

# Metaethical Contextualism Defended\*

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We defend a contextualist account of normative judgments as relativized both to (i) information and to (ii) standards or ends against recent objections that turn on practices of normative disagreement. Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane argue that information-relative contextualism cannot accommodate the connection between deliberation and advice. In response, we suggest that they misidentify the basic concerns of deliberating agents, which are not to settle the truth of particular propositions but to promote certain values. For pragmatic reasons, semantic assessments of normative claims sometimes are evaluations of propositions other than those asserted. Other writers have raised parallel objections to standard-relative contextualism, particularly about moral claims; we argue for a parallel solution.

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According to one form of relativism in ethics, people commonly mean and say different things in uttering the same “ought” sentences. *Metaethical contextualism* is the semantic doctrine that normative terms like “ought” are semantically incomplete, and have one or more open argument places that can be filled in different ways, with values supplied by the context of utterance. Recently, this kind of contextualism has been the target of a barrage of objections, paralleling similar objections pressed against analogous forms of contextualism about episte-

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mic modals like “might” and taste predicates like “tasty.”<sup>1</sup> These objections are updated forms of a venerable kind of argument based on a theory’s inability to satisfactorily account for moral disagreement.<sup>2</sup> More precisely, they turn on difficulties faced by semantically relativistic theories in accommodating the interrelation of normative claims and judgments made from different perspectives.

We believe that normative “ought” claims are doubly relative to context, being relativized both to (i) bodies of information and (ii) standards or ends.<sup>3</sup> On this view, every meaningful normative utterance of a sentence “A ought to  $\phi$ ” will express a proposition to the effect that A ought-relative-to-information-*i*-and-standard-*s* to  $\phi$ , for some *i* and *s* determined by the context of utterance. Disagreement-based objections have recently been pressed against both these claims of context relativity. Our aim in this essay is to show that these objections fail and that contextualism can accommodate disagreement. (We shall not attempt to address other kinds of objection to contextualism here.) In Section I we argue for a particular defense of contextualism about information relativity. In Section II we show how a similar strategy can be employed to defend contextualism about standard relativity. We expect that this kind of strategy can be generalized to defend

1. Contextualism about other kinds of terms is challenged in, for example, Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter Lasnik, “Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28 (2005): 643–86; Andy Egan, John Hawthorne, and Brian Weatherson, “Epistemic Modals in Context,” in *Contextualism in Philosophy*, ed. G. Preyer and P. Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131–68; Andy Egan, “Epistemic Modals, Relativism, and Assertion,” *Philosophical Studies* 133 (2007): 1–22; and John MacFarlane, “Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive,” in *Epistemic Modality*, ed. A. Egan and B. Weatherson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Contextualism about modals is orthodox in linguistics, following Angelika Kratzer, “The Notional Category of Modality,” in *Words, Worlds, and Contexts*, ed. H. J. Eikmeyer and H. Rieser (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981), 38–74. Metaethical contextualism is also defended against disagreement problems in Berit Brogaard, “Moral Contextualism and Moral Relativism,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2008): 385–409; Janice Dowell, “A Flexible Contextualist Account of ‘Ought’,” (unpublished manuscript, University of Nebraska–Lincoln); and other forms of contextualism are defended in, for example, Kai von Fintel and Anthony Gillies, “‘Might’ Made Right,” in Egan and Weatherson, *Epistemic Modality*; Janice Dowell, “Empirical Metaphysics: The Role of Intuitions about Possible Cases in Philosophy,” *Philosophical Studies* 140 (2008): 19–46; and Jonathan Schaffer, “Contextualism for Taste Claims and Epistemic Modals,” in Egan and Weatherson, *Epistemic Modality*.

2. This argument dates back at least to G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), chap. 3.

3. This claim doesn’t require that modals have separate argument places for each, as in Aaron Sloman, “‘Ought’ and ‘Better’,” *Mind* 79 (1970): 385–94; and Kratzer, “The Notional Category of Modality.” For one view on which a single argument place accommodates both kinds of relata, see Stephen Finlay, “Oughts and Ends,” *Philosophical Studies* 143 (2009): 315–40.

contextualist treatments of other kinds of terms, but here we focus on the case of “ought.”<sup>4</sup>

## I. INFORMATION RELATIVITY

Practical questions about what to do are often resolved by reaching ought judgments. In deliberation or first-person practical reasoning this commonly leads to decision, intention, and action, while in second- and third-person reasoning it commonly leads to advice and evaluation. In the real world, we must typically answer these questions under less than ideal epistemic circumstances, possessing incomplete information. The action that is best given available evidence is often not the action that is best given all the facts. This raises a dilemma: is what an agent ought to do what is best given the evidence, or what is best given the facts? While both answers have had their champions, it seems eminently reasonable to distinguish between “subjective” and “objective” senses of “ought,” popularly identified as the “ought” of rationality and the “ought” of most reason, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Considering judgments of advice reveals that we cannot stop with just one subjective sense of “ought,” however. The “oughts” of advice do not aim to inform agents about which actions are best relative to the agent’s information (i.e., those that are “rational”), because they are sensitive also to any additional information possessed by the advisor. But neither do they (always) aim to inform agents about which actions are best given all the facts (are “supported by most reason”), since advisors are often not in a position to know this either. It may therefore seem that there must be as many different senses of “ought” as there are different bodies of information. To impose some order

4. This strategy is applied to the defense of epistemic modals and taste predicates in Alexander Almér and Gunnar Björnsson, “Contextualism, Assessor Relativism, and Insensitive Assessments,” *Logique et Analyse* 52 (2009): 363–72.

5. A. C. Ewing, *Ethics* (London: English Universities Press, 1953). Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane (in “Ought: Between Subjective and Objective” [unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley]) provide a helpful survey of the literature, placing on the side favoring the subjective interpretation H. A. Prichard (“Duty and Ignorance of Fact,” in *Moral Obligation*, ed. W. D. Ross [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949], 18–39), W. D. Ross (*Foundations of Ethics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939]), T. M. Scanlon (“Thomson on Self-Defense,” in *Fact and Value: Essays on Ethics and Metaphysics for Judith Jarvis Thomson*, ed. R. Stalnaker, A. Byrne, and R. Wedgwood [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001], 199–215), and “perhaps” Frank Jackson (“Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection,” *Ethics* 101 [1991]: 461–82, and “Which Effects?” in *Reading Parfit*, ed. J. Dancy [Oxford: Blackwell, 1997], 42–53); and on the side favoring the objective interpretation G. E. Moore (*Principia Ethica* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903]), and *Ethics*) and Judith Jarvis Thomson (“Imposing Risks,” in *Rights, Restitution, and Risk*, ed. W. Parent [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986], 173–91, and *The Realm of Rights* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990]).

on this “annoying profusion” of senses,<sup>6</sup> it is natural to embrace a contextualist view, on which the unqualified “ought” selects the best action relative to a body of information somehow determined by the context of utterance.<sup>7</sup> (In our use, a “body of information” need not be the information of somebody; it is merely a set of propositions, so that the objective “ought” is a limiting case in which the body of information is just the set of all true propositions.)

To use the illustration provided by Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane, suppose that ten miners are trapped together in one of two mine shafts, A and B, their lives threatened by impending flooding.<sup>8</sup> *Agent* does not know whether the miners are all in A or are all in B, but he is able to block either but not both of the shafts with sandbags. His evidence suggests that if he blocks the shaft that holds the miners then all will survive, if he blocks the other shaft then all the miners will drown, and if he leaves both shafts unblocked then each shaft will flood partially, and only the one miner who is deepest in the shaft will drown. However, *Agent* has in his company *Advisor*, who has additional information. The totality of *Advisor*’s evidence suggests that, while the effect of blocking B will be as *Agent*’s evidence suggests, trying to block A will fail, partially flooding both shafts and resulting in the death of one miner whichever shaft they are in, while leaving both shafts unblocked will result in the drowning of all if they are in B but the survival of all if they are in A.

If we assign each life one unit of utility, the expected values therefore look like this:

	Agent’s Information	Advisor’s Information
Block A	$(.5 \times 10) + (.5 \times 0) = 5$	$1 \times 9 = 9$
Block B	$(.5 \times 0) + (.5 \times 10) = 5$	$(.5 \times 0) + (.5 \times 10) = 5$
Block neither	$1 \times 9 = 9$	$(.5 \times 10) + (.5 \times 0) = 5$

The appropriate outcome of *Agent*’s deliberation, it seems, is the judgment that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked. A simple contextualist account interprets this as the judgment that he ought to do so given his information. The appropriate advice for *Advisor* to

6. Jackson, “Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism.”

7. Sloman, “‘Ought’ and ‘Better’”; Angelika Kratzer, “What ‘Must’ and ‘Can’ Must and Can Mean,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1 (1977): 337–55, and “The Notional Category of Modality”; Frank Jackson, “On the Semantics and Logic of Obligation,” *Mind* 94 (1985): 177–95; Finlay, “Oughts and Ends”.

