

One Ought Too Many*

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ABSTRACT: Some philosophers hold that 'ought' is ambiguous between a sense expressing a propositional operator and a sense expressing a relation between an agent and an action. We defend the opposing view that 'ought' always expresses a propositional operator against objections that it cannot adequately accommodate an ambiguity in 'ought' sentences between evaluative and deliberative readings, predicting readings of sentences that are not actually available. We show how adopting an independently well-motivated contrastivist semantics for 'ought' according to which 'ought' is always relativized to a contrast set of relevant alternatives enables us to explain the evaluative-deliberative ambiguity and why the availability of these readings depends on sentential grammar.

Normative branches of philosophy take special interest in claims expressed by sentences of the form '*S* ought to ϕ ', where *S* is some agent and ϕ -ing is some action (broadly conceived). We'll call sentences satisfying this description *agential*. These claims raise many important philosophical issues, such as: Which ones are true? What makes them true? How can we know if they are true? What follows from them? Some philosophers have hoped that light would be cast on these issues if we could get clearer on the exact meaning of this word 'ought'. Once we start looking to language for philosophical clues we should notice that the word 'ought' is also employed in different kinds of sentence. It appears in normative sentences with different grammatical forms, like 'It ought to be that Charlie was born a girl', and 'There ought to be less suffering in the world'. For convenience we'll call sentences like these *nonagential*.¹ (It also has a non-normative *epistemic* use meaning

* We owe this play on Bernard Williams' phrase to Jake Ross; Terence Cuneo has previously used it with a different signification as a section title of his book *The Normative Web* (Oxford University Press, 2007). For help with the content of the paper we are grateful to Fabrizio Cariani, Matthew Chrisman, Brian Cutter, Shyam Nair, Jake Ross, Mark Schroeder, Robert Shanklin, and audiences at UT Austin, USC, the Conference on Practical Reasoning and Metaethics at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and the IVth annual Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Justin Snedegar's work on this paper was supported by the USC Oakley Fellowship.

¹ 'Agential' and 'nonagential' are used here merely as convenient labels for two sentence groups of interest. They do not provide an exhaustive classification of 'ought' sentences, many of which are neither agential nor nonagential by these definitions. The classification is also not philosophically deep, as we shall see.

approximately *what is probable*, as in ‘The sky ought to get dark soon’.) In these other sentences, ‘ought’ appears to represent a propositional operator, $O(p)$.

Are these other kinds of sentences clues to the meaning of ‘ought’ in the cases of special interest to normative philosophy? This will be the case if ‘ought’ has just one linguistic meaning, a unified semantics and logical form (syntax) as many linguists hold. Many philosophers have also embraced this view, which we’ll call the *Uniformity Thesis*.² On this view agential sentences like ‘Vince ought to stop driving drunk’ are semantically and logically equivalent to nonagential sentences like ‘It ought to be that Vince stops driving drunk’, with ‘ought’ representing a propositional operator in both. This view is rejected by other philosophers who maintain that at least sometimes the ‘ought’ in agential sentences instead represents a normative relation between the agent S and the action of ϕ -ing, with the logical form $O(S, \phi)$ and meaning roughly *is obligated to* or *has most reason to*.³ According to this *Ambiguity Thesis* ‘ought’ is semantically and logically ambiguous, so it is a mistake to try to draw philosophical lessons about the agential ‘ought’ claims of interest to normative philosophy from the other uses of the word.

In this paper we defend the Uniformity Thesis against the central objection that it cannot account for all the linguistic data from ordinary usage of ‘ought’. Versions of this objection have been raised by a number of philosophers including Gilbert Harman, Peter Geach, Anthony Price, and most recently and rigorously Mark Schroeder. After clarifying which ambiguity is at issue and explaining the Overgeneration problem it faces, we introduce a contrastivist semantics for ‘ought’ and show how it provides resources for accommodating and explaining the problematic data without attributing any semantic or logical ambiguity to the word ‘ought’. Officially we remain neutral about whether contrastivism and the

² The seminal texts in linguistics are Kratzer 1977, 1981. Philosophical advocates of uniformity for at least all normative uses of ‘ought’ include Chisholm 1964, Wertheimer 1972, Williams 1981a, Horty & Belnap 1996, Horty 2001, Finlay 2009, ms.

³ For example Harman 1973, Vermazen 1977, Schroeder 2004, 2011, Price 2008 (who also attributes the view to St. Anselm), Ross 2010, ms. Pritchard (1912: 24) and Geach (1982) claim that ‘ought’ has only the relational and not any propositional sense; we do not take this radical view seriously here. A compromise view (e.g. Broome 1999, Wedgwood 2006, 2007) proposes that ‘ought’ sometimes represents a relation between an agent and a proposition. This yields wrong predictions about the acceptability of various ‘ought’ sentences and the availability of readings, and we do not address it here; see criticism in Schroeder 2004: 343, 2011, Price 2008: 64-6.

Uniformity Thesis itself are correct. But since contrastivism is independently well-motivated and the Uniformity Thesis has the virtue of parsimony, we believe this view should enjoy the presumption of truth unless and until better objections are found.

