

# Metaethical Contextualism Defended

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**ABSTRACT:** 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 moral disagreement. Kolodny & MacFarlane argue that information-relative contextualism cannot accommodate the connection between deliberation and advice; we suggest in response that they misidentify the basic concerns of deliberating agents. For pragmatic reasons, semantic assessments of normative claims sometimes are evaluations of propositions other than those asserted. Others have raised parallel objections to standard-relative contextualism; we argue for a parallel solution.

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 and deontic 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 epistemic 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 the moral 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 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. In section 1 we argue for a particular defense of contextualism about information-relativity. In section 2, we show how a similar strategy can be employed to defend contextualism about standard-

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<sup>1</sup> Contextualism about other kinds of terms is challenged in (e.g.) Cappelen & Lepore 2005, Lasersohn 2005, Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson 2005, Egan 2007, and MacFarlane forthcoming. Contextualism about modals is orthodox in linguistics, following Kratzer (1981). Metaethical contextualism is also defended in Brogaard (2008), Dowell (ms), and other forms of contextualism are defended in (e.g.) von Fintel & Gillies (2008), Dowell (2008), Schaffer (ms).

<sup>2</sup> This argument dates back at least to Moore 1912, ch. 3.

<sup>3</sup> This claim doesn’t require that modals have separate argument-places for each, as in Sloman 1970 and Kratzer 1981. For one view on which a single argument-place accommodates both kinds of relata see Finlay 2009.

relativity. We expect that this kind of strategy can be generalized to defend contextualist treatments of other kinds of terms, but here we focus on the case of the deontic ‘ought’.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. *Information-relativity*

Practical questions about what to do are often resolved by reaching ought-judgments. In deliberation or first-personal practical reasoning this commonly leads to decision, intention, and action, while in second- and third-personal 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 most reasonable to distinguish between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ senses of ‘ought’.<sup>5</sup>

Considering judgments of *advice* reveals that we cannot stop with just one subjective sense of ‘ought’, however. The ‘ought’s of advice don’t aim to inform agents about which actions are best relative to the *agent’s* information, 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, 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 on this ‘annoying profusion’ of senses,<sup>6</sup> it is natural to embrace a contextualist view, on which the practical ‘ought’ selects the best action relative to a body of information somehow determined by the context of utterance.<sup>7</sup>

To use the illustration provided by Niko Kolodny & John MacFarlane (ms),<sup>8</sup> suppose that ten miners are trapped together in one of two mine shafts, A and B, their lives threatened by impending flooding. *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

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<sup>4</sup> Almér & Björnsson (forthcoming) apply this strategy to the defense of epistemic modals and taste predicates.

<sup>5</sup> Ewing 1953. Kolodny & MacFarlane (ms) provide a helpful survey of the literature, placing Prichard (1949), Ross (1939), Scanlon (2001), and ‘perhaps’ Jackson (1991, 1997) on the side favoring the subjective interpretation, and Moore (1903, 1912) and Thomson (1986, 1990) on the side favoring the objective interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Sloman 1970, Kratzer 1977, 1981, Jackson 1985, Finlay 2009.

<sup>8</sup> They adopt the scenario from Regan (1980) and Parfit (ms).

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:

	<u>Agent’s Information</u>	<u>Advisor’s Information</u>
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 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*.

Kolodny & 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 favour 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 favour of an admittedly radical semantic view like relativism? We distinguish two related challenges to contextualism in Kolodny & MacFarlane’s objection: a problem of *practical integration* and a problem of *semantic assessment*. We address these in turn.

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<sup>9</sup> For semantic relativism about epistemic modals and/or taste predicates, see Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson 2005, Lasersohn 2005, Egan 2007, Stephenson 2007, MacFarlane forthcoming. 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 Egan 2009, Cappelen 2008). We ignore this view here for the sake of simplicity.

### 1.1. *The practical integration problem*

Kolodny & 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 deliberating.’<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 & MacFarlane claim, according to contextualism advisors do not address the question about 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 & 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 only arises if the ought-judgments of deliberation and advice are relativized to different bodies of information. As Kolodny & 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 & MacFarlane’s scenario Agent asserts his claim in a ‘dialogue’; it is a piece of public 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-

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<sup>10</sup> We agree with Campbell Brown’s observation (discussion) that it is independently implausible that advice typically has this aim. There is nothing atypical about advising a father 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, we might more accurately say that advice typically aims to give the correct answer to questions about which agents *ought* to be deliberating. But Kolodny & MacFarlane’s characterization of advice seems highly plausible in cases like Advisor’s, so the puzzle remains.