8. Kolodny and MacFarlane, “Ought: Between Objective and Subjective.” They adopt the scenario from Donald Regan, *Utilitarianism and Cooperation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

offer, it seems, is that Agent ought to block shaft A. A simple contextualist account interprets this as the judgment that Agent ought to do so given Advisor's information. (Note that neither judgment can plausibly be interpreted as concerned with what Agent ought to do given the facts, since each believes that one of the other options—he knows not which—is objectively better.)

Kolodny and MacFarlane argue that contextualism cannot give a satisfactory account of the interrelation of judgments of deliberation and advice in cases like this one and should be abandoned in favor of a rival theory, (semantic) *relativism*. According to relativism about “ought,” ought sentences invariantly express propositions that are not relativized to bodies of information in their content (i.e., different utterances of the same sentence all say the same thing), but rather have truth values that are relative to different bodies of information determined by the context of assessment (i.e., the truth of what is said depends on the standpoint of the person assessing it).<sup>9</sup> According to relativism then, Agent accepts and Advisor rejects the same proposition that Agent ought to block neither shaft, a proposition that is true as assessed from the context of Agent's information and false as assessed from the context of Advisor's information.

Why is it that we allegedly must abandon an orthodox semantic view like contextualism in favor of an admittedly radical semantic view like relativism? We distinguish two related challenges to contextualism in Kolodny and MacFarlane's objection: a problem of practical integration and a problem of semantic assessment. We address these in turn.

#### A. *The Practical Integration Problem*

Kolodny and MacFarlane charge that contextualism can provide only a “distorted” account of the interrelation of deliberation and advice, because it is forced to deny that advice typically aims to “give advisees the correct answer to the questions about which they are deliberat-

9. For semantic relativism about epistemic modals and/or taste predicates, see Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson, “Epistemic Modals in Context”; Lasersohn, “Context Dependence”; Egan, “Epistemic Modals, Relativism, and Assertion”; Tamina Stephenson, “Judge Dependence, Epistemic Modals, and Predicates of Personal Taste,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30 (2007): 487–525; and MacFarlane, “Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive.” On an alternative view of what propositions are, relativism claims rather that the sentences at issue express different propositions relative to different contexts of assessment; see Andy Egan, “Billboards, Bombs and Shotgun Weddings,” *Synthese* 166 (2009): 251–79; Herman Cappelen, “The Creative Interpreter: Content Relativism and Assertion,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 22 (2008): 23–46. For simplicity we ignore this view here.

ing.”<sup>10</sup> For if the judgments of deliberation and the judgments of advice involve different senses of “ought,” then there is apparently no common question with which both are concerned, and deliberation and advice come apart in a puzzling way. If Agent’s deliberation is directed toward answering the question “What ought I to do given my information?” then he has successfully reached the correct answer when he judges that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked. In this enquiry he neither needs nor receives any assistance from Advisor. Hence, Kolodny and MacFarlane claim, according to contextualism advisors do not address the question over which the agent deliberates and so do not appear to be advising at all.

On relativism, on the other hand, Agent’s deliberation and Advisor’s advice both concern the same ought proposition. Agent is right to draw his deliberative judgment, because relative to his information it is true. But Advisor is right to reject that judgment, because relative to Advisor’s information it is false. Because of its apparent ease in integrating deliberation and advice, Kolodny and MacFarlane conclude that relativism rather than contextualism must be correct.<sup>11</sup>

We believe this conclusion is mistaken. A preliminary step in defending contextualism is to take care in identifying the relevant context and information for Agent’s judgment. The integration problem arises only if the ought judgments of deliberation and advice are relativized to different bodies of information. As Kolodny and MacFarlane acknowledge, more sophisticated versions of contextualism are less vulnerable. Contextualists need not construe normative judgments as inflexibly relativized always to the speaker’s information and can and should rather allow that they are relativized to bodies of information defined in different ways, as determined by the conversational purposes or intentions of the speaker.<sup>12</sup> While it is plausible that ought judgments concluding private deliberations are relativized to the speaker’s information alone, in Kolodny and MacFarlane’s scenario Agent asserts his claim in a “dialogue”; it is a piece of public

10. We agree with Campbell Brown (discussion) that it is independently implausible that advice typically has this aim. It is not atypical to advise someone that he ought to take his daughter to the doctor for her cough, though he hadn’t been deliberating over any relevant practical question. As a referee observed, advice more plausibly aims to give the correct answer to questions about which agents ought to be deliberating. But since Kolodny and MacFarlane’s characterization of advice is reasonable in cases like Advisor’s, the puzzle remains.

11. A similar view is defended in John Horty, “Right Actions in Perspective,” in *Modality Matters: Twenty-five Essays in Honour of Kristler Segerberg*, ed. H. Lagerlund, S. Lindström, and R. Sliwinski, Uppsala Philosophical Studies 53 (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2006).

12. See Dowell, “Empirical Metaphysics,” for a theory of how speaker’s intentions determine relevant parameters.

communication. In that circumstance Agent can be expected to see his practical problem as a shared problem, to be solved with collective resources. Plausibly, therefore, ought claims asserted in conversations are typically intended as relativized at least to the collective information (i.e., the union of the information possessed by each participant in the conversation).<sup>13</sup> Consider that if Agent is aware that others in his conversation have more information than he, then it seems presumptuous for him to assert confident normative claims and appropriate for him rather to express uncertainty and ask for others' input. If Agent's judgment is relativized to the collective information, then it is false, and Advisor rightly contradicts it.<sup>14</sup>

Kolodny and MacFarlane do not believe that even a sophisticated contextualism can escape their objection, however, because of a problem of "advice from unexpected sources."<sup>15</sup> Suppose that, after Agent announces his deliberative conclusion that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked, *Physicist* unexpectedly arrives in a helicopter.<sup>16</sup> *Physicist* has been conducting experiments in a neighboring shaft and has information that definitively places the miners in shaft A. She therefore advises Agent that he ought to block shaft A.

The case of *Physicist* confronts the contextualist with a dilemma: either she is a member of the relevant group, so that the truth of Agent's judgment is sensitive to her information, or else she is not a member. Kolodny and MacFarlane believe that it is embarrassing for contextualists to embrace either horn. Suppose first that (i) *Physicist* is a member. In this case Agent's judgment that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked was false, and, they claim, the relevant information would have to be so broadly defined that Agent would have been "unwarranted and irresponsible" in drawing his conclusion. But on the contrary he has reasoned "well and appropriately" (as we agree).<sup>17</sup> Suppose then that (ii) *Physicist* is not a member. In this case we reencounter the original problem: her advice involves a different sense of "ought" from Agent's judgment and so cannot be addressed to the same question.

We think that contextualism can actually thrive on either horn

13. In "‘Might’ Made Right," von Fintel and Gillies draw the same conclusion for epistemic claims.

14. Relativists also need to accommodate this point; Kolodny and MacFarlane acknowledge that in some contexts assessors are interested in the truth of an "ought" claim relative to a composite of different people's evidence.

15. Similar problems arise from the evaluations of eavesdroppers, discussed below.

16. In this scenario, *Physicist* and her information replace rather than supplement Advisor and his information.

17. A similar objection against contextualism about epistemic claims is raised by von Fintel and Gillies ("‘Might’ Made Right").

of this dilemma, as we shall now explain. First, there are plausible ways in which Agent could have intended to refer to a body of information that included Physicist's. Consider as an illustration what we will call *news-sensitive* contextualism. Facing a practical problem, agents usually have a window of time in which they can conduct research and gather information before the moment when they have to act. Rational agents prefer to base their decisions on fuller information. It is therefore implausible that the question an agent deliberates over would be "What ought I to do given my present information?" (If that were the case, then deliberation would never call for seeking additional information.)<sup>18</sup> More plausibly, a deliberating agent is concerned with what he ought to do given something like the fullest information he will or can acquire by the time he must decide what to do.<sup>19</sup> Since Physicist makes her information available in time, it would be relevant to Agent's judgment. But while Agent would then have judged falsely, Kolodny and MacFarlane are wrong to suggest that he would have judged irresponsibly. It was perfectly reasonable for Agent to have expected, mistakenly, that no information like Physicist's would be forthcoming in the short time at his disposal.<sup>20</sup>

However, this solution obliges contextualists to find a solution to the issues we face on the other horn of the dilemma too.<sup>21</sup> For on news-sensitive contextualism, whether the truth of Agent's judgment is sensitive to Physicist's information depends on whether Physicist chooses to make it available to him. If she does not make it available, then the truth of Agent's claim would not be sensitive to it, and he would have judged correctly. So Physicist makes Agent's claim false by making her information available. From her point of view, presumably she is helping him with his deliberations, but contextualism seems to entail that he would have been at least as likely to get the

18. Kolodny and MacFarlane press this as an objection to contextualism, charging that it "distorts" the nature of deliberation. They briefly consider news sensitivity but claim that it seems equally vulnerable.