1. The Ambiguity

‘Ought’ sentences seem ambiguous in a variety of ways. We can distinguish normative readings from epistemic readings, moral from prudential readings, and more. Not all of these differences present a challenge for the Uniformity Thesis, as we’ll explain. The challenge is motivated by one difference in particular, which can be observed between paradigmatic examples of nonagential sentences, like

- (1) It ought to be that every election is free and fair.
- (2) It ought to be that Larry wins the lottery.

and of agential sentences, like

- (3) Bill ought to kiss Lucy.
- (4) Vince ought to stop driving drunk.

The nonagential sentences (1) and (2) say that certain states of affairs ought to be the case (the “ought-to-be”). Here ‘ought’ is commonly glossed as meaning *it is best that...*,⁴ so we can call these readings *evaluative*.⁵ From some state of affairs being best nothing directly follows about how any agent has most reason to act, and so these sentences seem to have at most an indirect bearing on agents’ deliberations. Sentence (2) entails neither that somebody has most reason to rig the lottery so Larry wins, for example, nor even that Larry has most reason to buy a lottery ticket (the odds of his winning would after all be extremely long).

By contrast, the agential sentences (3) and (4) on a natural reading do seem to entail claims about the agents’ reasons to act, and so to bear directly on their deliberations (the “ought-to-do”). They do not, however, entail that any particular state of affairs would be best. We can call these readings *deliberative*. Mark Schroeder identifies five hallmarks that

⁴ E.g. Sloman 1970, Williams 1981b: 125.

⁵ Our terminology follows Schroeder’s. Others have called these readings ‘political’ or ‘situational’.

distinguish deliberative readings from evaluative readings. Unlike the evaluative ‘ought’, the deliberative ‘ought’ (i) matters directly for *advice*; (ii) functions to close *deliberation*; (iii) is characteristically tied to assessments of agents’ *accountability*; (iv) *implies ‘can’*;⁶ and (v) is closely related to *obligation*.⁷ We agree that these differences between readings exist, but reject the claim that the Uniformity Thesis cannot accommodate and explain them.

How can ambiguities in ‘ought’ sentences coherently be admitted without accepting the Ambiguity Thesis? The issue between the Uniformity and Ambiguity Theses more precisely is whether any of these sentential ambiguities are due to the word ‘ought’ itself having more than one meaning. Other explanations of different readings of ‘ought’ sentences are possible that are compatible with a uniform semantics for the word ‘ought’ itself. One possibility is an ambiguity in some other part of the sentence. A solution of this kind is the *agency-in-the-prejacent* theory of Nuel Belnap and John Horty. This theory explains the difference between evaluative and deliberative readings of ‘ought’ sentences by postulating an implicit agency operator, *stit* (‘sees to it that’), present in deliberative readings and absent in evaluative readings.⁸

While Schroeder discusses and rejects the agency-in-the-prejacent theory, other explanations of sentential ambiguities are available to uniformity theorists that to our knowledge have not previously been explored. ‘Ought’ sentences could be *context-sensitive*, in either a semantic or a pragmatic way. (i) If ‘ought’ were *indexical* like ‘now’ and ‘I’ then it would contribute differently to the proposition expressed by a sentence, as determined by a uniform semantic rule that selects a value from the context of use. The word ‘now’ does not have a different semantic meaning at each different time of use, for example, though it is used to refer to different times. Alternatively, (ii) if ‘ought’ is semantically *incomplete* in having one or more implicit places filled by some value intended by the speaker—as, for example, ‘poisonous’ has an argument place for a type of individual: poisonous *to whom or what?*—then a uniform semantics for ‘ought’ would allow indefinitely many different readings of the same

⁶ Here he cites Moore 1922, Humberstone 1971, and Wedgwood 2007.

⁷ Schroeder says only “closely connected” because ‘ought’ is in different ways both weaker and stronger than ‘is obligated’: weaker in that what ought to be done needn’t be obligatory (*viz.* the contrast between ‘ought’ and ‘must’), and stronger in that whereas obligations arguably can conflict, ‘ought’ expresses an all-things-considered verdict.

⁸ Belnap & Horty 1996, Horty 2001. See also discussion in Price 2008: 66n.

‘ought’ sentences. Interpreters would identify the intended proposition through pragmatic cues arising from the speakers’ choice to use those particular sentences in those particular contexts.⁹ Our solution in section 4 is a form of this second strategy, involving semantic incompleteness resolved by pragmatics.

Ambiguity theorists believe that the evaluative/deliberative ambiguity provides an especially and perhaps even uniquely strong case for an ambiguity in ‘ought’ itself, because it appears to be not merely semantic but also *logical* (syntactic).¹⁰ Grammatically, this means that these two senses of ‘ought’ would obey different rules in composing meaningful sentences with other words. Whereas the evaluative ‘ought’ takes a sentence as its object and logically expresses an operator on propositions, the deliberative ‘ought’ takes two objects, a noun referring to an agent and an infinitival verb phrase referring to an action, and logically expresses a relation between the agent and the action. Consequently the Ambiguity Thesis yields a testable kind of prediction: that ‘ought’ sentences with certain syntax will only admit one kind of reading and not the other.