<sup>11</sup> A similar view is defended in Horty 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See Dowell (2008) for a theory of how speaker’s intentions determine relevant parameters.

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 & 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 & MacFarlane believe that it is embarrassing for contextualists to embrace either horn. Suppose first (i) that *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 (ii) that *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 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

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<sup>13</sup> Von Fintel & Gillies (2008) draw the same conclusion for epistemic claims.

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

<sup>15</sup> Similar problems arise from the evaluations of eavesdroppers, discussed below.

<sup>16</sup> Note that in this scenario, *Physicist* and her information replace rather than supplement Advisor and his information.

<sup>17</sup> Von Fintel & Gillies (2008) raise a similar objection against contextualism about epistemic claims.

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 & 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<sup>22</sup> as likely to get the answer to his question right if she had chosen not to interfere. 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 & 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

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<sup>18</sup> Kolodny & 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.

<sup>19</sup> Precisely defining the relevant body of information is challenging, and we (authors) disagree about exactly how to do this. Since we argue below that a satisfactory contextualist account must solve the problems on the second horn anyway, we leave this question open. The right account will at least have to be able to balance the value of better information against the value of a timely decision. We also agree with Elizabeth Barnes’ suggestion (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.

<sup>20</sup> We disagree similarly with von Fintel & Gillies’ (2008) diagnosis of the analogous case for epistemic claims.

<sup>21</sup> Here we part company with Janice Dowell (ms), who argues that a news-sensitive strategy is sufficient to vindicate contextualism.

<sup>22</sup> The problem is sharpened if we suppose that the advisor’s information is complex and hence 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. In this circumstance, it would seem that the advisor would assist the agent more by withholding that information than by providing it. But this can’t be right. 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 that without that information there is a probability of 1 that he correctly judges that he ought to leave both shafts open, saving only 9. Clearly in this case Physicist should provide the information, despite that by doing so she makes it less likely that Agent answers his deliberative question correctly.

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 & 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 context 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*,<sup>23</sup> and not simply to determine the correct answers to particular ought-questions. 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*

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<sup>23</sup> We don't believe it is possible to identify any more basic, unified and 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 that 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 shaft 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 deliberation might be concerned with *how* to promote and protect values, including questions of how to weight probabilities and values, and what means one may use.

<sup>24</sup> One might offer different accounts of *why* it is better to promote our values from a position of fuller information (note that a better position for making decisions is no *guarantee* of a better result). Our argument here rests merely on the intuition that it is better.

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>

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 miner's lives, then we can appreciate how Physicist helps Agent address his practical problem even on the second horn of Kolodny & 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 & 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.

### 1.2. *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'.

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<sup>25</sup> This treatment of deontic modals parallels Kent Bach's treatment of epistemic modals (ms). 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 some similarity to a couple of other contextualist strategies. One considered by Kolodny & 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 DeRose 2004), Agent and Advisor are concerned with a common but indeterminate proposition. As Kolodny & 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 & Gillies (2008), suggests that modal claims put into play a range 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 either of these alternatives.

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 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.

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<sup>26</sup> 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 seems less of a problem for news-sensitive contextualism, as it accommodates contradiction for reassessments made prior to the act, while *post facto* retractions do not seem as natural.

Finally, consider that if Agent's claim that he ought to leave both 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 of these claims 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 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. Plenty of 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."

In both of 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,

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<sup>27</sup> For similar arguments against contextualism about epistemic modals see Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherson 2005, Egan 2007, MacFarlane forthcoming, and against contextualism about taste predicates see Lasersohn 2005.

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 1.1, 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 therefore only conversationally relevant in deliberative contexts 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

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<sup>28</sup> For the expectation of reciprocity in gossip see Haidt 2006: 54.

<sup>29</sup> 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...'

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 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>33,34</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

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<sup>30</sup> Richard (2004) 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 have noted that ought-claims involve implicit comparison classes (e.g. Sloman 1970; Jackson 1985). 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". You then retort "Oh no, it ought to be that everyone was already happy so that there was no question of her making them 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.'