19. Since we argue below that a satisfactory contextualist account must solve the problems on the second horn anyway, we leave open the difficult question of how precisely to define the relevant body of information. The right account must at least balance the value of better information against the value of timely decisions. We also agree with Elizabeth Barnes (conversation) that in some contexts speakers may require for their normative judgments information of a quality that they know unobtainable; the appropriate judgment is then that there is no way to know what one ought to do. Plausibly, the quality of information that satisfies us is a function of what is at stake.

20. We disagree similarly with von Fintel and Gillies's diagnosis (in "'Might' Made Right") of the analogous case for epistemic claims.

21. Here we part company with Janice Dowell ("A Flexible Contextualist Account of 'Ought'"), who argues that a news-sensitive strategy is sufficient to vindicate contextualism.

answer to his question right if she had chosen not to interfere.<sup>22</sup> The contextualist therefore still needs to explain how by her intervention Physicist is helping Agent answer the question he deliberates over.

Observe, however, that moving from contextualism to relativism does not obviously help to resolve this integration problem. According to Kolodny and MacFarlane's relativism, Agent and Physicist both address the truth values of the same propositions—but they are not now interested in the same truth value. Agent deliberates with the aim of determining which ought proposition is true relative to his information, while Physicist advises him rather about which proposition is true relative to her information. One could try to determine which ought propositions are true relative to some other person's context of assessment, but that cannot be the concern of a deliberating agent. Agent might be fully aware, for example, that relative to the miners' information he ought to block whichever shaft they are actually in. But this cannot be his concern in deliberation, for he is not able to occupy their context. Hence, although the relativist can say that Physicist is concerned to correct Agent's judgment, the incorrectness she removes is not one that Agent has been concerned to avoid. Any perceived advantage to relativism over contextualism here is therefore illusory, and explaining how advice engages with deliberation is everybody's problem.

The puzzle that relativism and contextualism (on either horn) here face together is how advice from unexpected sources helps the advisee with the problem he is trying to solve. We suggest that the solution to this integration problem lies in rejecting a key assumption underlying Kolodny and MacFarlane's objection: that the basic problem that deliberation aims to solve is to determine the truth of particular ought propositions or what ought to be done relative to some particular body of information. This assumption doesn't take account of agents' general preference to base their decisions on better information. Consider that even on relativism it cannot be that what fundamentally motivates advice is the danger that the advisee will make or act on an ought judgment that is incorrect from the advisor's con-

22. The problem is sharpened if we suppose that the advisor's information is complex and difficult to process, so that the agent is more likely to get the correct answer to the question of what he ought to do given *i* if *i* excluded the advisor's information, than if *i* included it. Suppose that with Physicist's information Agent has a .99 probability of correctly judging that given that information he ought to block shaft A, thereby saving all 10 miners, and a .01 probability of incorrectly judging that he ought to block neither, saving 9, whereas without that information there is a probability of 1 that he correctly judges that he ought to block neither. Clearly in this case Physicist should provide the information, and assists Agent more by doing so, even though she thereby makes Agent less likely to answer his deliberative question correctly.

text of assessment. This is evinced by cases where the advisor's information is inferior to the agent's: in some such cases the agent is in "danger," on relativism, of arriving at what is from the advisor's context of assessment an incorrect answer. But advice is typically inappropriate in such cases.

The reason for this preference for better information, we believe, is that agents' fundamental concerns in deliberating are to promote and protect certain values or things that matter to them, and not simply to determine the correct answers to particular ought questions.<sup>23</sup> In the flooding mine scenario, Agent's fundamental concerns are presumably for the preservation of each of the miners' lives. Fuller information is preferable to him because it puts him in a better position to promote his values.<sup>24</sup>

If this is the right way to think about the concerns that drive deliberation, then deliberating agents will have a derivative and instrumental interest in reaching true ought judgments relativized to particular bodies of information. Ought judgments relativized to the best information available to an agent will be the best basis for a decision that is within his reach. This explains why deliberation generally seeks ought judgments for its conclusions. But if an advisor could make new and relevant information available to the agent, the proposition formerly of interest would lose this derivative practical significance and become moot. Its significance passes to the question of what he ought to do relative to the new and improved body of information.<sup>25</sup>

23. We don't believe it possible to identify any more basic, unified, or overarching goal of Agent's deliberation that advice aims to promote; any proposal of this kind will reproduce the problems discussed above. Agent's concerns have to be understood as irreducibly plural; his separate concerns for the lives of each of the miners cannot be replaced with a concern to save all their lives, or the most lives he can, for example, or else he ought to take an all-or-nothing gamble and choose one shaft to block, rather than blocking neither and sacrificing one life to save the other nine. Saying that the fundamental concerns in deliberation are to promote and protect values is not to deny that it might also be concerned with how to promote and protect values, including questions of how to weight probabilities and values, and what means to use.

24. Our argument here rests merely on the intuition that fuller information is better, and doesn't commit us to a particular account of why it is better. (A better position for making decisions is no guarantee of a better result.)

25. This treatment of normative modals parallels Kent Bach's treatment of epistemic modals ("Perspectives on Possibilities: Contextualism, Relativism, or What?" in Egan and Weatherson, *Epistemic Modality*). Bach argues that our real interest is not in any static epistemic modal propositions, but rather (as he puts it) in what is "possible now." It also bears similarities to two other contextualist strategies. One considered by Kolodny and MacFarlane is that ought judgments in deliberation and advice are made relative to evidence in an indeterminate and negotiable "conversational score"; on this strategy (applied to epistemic disagreements by Keith DeRose, "Single Scoreboard Semantics," *Philosophical*

Once we reject the assumption that Agent’s fundamental concern is with determining the truth of particular ought claims, and identify his concerns rather as with preserving the miners’ lives, we can appreciate how Physicist helps Agent address his practical problem even on the second horn of Kolodny and MacFarlane’s dilemma. Even if Agent’s ought-judgment was relativized to his own information, and so true and not contradicted by Physicist’s advice, his fundamental concerns for preserving lives would be better pursued by acting on an ought judgment based on fuller information—which is just what Physicist provides. Advice is driven by an interest in putting the advisee in a better position to promote his values, so we reject Kolodny and MacFarlane’s claim that “in order for advice to be genuine *advice*, in order for it to mesh with deliberation, ‘ought’ in the mouth of advisers must invoke the same subject as ‘ought’ in the mouth of deliberators.” In order for advice to be integrated with deliberation, it has to be concerned with promoting the same values, but the contextualist should deny that this requires a concern with the same “ought” propositions.

#### *B. The Semantic Assessment Problem*

Even if contextualism can integrate deliberation and advice in this way, it remains to be shown that it gives a correct analysis of the ought judgments that people actually make in deliberating and advising and that this is how those practices are actually integrated. Its opponents argue that contextualism is disconfirmed by ordinary linguistic practice—in particular by our practices of expressing agreement and disagreement with others’ ought claims made in different informational contexts, with “yes” or “no,” “true” and “false.”

Consider first the practice of denial. When Physicist unexpectedly enters the scene, it would be natural for her to reject Agent’s claim that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked by saying,

- (1) No, you ought to block shaft A.