Naïvely, one might suppose this prediction and hence the Ambiguity Thesis itself to be already confirmed by the association of agential ‘ought’ sentences with deliberative readings and nonagential ‘ought’ sentences with evaluative readings, which we utilized ourselves to illustrate the ambiguity, above. But care is needed, because ‘ought’ sentences with the grammatical form of agential sentences also admit evaluative readings. For example, the sentences

⁹ Any way of drawing a semantics/pragmatics distinction is controversial. Here we follow Kent Bach, who writes, “Contextual information in the broad sense is anything that the hearer is to take into account to determine (in the sense of ascertain) the speaker’s communicative intention... In this broad, pragmatic sense... context does not literally determine content. So not just any sort of context variability is semantic... Pragmatics is concerned with whatever information is relevant, over and above the linguistic properties of a sentence, to understanding its utterance.” (1997) If this distinction between broad and narrow context is rejected, these factors and our solution might rather be classified as *metasemantic* (with a Gricean trigger), as Fabrizio Cariani suggests to us.

¹⁰ This contrasts with the normative/epistemic distinction, for example, which might initially be thought clear evidence of ambiguity. But normative and epistemic ‘ought’s have both been analyzed as propositional operators, and several theorists have offered ways of accounting for the distinction with a uniform semantics for ‘ought’; e.g. Sloman 1970, Wheeler 1974, Kratzer 1981, Finlay 2009.

- (1a) Every election ought to be free and fair.
(2a) Larry ought to win the lottery.

have natural evaluative readings as equivalent to (1) and (2) respectively, lacking Schroeder's five hallmarks of the deliberative 'ought'. The linguistic explanation of this is that 'ought' is a *raising* verb, like other sentential operators in English. An idiosyncrasy of English grammar is the requirement that every sentence have a grammatical subject (noun or noun-phrase). For example, although the word 'might' takes a whole sentence (like 'Today is Sunday') as its object, it is ungrammatical to say 'Might be that today is Sunday'. One way of complying with the rule is by employing an expletive or non-referring subject term like 'there' or 'it', as in 'It might be that today is Sunday'. This is found in the nonagential 'ought' sentences like (1) and (2) with the constructions '*There* ought to be...' and '*It* ought to be that...'. A different way of complying with the rule is by "raising" the noun from the subordinate or *prejacent* sentence (e.g. 'Today is Sunday') to the subject position before the verb (e.g. 'Today might be Sunday')—hence the name "raising verb". English grammar therefore allows the nonagential sentence (2) to be transformed via subject-raising into the agential sentence (2a) without change in meaning or logical form.

The upshot is that if the Ambiguity Thesis is correct then agential 'ought' sentences will be logically ambiguous between (i) evaluative readings where 'ought' is a raising verb like 'might', and (ii) deliberative readings where 'ought' is rather a *control* verb like 'wants' and 'tries'. (A control verb has a semantic subject for its verb argument that is also the semantic subject of the control verb itself. For example, in 'Bill wants to kiss Lucy', Bill is the subject of both the control verb 'want' and its verb argument 'kiss'—i.e. the wanting and the kissing at issue are both Bill's.) Therefore it is impossible to confirm the Ambiguity Thesis by finding that agential 'ought' sentences do not admit evaluative readings, as it concedes to the Uniformity Thesis that evaluative readings of these sentences will always be available. However, the behavior of raising and control verbs do differ in some significant ways, and it is to these differences that ambiguity theorists must appeal for evidence that deliberative readings can only arise from a control sense of 'ought'. We turn now to examine this evidence.

2. The Overgeneration Problem

The central problem for the Uniformity Thesis is *overgeneration*. Semantic and logical uniformity seems to predict the availability of deliberative readings of ‘ought’ sentences which in fact only admit evaluative readings.¹¹ There are two major pieces of data here. The first comes from nonagential ‘ought’ sentences, with the grammatical constructions ‘It ought to be that...’ and ‘There ought to be...’. Only raising verbs can occur in these constructions. Control verbs cannot because they require genuinely referring nouns in subject position; hence ‘It wants to be the case that...’ and ‘There wants to be...’ are impermissible. The Ambiguity Thesis therefore predicts that nonagential ‘ought’ sentences should never admit deliberative readings, as they have only non-referring nouns in subject position. By contrast, the Uniformity Thesis entails that every agential ‘ought’ sentence can be grammatically transformed into a semantically and logically equivalent nonagential sentence. So it seems to predict rather that nonagential ‘ought’ sentences should admit all the same readings as their agential transformations, including the deliberative readings of those sentences. Our opponents claim that the data confirms the prediction of the Ambiguity Thesis against the prediction of the Uniformity Thesis: nonagential ‘ought’ sentences like (1) and (2) admit only evaluative and never deliberative readings. This is the first piece of the case for semantic and logical ambiguity in ‘ought’.

The second piece of data comes from *passivization*.¹² Contrast the sentences

(5a) Bill ought to kiss Lucy.

(5b) Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill.

According to the Uniformity Thesis, (5a) is formed by applying ‘ought’ to the preagent sentence ‘Bill kisses Lucy’. ‘Bill’ becomes the grammatical subject of the sentence by being raised from its position as the subject of the preagent. Similarly, (5b) is formed by applying ‘ought’ to the preagent sentence ‘Lucy is kissed by Bill’, with ‘Lucy’ being raised from its position as the subject of the preagent. Since the sentence ‘Lucy is kissed by Bill’ is simply the passivization of the sentence ‘Bill kisses Lucy’, these two preagents seem to differ only

¹¹ In his 2011, Schroeder claims there is both an overgeneration problem and an *undergeneration* problem. In conversation he agrees that both are really instances of overgeneration, as explained below.