<sup>31</sup> One possible contextualist response is to postulate *semantic blindness*: i.e. that insensitive assessments result from a failure to recognize the ambiguity in ought-sentences. Kent Bach (ms) postulates this kind of semantic blindness in defense of (by our classification) contextualism about epistemic modals. However, we think ours is a better and more charitable solution.

<sup>32</sup> This strategy mimics Blackburn's 'quasi-realism' (1993), the project of explaining the realist-looking features of moral discourse with purely expressivist resources.

<sup>33</sup> 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'.

<sup>34</sup> 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.

contextualist should understand context-insensitive assessments of ought-claims.<sup>35</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>36</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 pragmatics puts it at a disadvantage, and favours the apparently simpler relativist account. This is not the case, because some of the phenomena seem rather to favour 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 in accordance with his judgment that he ought to block neither shaft, saving nine of the ten miners. In the subsequent debriefing, despite our 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 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

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<sup>35</sup> For a general discussion of why context-insensitive assessments fit certain kinds of context-dependent expressions (e.g. deontic and epistemic modals, predicates of personal taste, gradable adjectives) but not others (e.g. paradigmatic indexicals, explicitly relativized modals), see Almér & Björnsson (ms).

<sup>36</sup> 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.

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>37</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. 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 favour 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 & 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.<sup>38</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

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<sup>37</sup> Kolodny & MacFarlane consider this problem, which has an analogue for relativism about epistemic modals raised by Dietz (2008).

<sup>38</sup> See MacFarlane forthcoming. This flexible relativism deflects another contextualist objection, offered against relativism about epistemic modals by Kent Bach (ms). 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'; compare: 'Given what *Agent* knows, he ought to block neither shaft')—so the relativist introduces an unnecessary complication into the semantics of modals. But the relativist can offer an interpretation of 'given that *p*' as forcing a particular context of assessment. For more relativist strategies to handle problematic cases, see Stephenson (2007: 514-518).

offered for contextualism, which therefore do not disadvantage contextualism at all.

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

## 2. *Standard-relativity*

Many philosophers have been drawn to the view that normative ‘ought’s are relativized to standards (norms, ends, etc.)<sup>39</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, etc., why moral beliefs diverge between cultures, and why moral disagreement persists among well-informed competent judges. We believe that moral 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 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 favour of semantic relativism, here the evidence is rather alleged to tell in favour 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 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-

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<sup>39</sup> They include Harman 1975, 1996, Wong 1984, Dreier 1990, Copp 1995, and Finlay 2009.

*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>40</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>41</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>42</sup>

### 2.1. *Integrating moral disagreement*

The integration problem for contextualism about standard-relativity parallels the problem raised by Kolodny & 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

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<sup>40</sup> Lyons 1982: 210, Streiffer 2003: 8, Huemer 2005: 50.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Streiffer (2003: 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. Janice Dowell (ms) is working on an account of this kind.

<sup>42</sup> Another way the contextualist can explain our sense that we disagree with Huck is to suggest that we erroneously but perhaps warrantedly assume that there is a shared standard in this case, or in moral disagreements in general (Wong 1984: 79, Finlay 2008: 356-7). Streiffer (2003: 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 even admitting indeterminacy), as would be true 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 (e.g.) a New Guinean headhunter prior to 'civilized' contact, instead of the moral beliefs of a 19<sup>th</sup> century American like Huck, it is arguably less clear that those beliefs *contradict* our own.

the promotion of certain values.<sup>43</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 in such a way 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>44</sup>

According to contextualism, our moral judgments are relativized to the standards to which we *subscribe*. To subscribe to a moral standard is (generally and inter alia)<sup>45</sup> to prefer that people conform to it in their conduct. 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 favour 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>46,47,48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Contrast Streiffer (2003: 6), who assumes that the contextualist must say that the goal of each of the disagreeing parties is to establish the truth of its own position.

<sup>44</sup> 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 restricted to likely or even possible scenarios (see Gibbard 2003).

<sup>45</sup> These qualifications are necessary; 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).

<sup>46</sup> 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.

<sup>47</sup> Some expressivists have agreed that moral judgments incorporate beliefs in standard-relative propositions, explaining disagreement as we propose in this section; see especially Gibbard 1990 and Chrisman 2007. We part company with them on how to understand standard-insensitive assessments, below.

