there were responsibility, they would not be excuses but — at most — justifications. Excuses do not presuppose responsibility, but only ascription of responsibility.[16]

Justifications, instead, are not at all negations of responsibility because justifications presuppose responsibility: justifications affirm responsibility, but deny it is responsibility for something bad. (A paradigmatic example seems to me "self defense": *a* admits to having killed *b*, but *b* was assaulting him with a knife, for instance.)

I suggested that

- (i) when we deny responsibility, we have (at least) two cases: internal negation (which stands for a justification) and external negation (standing for an excuse).
- (ii) internal negations of responsibility do not exit the domain of responsibility (they presuppose responsibility); whereas external negations do (they reject the presupposition of responsibility). But this was exactly what happened with Prior's ought sentences: internal negation keeps the sentence normative (it keeps the presupposition of normativity), whereas external negation rejects it (it cancels the presupposition of normativity).

If we suppose that this kind of negation is at work only with non-descriptive (and namely, normative statements), we can therefore conclude that

- (iii) since judgments denying responsibility are structurally akin to normative sentences, responsibility judgments are akin to ought sentences.[17]

Some caveats and limitations apply. *First*, I have not maintained that responsibility judgments can be reduced to ought sentences. This would require a full-fledged theory of responsibility. *Second*, I have implicitly assumed that ought-sentences are paradigmatically normative. This is debatable and depends on one's metanormative theory. In recent decades, in fact, there has been a noticeable shift from 'ought' and 'good' towards the 'reasons' as the basis of normative. *Third*, I have not shown that the opposite behavior of internal and external negation is the case only when normative sentences are negated, and therefore the argument is not conclusive at all. *Fourth*, linguistic evidence needs to be supported by relevant contextual information and a background theory.

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[16] As I noted with accusations, not all excuses are pled using a verb like 'to excuse' or Italian 'scusare'; in an analogous fashion, it is not only the use of 'to excuse' or 'scusare' that can make an excuse.

[17] The results of this section partially overlap with [5, Sect. 4].

The application of part of Prior's contributions to the analysis of responsibility judgments showed how syntactic features aren't enough for one philosophical thesis or another. The fact that responsibility judgments are usually realized as is-sentences but seem to exhibit features proper of ought-sentences warned us of the importance of context and pragmatics. This seems a lesson we can apply to other areas of normative inquiry.

4 Conclusion

In his *The Ethical Copula*, Prior made several contributions to the philosophy of normative language. In *general*, he discussed the possibility of seeing 'ought' as a copula, ie. whether deontic normativity is best thought of as a modality, rather than a predicate, thus opening the way to the metaphysical investigation of normativity. *Semantically*, he called our attention to the issue of synonymity and equivalence of normative expressions, which is now being under scrutiny as the possible hyperintensionality of ought contexts. *Syntactically*, some arguments he used to reject the thesis of seeing ought as a copula were about the negation of normative statements. In particular, he highlighted that internal and external negation of ought-statements are not equivalent. I have put his arguments on negation to use considering is-statements such as responsibility judgments and arguing that they are nonetheless normative, provided we assume a relevant context and a background theory.

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