¹² See also Humberstone 1971, Harman 1973, Geach 1982, Price 2008.

grammatically and not semantically or logically.¹³ The Uniformity Thesis therefore seems to predict that (5a) and (5b) also differ only grammatically, and are semantically and logically equivalent, just like

(6a) Bill might kiss Lucy.

(6b) Lucy might be kissed by Bill.

For convenience we will refer to ‘ought’ sentences like (5b) as *passive*.¹⁴

As observed, the Ambiguity Thesis accepts that (5a) has an evaluative reading with a raising ‘ought’, which is equivalent to (5b). But it also predicts that on the rival, deliberative reading the meaning of (5a) will differ significantly from that of (5b). In (5a) ‘ought’ logically connects the agent Bill with the action of kissing Lucy, while in (5b) ‘ought’ logically connects Lucy with the “action” of being kissed by Bill. The Ambiguity Thesis therefore predicts that the readings of this pair of sentences will differ significantly, like those of the following two sentences involving an uncontroversial control verb:

(7a) Bill wants to kiss Lucy.

(7b) Lucy wants to be kissed by Bill.

Here too the data is claimed to confirm the prediction of the Ambiguity Thesis and not that of the Uniformity Thesis. Whereas (5a) has a deliberative reading, “on which it is appropriate for advice for *Bill*, on which it settles *Bill*’s deliberative question of what to do, on which *Bill* is accountable if he does not kiss Lucy, which implies that *Bill* is able to kiss Lucy, and which is on a par with the claim that *Bill* has an obligation to kiss Lucy”,¹⁵ it is maintained that (5b) allows no deliberative reading. This is the second major piece of the case for semantic ambiguity in ‘ought’.

¹³ On some views of propositions, e.g. as structured entities that mirror the structure of their syntactic trees, these sentences express distinct propositions (we thank Fabrizio Cariani for this observation). But even these views will hold that the sentences express logically equivalent propositions, which is enough to generate the problem since deliberative ‘ought’ claims are not logically equivalent to merely evaluative ‘ought’ claims. For this reason and because such views aren’t widely held among philosophers we ignore them below.

¹⁴ Calling (5b) the passivization proper of (5a) would be to assume what is in question, that ‘ought’ in (5a) is a raising verb.

¹⁵ Schroeder 2011: 15, his emphasis.

At first glance this seems a strong case for ambiguity.¹⁶ Our primary response will be to demonstrate that the Uniformity Thesis can accommodate and explain these data. However, we pause briefly here to voice some doubts about the data.¹⁷ While we agree that nonagential and passive ‘ought’ sentences do not naturally encourage deliberative readings, it seems to us that these readings can sometimes be available, especially with a suitable context. Consider the scenario of a dating game show where the host is about to reveal which of the contestants is obliged to give Lucy a kiss. In this context we find it quite natural to interpret his utterance of (5b), ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by...Bill!’ as having all five of Schroeder’s hallmarks for deliberative ‘ought’s. The parallel point holds, we think, of ‘It ought to be that...Bill kisses Lucy!’

A reader might be tempted to suppose that the difficulty of obtaining these deliberative readings itself supports the Ambiguity Thesis over the Uniformity Thesis. This characteristic of nonagential and passive ‘ought’ sentences is certainly something that a defender of the Uniformity Thesis is obliged to explain; we try to discharge this burden below in section 4. But if our intuitions about the data are correct this presents a more serious problem for the Ambiguity Thesis, which predicts that deliberative readings of these nonagential and passive sentences should not be possible at all, just as there is no permissible reading of (7b) as equivalent to (7a). For the sake of argument however we will proceed by assuming that the ambiguity theorists’ description of the data is correct.

¹⁶ Schroeder supplements this evidence by arguing that ‘ought’ on a deliberative reading satisfies three common linguistic tests for distinguishing control verbs from raising verbs. The upshot of these tests is that control verbs require a subject noun referring to a kind of agent or object of the right kind to stand in the relation expressed by the verb. The deliberative ‘ought’ allegedly shares this requirement, allowing only subject terms that refer to an agent. We provide an explanation of this feature of deliberative ‘ought’ sentences below for a uniform raising semantics. Price (2008: 52) provides a further objection to uniformity appealing to the difference between ‘Everyone ought to *F*’ and ‘It ought to be that everyone *F*s’. This overlooks the scope ambiguity in the former sentence between $\forall xO(Fx)$ and $O(\forall xFx)$.

¹⁷ For related objections to Schroeder’s data see Chrisman (forthcoming). Chrisman challenges the Ambiguity Thesis by presenting competing evidence that ‘ought’ does not have a control sense, whereas here we attempt to defuse Schroeder’s evidence by giving an alternative explanation consistent with semantic uniformity. Chrisman observes two tests for control verbs that ‘ought’ fails: (i) they allow *er-nominalization*—compare ‘the wanter’, ‘the trier’ (ok) with ‘the mightier’, ‘the oughter’ (not ok), and (ii) they allow passive constructions like ‘it was wanted’ (contrast ‘it was oughted’, which patterns with ‘it was mighted’). We take no stand on the force of these objections here.