This looks like a problem for (news-insensitive) contextualism. If Agent’s judgment was relativized to his own information, then it was true, and Physicist would be wrong to deny it. If their ought claims

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*Studies* 119 [2004]: 1–21), Agent and Advisor are concerned with a common but indeterminate proposition. As Kolodny and MacFarlane point out, this strategy seems unable to integrate deliberation and advice when the conversational scores remain unreconciled. Another strategy, applied to epistemic disagreement by von Fintel and Gillies (“‘Might’ Made Right”), suggests that modal claims put into play a “cloud” of propositions, and can be accepted or rejected on the basis of the truth value of the strongest one that the assessor is in a position to accept or reject. We consider our strategy more plausible and better motivated than these alternatives.

are relativized to different information, then they are not contradictory. But intuitively it seems that unexpected advisors with better information often disagree with agents' ought claims. This appears to support the relativists' claim that there is just one proposition at issue in contexts of advice.<sup>26</sup>

News-sensitive contextualism can accommodate this point about advice, since it identifies a common proposition for deliberation and advice. But a similar problem arises for any form of contextualism from practices of mere evaluation or eavesdropping, in which the assessor is unable to make her information available to the agent. Suppose that Physicist is observing Agent over closed-circuit television, with no way of communicating with him. Hearing him declare that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked, Physicist might say,

(2) No, he ought to block shaft A.

Physicist has expressed disagreement with Agent, but according to news-sensitive contextualism their ought claims are not contradictory.

Similar difficulties arise from practices of acceptance. Suppose that Agent becomes confused while deliberating over his own information and mistakenly claims "I ought to block shaft A," at which time Physicist enters. Knowing the miners are in shaft A, she might respond,

(3) Yes, that's true, you ought to block shaft A. But not for the reason you think.

Or to press the problem against news-sensitive contextualism, suppose instead that Physicist is evaluating his claim from a distance. She might say,

(4) Yes, that's true, he ought to block shaft A. But not for the reason he thinks.

This is problematic, because (as she may know) the proposition that according to contextualism Agent asserts—namely, that he ought to block shaft A given the information available to him—is false. Contextualism seems unable to identify a proposition that Agent asserted with which Physicist agrees.

Finally, consider that if Agent's claim that he ought to leave both

26. Similar problems arise from diachronic disagreement with oneself (retractions). Suppose that having already judged that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked, Agent acquires new information, leading him to say, "I was wrong/what I said was mistaken. I ought to block A." Under news-insensitive contextualism his new judgment does not contradict his old judgment. This is less problematic for news-sensitive contextualism, which accommodates contradiction for reassessments made prior to the act, while post facto retractions do not seem as natural.

shafts unblocked is true (as news-insensitive contextualism suggests), then one might reasonably expect that Physicist could acknowledge this. But it would definitely be odd for her to say,

- (5) ??Yes, that's true, but you ought to block shaft A.

The corresponding claim made in eavesdropping is equally unacceptable, and problematic for news-sensitive contextualism:

- (6) ??Yes, that's true, but he ought to block shaft A.

The conjuncts in 5 and in 6 apparently contradict each other, yet contextualism seems to tell us that they are consistent. Relativism, on the other hand, respects the intuition of contradiction, since it tells us that the truth values of both conjuncts in each case are determined by the same context of assessment.

Moreover, similar problems can easily be constructed in which what is assessed are agents' beliefs rather than their utterances. For example, we can replace 1 and 4 with

- (7) You believe that you ought to block neither shaft, but you're wrong—really you ought to block A.  
(8) Agent believes that he ought to block shaft A, which is true—but not for the reason he thinks.

Taken together, these phenomena of denial, acceptance, and contradiction of ought claims suggest that contextualism cannot be right about the actual semantics of "ought" and seem rather to support relativism.<sup>27</sup>

However, this objection to contextualism rests on a covert but significant assumption: that appropriate assessment of a person's utterance or judgment with "yes" or "no," "true" or "false" is always assessment of the same proposition that the person asserted or accepted. Various counterexamples illustrate that this assumption is mistaken. Consider:

- (9) X: "I was told that Sally stole the money."  
Y: ?? "Yes, that's true, you were."  
Y: "Yes, that's true, she did."  
(10) X: "I can't believe how healthy John looks."  
Y: ?? "No, you can't."  
Y: "No, neither can I."

27. For similar arguments against contextualism about epistemic modals, see Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson, "Epistemic Modals in Context"; Egan, "Epistemic Modals, Relativism, and Assertion"; and MacFarlane, "Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive." For similar arguments against contextualism about taste predicates, see Lasersohn, "Context Dependence."

In both these cases, Y's first response to X's utterance offers an assessment of the proposition which (on an orthodox view) the utterance literally asserts, while Y's second response seems to offer an assessment of a different, nonasserted proposition. Yet in most ordinary contexts, the second responses would be natural, while the first responses would be pragmatically odd. Often the assessed proposition is plausibly also something that the speaker somehow implicated or expressed, as in the case of 9. But in other cases the assessed proposition is not plausibly anything that the speaker expressed. In the case of 10, presumably Y's "No" in the second reply is to be interpreted as denying the proposition that Y can believe how healthy John looks. This observation may seem puzzling and calls for explanation. How could the salient proposition for semantic assessment of speech or mental acts be something other than the proposition that was thereby asserted or accepted?

Since salience is generally governed by conversational interests, we surmise that sometimes the conversational interest in a speech or mental act makes propositions other than the asserted or accepted propositions more salient for assessment of those acts. This seems plausible for 9 and 10. In a typical context for 9, what will be of primary conversational interest in relation to X's speech act is the proposition that X reports himself as having been told, and not the reported fact of his having been told it. In a typical context for 10, X is engaging in gossip and his speech act can be understood primarily as an invitation for Y to give his opinion on the same topic; this makes it silly for Y to respond by assessing X's autobiographical report, but quite relevant to assess the proposition that he would have asserted by uttering the same sentence.<sup>28</sup> The most conversationally relevant proposition for assessment of a speech act will usually be the original proposition asserted, of course. But clearly this is not always the case; might it also sometimes not be true of ought claims? We believe so.<sup>29</sup>

In Section I.A, we observed that the fundamental interest motivating deliberation and advice is not in reaching a true answer to a predetermined ought question but rather in promoting and protecting certain values. Because of this, we argued, deliberators prefer to base their decisions on better information. Ought propositions are

28. For the expectation of reciprocity in gossip, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 54.

29. A relativist might claim that unlike 9 and 10 it is impossible to respond to these "ought" claims by assessing the propositions which, according to our contextualism, they originally asserted. We think this is false; one can always respond with "Yes, that is what you ought to do, given what you know. But . . ."

therefore conversationally relevant in deliberative contexts only insofar as they are relativized to the best available information, and once this is no longer the case they become pragmatically moot. Assessment of these original propositions then becomes pointless, doing nothing to advance the practical interests of the conversation. After Physicist makes her superior information available, if either she or Agent were to offer an assessment of the original proposition asserted by Agent—while lives were at stake!—it would manifest a perverse fixation on truth for truth’s sake.

When the available information is upgraded in this way, the original ought propositions lose their conversational relevance. What now becomes conversationally relevant in their stead are other ought propositions, which are related to the agents’ utterances (or judgments) in the following way: they are the propositions that the agents would have asserted by their utterances if they had rather been made in the new, improved context, relativized to the new, superior information. In contexts of advice, we evaluate previous ought claims as if they had been made in our present context, evaluating relevant propositions rather than the original propositions.<sup>30</sup>

There is still, however, a question of why these conversational interests would make the relevant proposition salient for assessment of the speech act. If the original claim is now moot, it might seem more appropriate simply to change the subject and move on (“Never mind about that/That’s nice, but you ought . . .”) than to offer a putative assessment of it (“No, that’s false”; “You’re mistaken”).<sup>31</sup> But as we found in the previous section, judgments of deliberation and advice are practically integrated even if they express noncontradictory

30. Mark Richard (“Contextualism and Relativism,” *Philosophical Studies* 119 [2004]: 215–42) observes evidence of similarly context-insensitive assessments of claims involving gradable predicates like “tall” and “rich.” Similar conversational dynamics have also been implicitly endorsed by philosophers who claim that ought claims involve implicit comparison classes (e.g., Sloman, “‘Ought’ and ‘Better’”; Jackson, “On the Semantics and Logic of Obligation”). Here is Jackson: “I say ‘It ought to be that Lucretia used less painful poisons.’ You retort ‘Oh no, it ought to be that Lucretia used painless poisons.’ I then retort ‘Oh no, it ought to be that Lucretia used political means rather than poison to obtain her ends.’ You then retort ‘Oh no, it ought to be that Lucretia never existed at all.’ I then retort ‘Oh no, it ought to be that Lucretia existed but made people happy’. . . Each retort seems a fair one, how so? What is happening is that the set of alternatives to which the ‘ought’ is relative is being implicitly changed at each stage of the conversation” (181).