<sup>48</sup> Streiffer (2003) 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 2007.

## 2.2. *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.

One variation on this problem is raised by Brian Weatherson (2008), who suggests that only moral invariantism, and not contextualism, can account for how we attribute moral belief and moral knowledge. 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>49</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>50</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

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<sup>49</sup> Weatherson's target sentence involves 'wrong' rather than 'ought' (and Jefferson Davis rather than Huck Finn): 'Davis believed that helping fugitive slaves was wrong.'

<sup>50</sup> Unlike Weatherson, we *also* think that it can be appropriately evaluated as true, and heard as relating to the norms to which Huck and his society ascribed. See note 55.

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.

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 invariantism is patently false for this epistemic case, it is hard to see how the moral analog could support invariantism.

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.'

A second variation on this problem is raised by Mark Schroeder (2009), who identifies it as contextualism's 'general problem with attitude ascriptions.' 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 1.2. 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 promoting 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 2.1 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: i.e. 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 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 1, 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 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

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<sup>51</sup> We have previously proposed this strategy for defending standard-relative contextualism, in a rudimentary way, in Finlay 2006: 12-14.

<sup>52</sup> This model of moral disagreement is explored and defended in Finlay 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009.

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. Contextualists can understand the inference that Schroeder challenges them 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.

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<sup>53</sup> 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 with case of eavesdropping, which we characterized as simulated advice. Likewise, we understand distant assessments of moral claims as simulated demands; see also note 44.

<sup>54</sup> 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 exchange, A is offering an instrumental evaluation relativized to the killer's goals. B understands this, but substitutes an alternative (moral) standard as normatively trumping the killer's goals, thereby 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 2006). The dynamics of conversations involving fundamental moral disagreement are obviously different, since the interlocutors have conflicting values and conversational purposes. See Finlay 2004, 2005, 2008; see also Barker 2000; Harman 1996.

A rival diagnosis of this exchange appeals to the idea that ought-claims always identify something as the best out of a specific set of alternatives, which can be expanded to introduce a better option like *not* killing (Jackson 1985; see our note 30). But this doesn't work where the change in context alters the ranking of the original options; e.g. it may be morally preferable that the killer failed to achieve his goals (by not using a silencer), given only the alternatives {he succeeds, he fails}.

(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 towards 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>

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<sup>55</sup> As contextualists, we recognize that there are attributions of moral knowledge made with 'anthropological' rather than moral conversational purposes. For instance, it might make perfect sense to say, by way of 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 of Huck and his social environment would be obvious enough, and no endorsement of those standards implied.

<sup>56</sup> Weatherson also objects that treating 'ought' differently in belief and knowledge reports would implausibly allow an interpretation of (A) on which it is non-contradictory:

(A) S believes that he ought to  $\phi$ . Indeed S knows it. But S doesn't know that he ought to  $\phi$ . This is because the two knowledge reports could then 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 the first knowledge report the same content as the second; hence the contradiction. The contradiction could be avoided if the first knowledge report could be made with an anthropological interest and the second with a moralistic. But such shifts of conversational interest do not occur between conjuncts without significant contextual markers (change of voice, stressing the second 'know', etc). See also Kolodny & MacFarlane (ms), who reject this kind of argument.

Consider also Streiffer's dilemma (2003: 9-12), which goes 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 with the subject's attitudinal state.

Brogaard (2008) 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

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. We 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, etc.<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, we in fact do relativize moral claims when we 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 we are talking about when we 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 us—while invariantism has no plausible explanation to offer.

These are claims that need a thorough defence, of course. But the following considerations alone show that invariantism gains no support from the phenomena dealt with here. The problems raised 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 in that area. So context-insensitive assessments cannot *as such* favour invariantism. Furthermore, since contextualism invokes the very same sort of pragmatic considerations (in particular an

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

<sup>57</sup> The semantics for modals orthodox in linguistics (Kratzer 1977, 1981) recognizes such an argument-place, which in deontic uses is filled by some system of norms. For analogous cases against nonrelativized propositions about epistemic modality, see Bach ms, Schaffer ms and Dowell ms.

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 the objections against contextualism can be handled by accepting well-motivated views about the pragmatics of these discourses. We also suspect, although we have not argued for it, that many of our strategies generalize effectively for other normative terms and modal terms.<sup>58</sup>

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