3. A Contrastivist Account of Ambiguity

Only one strategy for explaining the difference between evaluative and deliberative readings of ‘ought’ sentences with a uniform, raising semantics for ‘ought’ has been directly considered by ambiguity theorists. On that strategy, the agency-in-the-prejacent theory, evaluative readings result from interpreting ‘ought’ sentences as containing an implicit agency operator, *stit* (‘sees to it that’) in the prejacent. A distinction can then be drawn between *It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy* (evaluative) and *It ought to be that Bill sees to it that he kisses Lucy* (deliberative), as two possible readings of ‘Bill ought to kiss Lucy’. Schroeder argues that this theory falls prey to the Overgeneration problem. Since it locates the ambiguity in the prejacent sentence, ‘Bill kisses Lucy’, it apparently predicts that this ambiguity would also occur in nonagential and passive ‘ought’ sentences, which are formed by applying ‘ought’ to the same prejacent.

Even if this objection against the agency-in-the-prejacent theory is successful,¹⁸ there are other ways of explaining the ambiguity with a uniform, raising ‘ought’, which do not locate the ambiguity in the prejacent sentence. A *contrastivist* semantics for ‘ought’ provides the alternative that we wish to explore. According to contrastivism ‘ought’ claims are always relativized to a contrast class. For example, to claim that it ought to be the case that Larry wins the lottery is to claim of some set of alternative propositions $\{a, b, c, \dots\}$ salient in the context that it ought to be the case that Larry wins the lottery *rather than* that any other of a, b, c, \dots obtains.¹⁹ Different contrast classes generate different readings for ‘ought’ claims; for

¹⁸ It could be resisted by denying that ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill’ is allowable as a passivization of ‘Bill ought to [stit: he] kiss Lucy’. This could be motivated by taking ‘stit’ to be syntactically the main verb and to leave a grammatical “trace”. The correct passivization would then be ‘Bill’s kissing Lucy ought to be seen to by Bill’. However, this objection depends on some controversial assumptions in linguistics and *stit* semantics. It also provides no solution to overgeneration worries for nonagential sentences. We prefer our contrastivist solution below.

¹⁹ Contrastivism permits different syntactic realizations. Perhaps ‘ought’ has an argument-place for a contrast class in its logical form (e.g. Finlay 2009). Or perhaps it directs us to a contrast class privileged in the context that determines truth-conditions without appearing in the logical form. We take no stand on this issue here. We also assume that contrast sets do not need to be exhaustive of logical space, and that they are *resolution-sensitive*, allowing alternatives to be distinguished at varying levels of detail; see Yalcin (2011) and Cariani (forthcoming). There are also reasons to think that ‘ought’ does not take a contrast set as a direct argument, but rather takes an “anchor” function or description, which determines a contrast set relative to a context or parameter. This may be necessary to accommodate sentences like ‘Every person in the room

example, saying that it ought to be that Larry wins the lottery rather than that *a* or *b* is to make a different claim than saying that it ought to be that Larry wins the lottery rather than that *b* or *c*. Contrastivism about ‘ought’ is independently well-motivated, having been embraced by numerous philosophers and for a variety of reasons.²⁰ If the normative ‘ought’ is correctly glossed as meaning *best*, for example, then it would inherit its contrastive character from the contrastive character of *better than*.²¹

Contrastivism offers a simple explanation of how ‘ought’ sentences can be ambiguous without any ambiguity in ‘ought’ itself—or in the prejacent sentence either. We can instead explain the ambiguity as arising from different kinds of contrast classes. A single proposition as expressed by a prejacent sentence such as ‘Bill kisses Lucy’ can allow different dimensions of contrast. The relevant contrast can be supplied in various ways. In ordinary speech it is common to indicate it by focus, as conveyed by intonational stress and other forms of emphasis.²² For example, contrast the following sentences, with italics indicating focus:²³

(8) Bill kisses Lucy.

(8a) *Bill* kisses Lucy.

(8b) Bill *kisses* Lucy.

(8c) Bill kisses *Lucy*.

(8d) Bill *kisses Lucy*.

ought to kiss all the others’, where the relevant contrast set will be different for each person in the room. We thank Errol Lord for raising this issue.

²⁰ Sloman 1970, Jackson 1985, Finlay 2009, ms, Cariani 2009, forthcoming, Snedegar forthcoming.

²¹ One of us has argued elsewhere for a uniform semantics for normative and epistemic uses of ‘ought’ (Finlay 2009, 2010, ms).

²² See Rooth 1992. Schaffer 2004, 2008 also appeals to focus in his defense of contrastivism about ‘knows’. A contrast class might also become salient simply by being the class of alternatives under discussion in the context, or the class of alternatives among which the agent (or perhaps the speaker) is deliberating. Cf. Cariani’s discussion (forthcoming) of the *deliberative question*.

²³ We are not suggesting that (8a)-(8d) are semantically contrastive; this is one sentence expressing one proposition. The contrasts involved in an assertion of this sentence are rather pragmatic, concerning the relevance of the proposition in the context. Is the conversational interest in what Bill is up to? In what is happening to Lucy? In what Bill is doing to Lucy? In whom Bill is kissing? ...