31. One possible contextualist response is to postulate semantic blindness—that is, that insensitive assessments result from a failure to recognize the ambiguity in ought sentences. Bach (“Perspectives on Possibilities”) postulates semantic blindness in defense of (by our classification) contextualism about epistemic modals. We think ours is a better and more charitable solution.

propositions. This supports what we like to think of as a “quasi-expressivist” model of normative discourse.<sup>32</sup> Since ought propositions relative to the best available information always provide agents with the best available bases for deciding what to do, ought claims with these contents have the pragmatic role of recommendations. Recommendations have to be endorsed or rejected as new information becomes available; even if Physicist does not reject any proposition that Agent accepted, she still (and more importantly) rejects his decision. (We find it significant that it would be more natural for Physicist to say, “No, don’t do that!” than for her to say, “No, that’s false!”)<sup>33</sup> Our primary conversational interest in these speech acts is with this pragmatic role, and therefore, when endorsing or rejecting them as recommendations or decisions, the salient propositions for assessment are the ought propositions relative to the new, improved information. This is how the contextualist should understand context-insensitive assessments of ought claims.<sup>34</sup>

In this way contextualism can accommodate the relativists’ observation that assessments of ought claims from positions of superior information are typically insensitive to the context of utterance. Whereas the relativist diagnoses this as the truth value of the original proposition being determined by the context of assessment, we diagnose it as the context of assessment determining which relevant proposition is assessed.<sup>35</sup> Independently motivated pragmatic considerations provide the contextualist with an explanation of why ought judgments in practical reasoning, advice, and evaluation behave as if relativism were correct. Which diagnosis should be preferred? It might be thought that contextualism’s dependence on this complex

32. This strategy mimics Simon Blackburn’s “quasi-realism” (*Essays in Quasi-Realism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993]), the project of explaining apparently realist features of moral discourse with purely expressivist resources.

33. This point needs care, however, since arguably “No, that’s false” isn’t false but just odd, and there doesn’t seem to be any similar oddity about context-insensitive agreement using “true.”

Eavesdropping cases admittedly have no direct impact on decisions or advice, but they seem typically to be made in the mode of advice, or as simulated advice.

34. For general discussion of why context-insensitive assessments fit certain kinds of context-dependent expressions (e.g., normative and epistemic modals, predicates of personal taste, gradable adjectives) but not others (e.g., paradigmatic indexicals, explicitly relativized modals), see Alexander Almér and Gunnar Björnsson, “The Pragmatics of Context-Insensitive Assessments” (unpublished manuscript, University of Gothenburg).

35. A contextualist position of this kind might seem self-undermining: isn’t allowing context-insensitive assessments as “true” incompatible with the contextualist’s signature claim of context-sensitive truth conditions? It is not, because by truth conditions we mean the technical notion of the conditions of satisfaction of a proposition, which doesn’t commit us to any stance on the meaning or use of “true” in English.

pragmatics puts it at a disadvantage and favors the apparently simpler relativist account. This is not the case, because some of the phenomena seem rather to favor contextualism over relativism.

If relativism explains context-insensitive assessments directly by the semantics of “ought” and “true” (and “false”), while contextualism explains them rather by appeal also to pragmatic features of deliberation and advice, then these rival accounts will yield divergent predictions about assessments in cases where different pragmatic considerations are operative. On relativism, we might expect similarly context-insensitive assessments in the absence of these special circumstances, while on contextualism we might expect rather context-sensitive assessments. It is the contextualist prediction that is borne out by our practices.

One case of this kind involves postmortem assessments. Suppose that Agent acts on his judgment that he ought to block neither shaft, saving nine of the ten miners. In the subsequent debriefing, despite everyone’s having learned that the miners were all in shaft A and would all have been saved if it had been blocked, it seems perfectly appropriate to say,

- (11) Agent was quite right; blocking neither shaft was indeed what he ought to have done. Any other action would have been totally irresponsible.

Here, 11 is clearly relativized to the information Agent had at the time of his decision, just as contextualism predicts. In postmortem assessments we are no longer interested in guiding a decision by the best information available, but rather in evaluating the actual decision in light of the information that the agent possessed. Here the relevant proposition for assessment is the original proposition that concerned the agent. But relativism may seem to be committed to rejecting 11 as false, since relative to the information available to the assessors, blocking shaft A was clearly the better option.

Relativism also seems to do worse than contextualism in accounting for assessments from contexts of inferior information.<sup>36</sup> Suppose that Observer is watching Agent on closed-circuit television. She knows that the miners are trapped in one of the shafts but not which and that blocking one will completely submerge the other. She also knows that Physicist has just told Agent where the miners are, but not where Physicist said they were, or what Agent concluded from this.

36. Kolodny and MacFarlane consider this problem, which has an analogue for relativism about epistemic modals raised by Richard Dietz, “Epistemic Modals and Correct Disagreement,” in *Relative Truth*, ed. M. García-Carpintero and M. Kölbel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239–62.

Relative to Observer's information, the best course of action would be to leave both shafts unblocked. But contrary to what relativism seems to imply, Observer could plausibly think that

- (12) If Agent concluded that he ought to block neither shaft, he was wrong.

This is what contextualism would predict; given Agent's information it is false that he ought to leave both shafts unblocked. Superior information allows a better decision, and therefore we generally defer to the judgments of those who have it, unless we suspect them to be making poor use of it. As our account of contextualist pragmatics predicts, in general our assessments of ought claims are context insensitive only insofar as the context of assessment is informationally superior to the context of utterance.

These cases of context-sensitive assessments do not settle the issue in favor of contextualism, however, because there is a solution available to the relativist to explain why in these cases we behave as if contextualism were correct, a solution that Kolodny and MacFarlane embrace. Relativism need not identify the "context of assessment" inflexibly as always constituted by the information available to the assessor. Just as the contextualist's "context of utterance" is not to be identified simply as constituted by the information available to the utterer at the time of utterance, but rather as determined by the informational base intended by the utterer, so too can the "context of assessment" be identified as determined by the informational base intended by the assessor—which can be the information available to people other than the assessor.<sup>37</sup> Observer can assess the truth of an ought claim relative to her own information, or relative to Physicist's information, or relative to any other set of information. However, the point to emphasize here is that in order for relativism to achieve sufficient flexibility to accommodate these cases, it will presumably need to invoke pragmatics as complex as the pragmatics we have offered for contextualism, which therefore do not disadvantage contextualism at all.

We have a stalemate, perhaps—and it might even be suspected

37. See MacFarlane, "Epistemic Modals Are Assessment-Sensitive." This flexible relativism deflects another contextualist objection, offered against relativism about epistemic modals by Bach ("Perspectives on Possibilities"). This objection holds that some modal claims must express relativized propositions, because they are explicitly relativized (e.g., "Given what she knows, the keys might be in the door"; cf. "Given what Agent knows, he ought to block neither shaft")—so relativism introduces unnecessary complications into the semantics of modals. But the relativist can interpret "given that *p*" as forcing a particular context of assessment. For more relativist strategies, see Stephenson, "Judge Dependence," 514–18.

that contextualism and relativism are mere notational variants, differing predominantly on the theoretical role that they assign to the technical term “proposition.” Any argument for one over the other may have to turn on such abstruse considerations; contextualism’s interpretation of assessment as directed at relevant rather than original propositions may be a cost that favors relativism (although we have argued that it is well motivated and independently plausible), but this is counterbalanced by the cost relativism incurs in embracing the radical notion of assessment-relative truth. The significant conclusion here is that with regard to the information relativity of normative ought claims, contextualism is able to accommodate the data produced by its opponents. We now turn to address the standard relativity of ought claims, where similar issues await.

## II. STANDARD RELATIVITY

Many philosophers have been drawn to the view that normative “ought”s are relativized to standards (norms, ends, etc.).<sup>38</sup> This view offers straightforward explanations of a variety of things, including how there can be such things as normative facts, why the normative domain divides into the moral, prudential, and so on, why moral beliefs diverge between cultures, and why moral disagreement persists among well-informed competent judges. We believe that moral and other normative claims are indeed standard relative and that contextualism is the correct semantic treatment of this relativity; every complete moral proposition includes a relation to a moral standard. This kind of contextualism about moral claims has received criticism closely analogous to the criticism of contextualist treatments of information relativity addressed above. But whereas information relativity is alleged to tell in favor of semantic relativism, here the evidence is rather alleged to tell in favor of semantic invariantism; moral judgments are not relative to standards either in their content or in their truth conditions. By uttering the same sentence, different people say the same thing—a proposition that has the same objective truth value regardless of the context from which it is assessed.