In (8a) the focus is on ‘Bill’, naturally suggesting a contrast with a set of alternative propositions which each involve some person other than Bill kissing Lucy; e.g. {Tom kisses Lucy, Jack kisses Lucy, Mary kisses Lucy, ...}. In (8b) the focus is on ‘kisses’, naturally suggesting a contrast with a set of alternatives in which Bill acts in some different way towards Lucy; e.g. {Bill shakes hands with Lucy, Bill says goodnight to Lucy, Bill hugs Lucy, ...}. In (8c) the focus is on ‘Lucy’, naturally suggesting contrast with a set of alternatives in which Bill kisses someone other than Lucy; e.g. {Bill kisses Mary, Bill kisses Jill, Bill kisses Tom...}. In (8d) the focus is on ‘kisses Lucy’, suggesting contrast with a set of alternatives in which Bill does other things, perhaps with other people. In the case of (8) where no part of the sentence is emphasized, possible contrasts include sets of alternatives in which something completely different happens, perhaps involving different people and actions. For example, A: “What happens next in your play?” B: “Bill kisses Lucy”.

These different contrasts are retained and exploited semantically when a propositional, raising ‘ought’ takes the sentence ‘Bill kisses Lucy’ as its prejacent:

- (9) Bill ought to kiss Lucy.
- (9a) *Bill* ought to kiss Lucy.
- (9b) Bill ought to *kiss* Lucy.
- (9c) Bill ought to kiss *Lucy*.
- (9d) Bill ought to *kiss Lucy*.

In each case the focus makes it natural to read the ‘ought’ sentence as saying that the state of affairs that Bill kisses Lucy is *better* (in some sense) than any of the alternatives in the contrast class suggested by that focus. So, for example, we read (9a) as saying that it is better that *Bill* be the person who kisses Lucy (than that it be Tom, or Jack, or Mary, etc. who does), while we read (9b) as saying that it is better that what Bill does to Lucy is *kiss* her (than that he shake her hand, tell her goodnight, hug her, etc.). These natural readings of (9a)-(9d) all differ significantly from each other, showing that when supplemented with contrastivism, the Uniformity Thesis can accommodate major ambiguities in ‘ought’ sentences.

These contrastivist ambiguities are plausibly relevant to the difference between evaluative and deliberative readings of ‘ought’ sentences. We hypothesize that to get a deliberative reading of an ‘ought’ claim for an agent *S* is approximately *to interpret it as having a*

content that S could (if she justifiedly believed it) appropriately use to settle her deliberations about what to do. Deliberation aims at settling on one course of action out of a set of options lying within the agent’s power. Hence, deliberating agents try to identify the best of the options within their power. We can then define the notion of a *deliberative set for S*: a contrast set of propositions involving alternative options *S* is able to choose.²⁴ So the kind of contrast set naturally suggested by the focus on (9a), for example, i.e. {Tom kisses Lucy, Jack kisses Lucy, Mary kisses Lucy, ...}, will not be a deliberative set for Bill, or presumably for any other agent.^{25, 26} But each of (9b)-(9d) can naturally be read as suggesting a deliberative set for Bill. He may deliberate over whether to *kiss* Lucy, rather than shake her hand, tell her good night, or hug her; here (9b) will be at issue. Or he may deliberate over whether to kiss *Lucy*, rather than Mary, Jill, or Tom; here (9c) will be at issue.

Our contrastivist hypothesis is that to get a reading of an ‘ought’ sentence as deliberative for *S*, it is necessary that it be interpreted as relativized to a deliberative set for *S*. (We do not claim that a deliberative set interpretation is also *sufficient*; there may be other

²⁴ Can a deliberative set consist of propositions that were once but are no longer options for the agent, concerning what is now in the past? (We thank Kathryn Lindeman for raising this question.) The answer should depend on whether retrospective ‘ought’ claims are rightly classified as deliberative or as non-deliberative; our sense is that the distinction isn’t clearly defined for these cases. They do not satisfy all of Schroeder’s hallmarks for deliberative oughts as formulated, but may satisfy variations of them; e.g. they would have been relevant for advice and deliberation at the time when they were the agent’s options.

²⁵ Perhaps it could be a deliberative set for God. Arguably, a deliberative set for *S* doesn’t always have to consist in propositions about *S*. For example, Chrisman (forthcoming) observes that sentences like ‘Rump roast ought to cook slowly’ and ‘Invitations ought to go out by post’ can be used to give advice, in which context they can have all Schroeder’s hallmarks for a deliberative ‘ought’. But they are not plausibly read as relativized to deliberative sets *for rump roasts/invitations*.

²⁶ But isn’t a deliberative reading compatible with placing focus on the agent? Consider the following exchange. A: “Did you say that Tom ought to kiss Lucy?” B: “No, I said that *Bill* ought to kiss Lucy. He’s the one who promised to kiss her, not Tom.” We accept that a deliberative reading is natural here, and so that focus needn’t always function to indicate the contrast class supplied to ‘ought’. Even on contrastivism, speakers will sometimes need to draw other kinds of contrasts. For example there are two separate contrasts operative in “What I said was that *Bill* ought to kiss Lucy (out of: he kisses Lucy, he kisses Jill, he kisses Mary, ...), rather than that *Tom* ought to kiss Lucy (out of: he kisses Lucy, he kisses Jill, he kisses Mary, ...)” Here a contrast is drawn between two contrastive (and intuitively deliberative) claims. We think this plausibly elucidates the exchange between A and B.

necessary conditions.²⁷) The availability of deliberative set readings can be expected to depend on a variety of other, pragmatic factors in addition to focus. Some ‘ought’ sentences, like ‘Larry ought to win the lottery’, will resist deliberative set readings because they involve events that aren’t sufficiently in the agent’s power. Some contexts of utterance will strongly suggest deliberative set readings as what is required for a cooperative contribution to the conversation. Whispering to Bill ‘You ought to kiss Lucy!’ while he is saying goodnight to her on her doorstep, for example, will strongly suggest a deliberative set reading like that made salient by (9b), since the alternative nondeliberative set readings—will not ordinarily be so cooperatively communicated in that context, like telling him that it is better that *he* kisses Lucy, than that Tom, Jack, or Mary does.

Plausibly, an ‘ought’ sentence will satisfy Schroeder’s five hallmarks for the deliberative ‘ought’ if (typically), and only if it is given a deliberative set reading, as follows. (i) *Deliberation*: as we’ve already observed, an agent deliberates to identify the best out of courses of action within her power.²⁸ (ii) *Advice*: similarly, a cooperative advisor aims to inform an agent about which is best out of courses of action within her power. (iii) *Implies ‘Can’*: it is trivially true that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ if relativized to a deliberative set, since we have defined this as a set of options within the agent’s power. (iv) *Accountability*: plausibly, agents are accountable for choosing the best course of action within their power, and not accountable for what is not within their power. (v) *Obligation*: plausibly, an agent has an obligation-like relationship to an action (e.g. having most reason to perform it) if and only if it is the best action in her power.

Contrastivism therefore offers a promising way to accommodate and explain a difference between evaluative and deliberative readings of ‘ought’ sentences without positing any semantic or logical ambiguity in ‘ought’ itself.

²⁷ We are especially sympathetic to the objection that a deliberative ‘ought’ doesn’t identify an option in an agent’s power as being best in some *objective* sense (e.g. from the “point of view of the universe”); see Ross 2010, ms. Plausibly, a deliberative reading requires that the option be identified as “best” in some agent-relative sense. One of us has argued elsewhere that normative ‘ought’ claims are also relativized to *ends* (Finlay 2009). A deliberative reading of an ‘ought’ claim may require relativization to the “agent’s ends” in some appropriate sense. This will block Jacob Ross’s argument for ambiguity.

²⁸ This “best” in deliberation and advice seems information-relative, raising complex issues that need not be addressed here. For discussion see Kolodny and MacFarlane ms, Björnsson and Finlay 2010.

4. A Contrastivist Solution to the Overgeneration Problem

Can this contrastivist theory escape the Overgeneration problem, the central objection to the Uniformity Thesis? Schroeder diagnoses the problem as an inevitable result of locating the ambiguity in the prejacent instead of in ‘ought’. Since the contrastivist explanation locates it rather in an implicit argument place of the ‘ought’ might we thereby evade the objection? But the overgeneration data teach a broader lesson: that the ‘ought’ sentences resisting deliberative readings (i.e. passive and nonagential sentences) are precisely those whose grammar dictates that they can only involve a raising ‘ought’ and not a control ‘ought’. It makes no difference whether the uniformity theorist locates the ambiguity in the prejacent or somewhere else; either way he faces the challenge of giving an explanation of this correlation that is not *ad hoc*. Ambiguity theorists maintain that this challenge cannot be met, and therefore that the only viable treatments of deliberative readings are those appealing to a distinct sense of ‘ought’ as a control verb.

At first glance contrastivism about ‘ought’ seems to offer nothing that addresses the problem. If the ambiguity in ‘ought’ sentences arises neither from ‘ought’ itself nor from the prejacent sentence but rather from differences in a contextually salient set of alternatives, then one might reasonably suppose that mere grammatical differences in how ‘ought’ and the prejacent sentence are composed shouldn’t make any difference for the availability of particular readings. Deliberative-set readings should be no less available for nonagential sentences like ‘It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy’ and passive sentences like ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill’ than for agential ‘ought’ sentences like ‘Bill ought to kiss Lucy’.

The contrastivist needs an explanation for why these grammatical differences affect the availability of deliberative-set readings of ‘ought’ sentences. Ambiguity theorists dismiss the notion that merely grammatical differences could determine the semantic interpretation of ‘ought’ sentences as being evaluative or deliberative, but we think there is a plausible pragmatic story that the contrastivist can tell in support of the Uniformity Thesis. The Gricean principle sensitive to grammatical differences is the maxim of Manner, which concerns *how* things are said.²⁹ Of particular relevance is the submaxim we will call *Efficiency*: “Avoid unnecessary prolixity”. *Efficiency* implies that a speaker will use the shortest and

²⁹ Grice 1989: 27.

simplest sentence she can unless she has special reasons to do otherwise. The use of a longer, more awkward sentence will therefore pragmatically signal that the speaker has some special reason for not selecting the more efficient sentence. Consider for example the following pairs of sentences, borrowed from Levinson (2000):

(10a) It's possible that the plane will be late.

(10b) It's not impossible that the plane will be late.

(11a) Bill stopped the car.

(11b) Bill got the car to stop.