Consider Huckleberry Finn’s belief that he ought to tell on Miss Watson’s fugitive slave, Jim. Huck wrestles with this belief through Twain’s novel, and as readers we reject it: it’s not the case that Huck

38. See, e.g., Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended,” *Philosophical Review* 85 (1975): 3–22; Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); David Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); James Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism,” *Ethics* 101 (1990): 6–26; David Copp, *Morality, Normativity, and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Finlay, “Oughts and Ends.”

ought to tell on Jim. Plausibly, Huck subscribes to a different moral standard than we do. According to a contextualist treatment of standard relativity in normative judgment, it is possible that the propositions that Huck accepts and that we reject are different: Huck accepts the proposition that he ought-relative-to-standard-Y to tell on Jim, while we reject the proposition that he ought-relative-to-standard-Z to tell on Jim. So it seems that contrary to appearances we are not really in disagreement with Huck: what he accepts is not what we reject.<sup>39</sup> As in the case of information relativity, this raises both a practical integration problem and a semantic assessment problem for contextualism.

As before, more sophisticated versions of contextualisms are possible that seek to avoid these problems, by denying that rival moral claims are relativized differently.<sup>40</sup> We accept that there genuinely are some fundamental moral disagreements where the rival claims are relativized to different standards, however, and will assume for the sake of argument that there is a difference of this kind between Huck's moral judgment and our own. Here we are interested in showing how the kind of strategy we developed above in defense of contextualism about information relativity can also be utilized in defense of contextualism about standard relativity.<sup>41</sup>

39. David Lyons, "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence," repr. in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, ed. J. W. Meiland and M. Krausz (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 210; Robert Streiffer, *Moral Relativism and Reasons for Action* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8; Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 50.

40. Janice Dowell is working on an account of this kind ("A Flexible Contextualist Account of 'Ought'"). Streiffer (*Moral Relativism*, 14) argues that this strategy neutralizes contextualism's supposed advantage in explaining the extent and persistence of moral divergence. However, we think that contextualism is also (and better) motivated by other considerations.

41. Another way the contextualist can explain our sense that we disagree with Huck is to suggest that we erroneously but perhaps warrantably assume that there is a shared standard in this case, or in moral disagreements in general (Wong, *Moral Relativity*, 79; Stephen Finlay, "The Error in the Error Theory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86 [2008]: 356–77). Streiffer (*Moral Relativism*, 14–15) argues that this defense of contextualism fails; the ubiquity of moral disagreement makes it highly implausible that common standards would be assumed. But such an assumption could be reasonable even in the face of extensive and intractable disagreement. Moral standards might be highly abstract and difficult to apply (perhaps admitting indeterminacy), as if Kantians or Utilitarians were correct about the principles of morality. Moreover, if our sense of disagreement depends on the assumption of a common standard, that could explain why it is less clear when the standards are strikingly different. If we consider the moral beliefs of, for example, a New Guinean headhunter prior to "civilized" contact, instead of the moral beliefs of a nineteenth-century American like Huck, it is arguably less clear that those beliefs contradict our own.

A. *Integrating Moral Disagreement*

The integration problem for contextualism about standard relativity parallels the problem raised by Kolodny and MacFarlane about integrating deliberation and advice. Moral judgment, like deliberation, aims at determining what ought to be done, and so moral disagreement, like advice, presumably aims at correcting judgments about what ought to be done. But if Huck's moral judgment and our own are relativized to different standards, then such fundamental moral "disagreement" would address the answer to a question ("What ought-relative-to-Z one to do?") different from the question addressed by the original belief ("What ought-relative-to-Y one to do?"), and it is hard to see how it is genuine disagreement at all.

In our treatment of information relativity, we denied that integrating deliberation and advice requires identifying a shared interest in any particular ought propositions, because the truth of any ought proposition has only a derivative importance which it owes to agents' more fundamental interest in the promotion of certain values.<sup>42</sup> This is plausibly also true in the case of moral thought and discourse; people who subscribe to moral standards are concerned with the values underlying those standards. However, while deliberation and advice are typically integrated by a shared interest in the same values, fundamental moral disagreements are presumably characterized by diverging concerns for conflicting standards: here we are contending against our interlocutors, not cooperating with them in the pursuit of a common goal. We must look elsewhere to find what might integrate Huck's and our own moral beliefs so as to accommodate the intuition that there is some form of disagreement between us.

In moral dispute there is something that is of more fundamental interest to both parties than the truth of any particular ought proposition: the question of what to do. As expressivists from Charles Stevenson to Allan Gibbard have argued, conflicts in moral attitudes need not involve contradictory contents; moral conflict characteristically involves a disagreement in "attitude" rather than a disagreement in belief. A conflict of this kind exists between Huck and ourselves.<sup>43</sup>

According to contextualism, our moral judgments are relativized

42. Contrast Streiffer (*Moral Relativism*, 6), who assumes that the contextualist must say that the goal of each of the disagreeing parties is to establish the truth of their own position.

43. Is it a problem that Huck is a fictional historical character? We suggest that the typical purpose of expressing moral disagreement with fictional and/or historical characters is to express our attitudes about or settle what to do in situations like theirs. We are unlikely to find ourselves in such a situation, of course, but contingency planning need not be not restricted to likely or even possible scenarios (see Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003]).

to the standards to which we subscribe. To subscribe to a moral standard is (generally and inter alia) to prefer that people conform to it in their conduct.<sup>44</sup> Even if strictly speaking our beliefs don't conflict with Huck's, in combination with subscription to conflicting standards these beliefs place us in conflict over the practical matter of what to do in situations like Huck's. In virtue of his subscription to standard Y, Huck's moral belief commits him to favor telling on fugitive slaves. In virtue of our subscription to standard Z, our moral belief commits us to oppose telling on fugitive slaves. Hence these noncontradictory moral beliefs precipitate a disagreement in attitude toward Huck's action.<sup>45</sup>

### B. *Standard-Insensitive Assessments*

Even if contextualism can integrate opposing moral judgments in this way, giving an account of moral disagreement between people who subscribe to different standards, it remains to be shown that it could be the correct account of actual moral disagreement. As in the case of information relativity, contextualism here faces problems from the practice of semantically assessing moral claims as true and false. The most obvious problem is that contextualism would seem to bar us from expressing our disagreement with Huck by saying that his belief is false, and force us to say that it is true. This is the problem of context-insensitive assessments again.

44. As Jonas Olson observed to us, one can have preference for conformity to a standard that isn't plausibly moral subscription (e.g., to the standard that requires everybody to give one money), and as Michael Ridge observed to us, it is possible to subscribe to a moral standard yet sometimes prefer that people fail to conform to it (e.g., hoping that one's political opponent proves himself morally unfit for office). For discussion of problems in defining the noncognitive attitude involved in moral judgments and a proposed solution, see Gunnar Björnsson and Tristram McPherson, "Moral Attitudes for Expressivists: Solving the Specification Problem" (unpublished manuscript, Linköping University/University of Gothenburg and University of Minnesota-Duluth).

45. Our practical conflict with Huck is strictly with his moral commitment. As readers of his adventures know, Huck is internally conflicted, and his moral commitment is ultimately defeated by his own humanity.

Some expressivists have agreed that moral judgments incorporate beliefs in standard-relative propositions, explaining disagreement as we propose in this section; see esp. Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Matthew Chrisman, "From Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism," *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 225–54. We part company with them on how to understand standard-insensitive assessments below.

Streiffer (*Moral Relativism*) claims that contextualists have to reject ordinary intuitions about when our moral claims are and are not contradictory. We disagree; the contextualist can accommodate intuitions about when our moral claims are and are not in practical conflict, and we doubt that ordinary intuitions can be trusted to reliably discriminate this from genuine contradiction. See also Chrisman, "From Epistemic Contextualism."

One variation on this problem is raised by Brian Weatherson, who suggests that only moral invariantism, and not contextualism, can account for how we attribute moral belief and moral knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Weatherson points out that, given contextualism, in our use of a sentence like

(13) Huck believed that he ought to tell on Jim.

the relevant standard seems to be the one to which the believer himself subscribes, and not the one to which we subscribe (which he might never have contemplated).<sup>47</sup> By itself this is compatible with our liberal contextualism. But we can also assume (i) that Huck applies his moral standard correctly, so that according to contextualism the proposition that Huck believes is true, and (ii) that he is epistemically justified in believing it. He would therefore seem to meet the criteria for knowing it. But consider:

(14) Huck knew that he ought to tell on Jim.

We agree with Weatherson that 14 is (usually) appropriately evaluated as false.<sup>48</sup> Huck couldn't have known that he ought to tell on Jim, because that is false. By itself, this also is compatible with our liberal contextualism, which allows us to interpret 14 as implicitly relativized to our moral standard Z. But Weatherson claims that this combination of accepting 13 as true and rejecting 14 as false is an unacceptable cost of contextualism, because it requires that normative terms behave differently (pick out different standards) in knowledge reports than they do in belief reports. Invariantism doesn't face this problem; Huck and we apply our different standards merely to lead us to conflicting judgments about what he ought absolutely to do.

Why is it a problem if belief and knowledge reports behave differently? Weatherson's main reason seems to be that belief and knowledge reports don't diverge like this in other cases, so moral terms would be anomalous if contextualism were true. We think this is mistaken; epistemic modals display the same pattern. When Physicist learns about Agent's predicament in the miners case, she can report that

(15) Agent believes that the miners might be in shaft B.

46. Brian Weatherson, "Attitudes and Relativism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 22 (2008): 527–44.

47. Weatherson's target sentence involves "wrong" rather than "ought" (and Jefferson Davis rather than Huck Finn): "Davis believed that helping fugitive slaves was wrong" ("Attitudes and Relativism," 540).

48. Unlike Weatherson, we think that it can also be appropriately evaluated as true and heard as relating to the norms to which Huck and his society ascribed. See n. 55.

Plausibly, this is relativized to Agent's information. But since Physicist knows that the miners are in A, she can also plausibly reject the following:

- (16) Agent knows that the miners might be in shaft B.

Her ground for this is that relative to the information available to her, it is not the case that the miners might be in B. This shows that the pattern isn't as general as Weatherson claims. Moreover, since invariance is patently false for this epistemic case, it is hard to see how the moral analog could support invariance.

There is still something that needs explaining, however. People's beliefs are a subclass of their attitudes toward propositions. What people know is a subclass of what they believe. So we would expect that knowledge reports concern propositions that the subject believes. Hence, as Weatherson writes, "it would be a real shock if some term *t* behaved quite differently in belief and knowledge reports."<sup>49</sup>

A second variation on this problem is raised by Mark Schroeder, who identifies it as contextualism's "general problem with attitude ascriptions."<sup>50</sup> Consider:

- (17) Huck believed that he ought to tell on Jim.  
 (18) It is not the case that Huck ought to tell on Jim.  
 (19) Therefore, Huck believed something that is not true.

The inference seems good; 19 seems to follow from 17 and 18, and both premises seem true. The dilemma facing contextualism is this: The "ought" in 18 must relate to our standard Z, if the premise is to be true. If the "ought" in 17 also relates to our standard Z then the inference seems valid, but 17 would be false: Huck didn't believe that he ought-relative-to-Z to tell on Jim. If it relates rather to Huck's standard Y, 17 is true but the inference is invalid, contrary to appearances.

These problems all involve insensitive semantic assessments, either explicitly in terms of truth and falsehood or implicitly in terms of knowledge, and we believe they can be solved by following the contextualist playbook for insensitive assessments proposed in Section I.B. As in the case of information relativity, the challenge is to explain why semantic assessment of another's claim or judgment would address a proposition other than the original proposition he asserted or accepted. The general form of our explanation above consisted in (i) observing that the relevance of ought propositions to conversational interests is derivative on our more fundamental interest in pro-

49. Weatherson, "Attitudes and Relativism," 539.

50. Mark Schroeder, "Hybrid Expressivism: Virtues and Vices," *Ethics* 119 (2009): 257–309.

moting our values, and (ii) proposing a pragmatic principle of assessment, according to which salience for assessment of others' claims and judgments is controlled by relevance to conversational interests. We observed that certain contexts—involving better information—were privileged because they put us in a better position to promote our values, while contexts of lesser information are moot, as are the truth values of propositions relativized to them. Conversational purposes are then better served by evaluating not the original propositions asserted, but relevant propositions that the uttered sentence would have expressed relative to the privileged context.

In Section II.A we observed that in the case of fundamental moral disagreement, too, it is plausible that our interest in the truth of ought propositions is derivative on a more fundamental interest in our values: that is, in agents' conformity with the moral standards to which we subscribe. Part of what it is to engage in a practice of moral discourse is to subscribe to a particular standard, to the exclusion of any rival, as determinative of what to do—both for one's own conduct and that of others. Here too there is a context which for us is privileged, consisting in our own standards. The truth of ought propositions relativized to other standards is irrelevant to this conversational interest. To address the question of whether Huck was right to think that telling on Jim is required by Huck's standard Y, when the issue is how to act in circumstances like Huck's, would therefore be a perverse fixation on truth for truth's sake, in neglect of what is relevant to the purpose of moral thought and discourse.

However there is a relevant ought proposition, which is related to Huck's utterance in the following way: it is the proposition that Huck's utterance would have asserted if it was relativized rather to the standard Z to which we subscribe. What would be relevant to our concerns is to assess the moral judgments of others like Huck as if they had been made relative to our (privileged) standards, and to express agreement and disagreement with these propositions that are relevant to us rather than the original propositions.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the information relativity case discussed in Section I, the different parties to a fundamental moral dispute have divergent and conflicting conversational aims; they are contending rather than cooperating, as we noted above. While it may appear that both parties would be talking past each other, this would not lead to a breakdown in communication so long as it is mutually understood that each party has the fundamental concern of promoting conformity to her own

51. We have previously proposed this strategy for defending standard-relative contextualism, in a rudimentary way, in Stephen Finlay, "The Reasons That Matter," *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 84 (2006): 12–14.

moral standards, and there is an implicit understanding of the pragmatics of assessment.

This pragmatic account supports a “quasi-expressivist” model of fundamental moral disagreement.<sup>52</sup> Just as ought claims relativized to the best available information have the conversational role of recommendations, so ought claims relativized to the speaker’s own standards will have the conversational role of prescriptions or imperatives—approximately, of imposing one’s will. Speakers have a pressing interest in endorsing or rejecting imperatives, an interest in acceding to or defying others’ will, regardless of whether they accept or reject any proposition that the other asserted.<sup>53</sup> A particularly efficient and convenient way of endorsing or rejecting imperatives is by expressing agreement or disagreement with the ought claims that play that conversational role.<sup>54</sup> This is how a contextualist can understand context-insensitive moral assessments and explain why we assess Huck’s belief as false.

This solution to the problem of context-insensitive assessments suggests the following solution to Schroeder’s objection. Contextual-

52. This model of moral disagreement is explored and defended elsewhere by Stephen Finlay (“The Conversational Practicality of Value Judgement,” *Journal of Ethics* 8 [2004]: 205–23, “Value and Implicature,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 5 [2005]: 1–20, “The Reasons That Matter,” “The Error in the Error Theory,” and “Oughts and Ends”).

53. Characterizing our assessment of Huck’s belief as an imperative may seem odd, since we cannot address it to Huck or affect his actions. This situation parallels the eavesdropping case, which we characterized as simulated advice. Likewise, we understand distant assessments of moral claims as simulated demands; see also n. 43.

54. The dynamics of privileged propositions are illustrated by the following case:

- A: “The killer ought to have used a silencer.”  
 B: “No, certainly not. He ought not to have killed at all.”  
 A: “No, of course.”

As we interpret this, A offers an evaluation relativized to the killer’s goals. B understands but substitutes an alternative (moral) standard as normatively trumping the killer’s goals, offering a context-insensitive assessment of A’s claim. A accepts the retroactive change in context, since the new standard is more highly valued than the original one (Finlay, “The Reasons That Matter”). The dynamics of fundamental moral disagreements are obviously different, since the interlocutors have conflicting values and conversational purposes. See Finlay, “Conversational Practicality,” “Value and Implicature,” “The Error in the Error Theory”; see also Stephen J. Barker, “Is Value Content a Component of Conventional Implicature?” *Analysis* 60 (2000): 268–79; Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*.

A rival diagnosis appeals to the idea that ought claims identify the best of a set of specific alternatives, which can be expanded to introduce better options like not killing (Jackson, “On the Semantics and Logic of Obligation”); see n. 30. This doesn’t cover the case where changing the context alters the ranking of the original options; for example, it may be morally better that the killer failed to achieve his goals (by not using a silencer), given only the alternatives {he succeeds, he fails}.

ists can understand the inference that Schroeder challenges us to validate as having the following form:

- (20) Huck believed that he ought-relative-to-Y to tell on Jim.
- (21) It is not the case that Huck ought-relative-to-Z to tell on Jim.
- (22) There is a proposition  $p$  such that Huck believed  $p$  and the proposition related to  $p$  that is relevant for assessment of Huck's attitudinal state is not true. ("Huck believed something that is not true.")

As we have argued, the proposition that Huck ought-relative-to-Z to tell on Jim is relevantly related to the original proposition that Huck ought-relative-to-Y to tell on Jim. Given this, 22 follows from 20 and 21, as desired.

At a first glance, this contextualist account of why we can infer 19 from 17 and 18 might seem less natural than the invariantist alternative. But the same sort of inference seems fine in the cases of information relativity where an invariantist account is thoroughly implausible. For example, we would presumably accept the following inference if we were in Physicist's position:

- (23) Agent believes that he ought to block both shafts.
- (24) It is not the case that Agent ought to block both shafts.
- (25) Therefore, Agent believes something that isn't true.

While there is no plausible invariantist account of this inference, the contextualist account of the inference from 17 and 18 to 19 generalizes quite naturally.

We now also have a straightforward answer to Weatherson's challenge to explain why "ought" behaves differently in belief and knowledge ascriptions. First, in attributing beliefs we are interested in conveying an understanding of the subject's attitudinal state. Our contextualist account proposes that in the case of moral ought beliefs that state typically involves two attitudes: (*a*) an ordinary belief in a standard-relative proposition, and (*b*) a subscribing/demanding attitude toward the standard involved. (This view has the virtue of offering an explanation for the intractable metaethical debate between cognitivists and expressivists: both are right.) We therefore interpret the belief report 13 as the ascription to Huck of the compound attitude of subscribing to a slavery-tolerant moral standard Y and believing that this standard calls for telling on Jim. But in attributing knowledge we are in part engaging in semantic assessment; knowledge

implies truth.<sup>55</sup> As we have already argued, assessing Huck's belief is assessing a proposition relevantly related to the proposition that Huck accepts, in this case the proposition that Huck ought-relative-to-Z to tell on Jim. Since that proposition is false, we appropriately reject the knowledge report.<sup>56</sup>

55. As contextualists, we accept that some attributions of moral knowledge are made with "anthropological" rather than moral conversational purposes. It might be perfectly acceptable to say, in retelling the story of Huckleberry Finn, "Huck knew that he ought to tell on Jim, but his humanity weakened his will." The reference to the standards current in Huck's social environment would be obvious enough, and no endorsement implied.

56. Weatherston also objects that treating "ought" differently in belief and knowledge reports allows an interpretation of *A* as noncontradictory:

- (A) S believes that he ought to  $\phi$ . Indeed S knows it. But S doesn't know that he ought to  $\phi$ .

Contextualism allegedly allows the two knowledge reports to relate to different ought propositions. The first seems to ascribe knowledge of the proposition made salient by the belief report (referred to by "it"), a proposition thus related to S's moral standards; the second ascribes knowledge of a proposition identified by an "ought" embedded in that knowledge report, hence related to the speaker's standards. But this reading of *A* seems unavailable.

Our account of context-insensitive assessments dissolves this problem. Although the first knowledge report is concerned with S's belief, the assessment implied is of a proposition relevantly related to the proposition believed by S, one related to our standards. This gives both knowledge reports the same content; hence contradiction. Contradiction could be avoided if the first report could be made with anthropological and the second with moralistic interest. But such shifts of conversational interest do not occur between conjuncts without significant markers (change of voice, stressing the second "know," etc.). See also Kolodny and MacFarlane, "Ought: Between Objective and Subjective," who also reject this kind of argument.

Consider also Streiffer's dilemma (*Moral Relativism*, 9–12), as follows. Contextualism holds either (i) that moral utterances are always relativized to the speaker's standards, or (ii) that they can be relativized to any salient standard. If i, then moral sentences are not relativized to speaker's standards when embedded in belief reports. If ii, then moral sentences are never relativized to any other standards except when embedded in belief reports. We now can explain why embracing ii is not ad hoc, contra Streiffer. In assertoric uses or in semantic assessments, a speaker is concerned with conformity of actions to her own standards, whereas in belief reports (and anthropological reports of knowledge) her concern is the subject's attitudinal state.

Brogaard ("Moral Contextualism") explains the differences between belief reports and knowledge reports in semantic rather than pragmatic terms. She takes moral propositions to be true only relative to judges, understands propositional attitude operators as shifting the relevant context of evaluation for these propositions from the attributor to the attributee and understands factive propositional attitude attributions as requiring that the proposition involved be true relative to the standards of the attributor. Her explanation thus bears structural similarities to ours, but it is less deep. It doesn't explain why we have a semantics that allows insensitivity to judges' concerns in semantic assessments in some areas of discourse but not others, why the sense of disagreement is stronger in moral matters than in, say, matters of taste, or why anthropological uses are natural. Explaining

We conclude that with the help of a rich understanding of moral pragmatics, the contextualist interpretation of the standard relativity of moral discourse can be successfully defended against the objections recently raised against it—just as pragmatics came to the rescue of the contextualist treatment of information relativity. It may again be asked, however, whether this pragmatic account isn't inferior to the simpler explanation offered by contextualism's rival—in this case, invariantism. The pragmatic account we have sketched allows contextualism to explain why it might seem as if invariantism about moral discourse were true. But then one might think that invariantism is the preferable theory, because simpler.

But this advantage of invariantism may be illusory. First, it is highly plausible that “ought” (with other normative modals) sometimes does have an argument place for a standard, which is sometimes provided by context. People talk about what ought to be done relative to the rules of war, and what ought to be done relative to the rules of etiquette, and so on.<sup>57</sup> If this is the case, then our contextualist account ascribes the moral “ought” the same logical form as it has in these other uses, while invariantism would need to postulate ambiguity in logical form. Contextualism would therefore be the simpler semantic theory. Second, speakers actually do relativize moral claims when they take a nonmoral interest in reporting them (as anthropologists, for example), which shows that the invariantist behavior of this discourse is contingent on certain pragmatic considerations. Third, we suggest that contextualism provides a plausible explanation of what people are talking about when they make moral claims, why moral disagreements might be particularly intractable, how there can be such a thing as moral value, and why it reliably motivates and matters to people—while invariantism has no plausible explanation to offer.

These are claims that need a thorough defense, of course, and go well beyond the scope of this article.<sup>58</sup> But the following considerations suffice to show that invariantism gains no support from the

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these requires understanding the pragmatic considerations discussed here, which remove any explanatory need for propositions with judge-relative truth conditions.

57. The semantics for modals orthodox in linguistics (Kratzer, “What ‘Must’ and ‘Can’ Must and Can Mean,” “The Notional Category of Modality”) recognizes such an argument place, which in normative uses is filled by some system of norms. For analogous cases against nonrelativized propositions about epistemic modality, see Bach, “Perspectives on Possibilities”; and Schaffer, “Contextualism for Taste Claims.”

58. We have attempted parts of this defense elsewhere. See, e.g., Finlay, “Conversational Practicality,” “The Reasons That Matter,” “The Error in the Error Theory,” “Oughts and Ends”; and Gunnar Björnsson, “Do ‘Objectivist’ Features of Moral Discourse and Thinking Support Moral Objectivism?” (unpublished manuscript, Linköping University and University of Gothenburg).

phenomena dealt with here. The problems we've considered for standard-relative contextualism all depend on the fact that there are semantic assessments of moral ought judgments that are insensitive to the standards endorsed by the judge. Traditionally this has been taken to support invariantism. But there are also assessments of ought judgments that are insensitive to the informational base to which the judge was related, and invariantism is thoroughly implausible there. So context-insensitive assessments cannot as such favor invariantism. Moreover, since contextualism invokes the very same sort of pragmatic considerations (in particular an appeal to privileged contexts) to account for both sorts of context-insensitive assessments, no significant extra cost is added to defend standard relativity.

This concludes our defense of contextualist treatments of the apparent information and standard relativity of normative and moral "oughts." We have argued that disagreement-based objections against contextualism can be handled by accepting well-motivated views about the pragmatics of these discourses. Although we have not argued for it, we also suspect that many of our strategies generalize effectively to other normative and modal terms.