Semantically each member of these pairs of sentences does not have significantly different truth conditions. But the lesser efficiency of the second member of each pair indicates that a speaker who uses it has some special reason for selecting it over the alternative. For (10b), perhaps the speaker intends to signal that this particular plane is less likely to be late than is typical, or that the possibility it will be late is too negligible to merit comment. For (11b), the speaker may intend to signal that Bill had to stop the car in an unusual way because the brakes failed.³⁰

We shall now argue that a uniform contrastivist semantics for 'ought' can explain the overgeneration data by appealing to *Efficiency*. Consider first the case of a passive 'ought' sentence like 'Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill'. This sentence is less efficient than its active counterpart 'Bill ought to kiss Lucy', and so *Efficiency* tells us to expect a special reason for its use. Hence, the ambiguity theorists' claim that the choice of active or passive voice makes no difference to our interpretation of a sentence is simply mistaken. The passive voice differs from the active voice in where it places *focus*. In particular, passive voice provides a means of de-emphasizing the agent by eliminating reference to her or him; compare 'The cookies were stolen' with 'Someone stole the cookies'.³¹ This cannot be done with the active

³⁰ Consider also Levinson's *M Heuristic*: "What's said in an abnormal way isn't normal" (2000: 38-9).

³¹ Here is *The Oxford English Grammar* on the subject: "A valid reason for resorting to the passive is that it is then possible to omit any mention of the agent (or cause) of the action... The usual motivation for omitting mention of the agent is that identification of the agent is irrelevant or intended to appear so." (Greenbaum 1996, §3.12) Less authoritatively but more suggestively, here is an example of lay online advice, from "Grammar Girl": "Depending on the context, it might make more sense to write, 'The cookies were stolen', instead of 'Somebody stole the cookies'... If you

voice because of the requirement that every sentence have a grammatical subject, which in active-voice sentences must be the agent-noun.

We have already observed that shifting focus is a natural way of controlling the salience of different contrast sets. A natural hypothesis is therefore that passive ‘ought’ sentences resist deliberative readings because the use of passive voice has the effect of placing focus on the preagent in a way that strongly raises the salience of nondeliberative contrast sets. So, for example, ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill’ places focus on the preagent in a way that suggests an evaluative contrast set like {Tom kisses Lucy, Jack kisses Lucy, Mary kisses Lucy...}, rather than a deliberative contrast class like {Bill kisses Mary, Bill kisses Jill, Bill kisses Tom...}. This hypothesis receives support if we consider which readings are natural when a contrast is made explicit. For example, ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill rather than *J*’ is more naturally read as meaning that Bill rather than *J* ought to kiss Lucy, and not as meaning that Bill ought to kiss Lucy rather than kiss *J*. We can increase the salience of the latter contrast set by adding intonational focus; e.g. ‘*Lucy* ought to be kissed by Bill rather than *J*’.

Can the use of passive sentences be predicted to have this effect on the basis of the contrastivist account of the deliberative/evaluative ambiguity? We argued in the last section that focus determines the dimension of contrast; e.g. that putting the focus on the agent (e.g. ‘*Bill* ought to kiss Lucy’) suggests an evaluative set in which the alternatives differ by agent, like {Tom kisses Lucy, Jack kisses Lucy, ...}, while putting the focus on the patient (e.g. ‘Bill ought to kiss *Lucy*’) can suggest a deliberative set in which the alternatives differ by patient, like {Bill kisses Lucy, Bill kisses Mary, ...}. What we need to explain is that passive ‘ought’ sentences suggest an evaluative set. So we should expect to find that passive sentences place focus on the *agent* rather than on the patient or elsewhere. This looks like a problem: haven’t we found that passive voice functions rather to shift focus *away* from the agent? But this problem is easily solved. We observed above that the passive voice has this function because it allows elimination of any reference to an agent. The corresponding passivization

want to put the focus on the cookies, use passive voice. Alternatively, if you want to put the focus on the unknown thief, use active voice.” (Accessed 3-8-12 at <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/active-voice-versus-passive-voice.aspx>).

of (5a) is therefore ‘Lucy ought to be kissed’.³² But significantly, the passive ‘ought’ sentences like (5b) we are considering are more verbose: ‘Lucy ought to be kissed *by Bill*’ (compare ‘The cookies were stolen by somebody’). Here the speaker has gone to the extra length of attaching a complement clause (‘by Bill’) that is not grammatically required in order to explicitly refer to the agent. *Efficiency* tells us she must have a special reason for doing so. Any special reason for referring to an agent places focus on that agent. Hence passivization can also be a device for putting extra focus on the agent-noun moved out of subject position.³³ By contrast, explicit reference to an agent in an active voice sentence like an agential ‘ought’ sentence cannot by itself place focus on the agent, since for the active voice this reference is necessary to supply a grammatical subject.

We therefore have a pragmatic explanation for why passive sentences but not agential sentences will resist deliberative readings if a uniform contrastivist semantics for ‘ought’ is correct. Passive sentences like (5b) place focus on the agent by virtue of the inefficiency of their reference to the agent, thereby indicating an evaluative contrast set. By contrast, because agential sentences like (5a) ‘Bill ought to kiss Lucy’ are maximally efficient, their grammar does not itself place focus on any word, permitting both evaluative- and deliberative-set readings.

This solution for passive ‘ought’ sentences does not directly extend to the other half of the Overgeneration problem, involving nonagential sentences like ‘It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy’. Here grammar does not seem to place focus on any particular part of the prejacent ‘Bill kisses Lucy’, so we do not yet have an explanation why nonagential sentences would resist deliberative readings if contrastivism is correct. However, these sentences are significantly more verbose and awkward than their agential counterparts, so *Efficiency* can be applied here too. When interpreting the use of a nonagential sentence, we can assume that

³² This sentence isn’t naturally read as deliberative either, which can easily be explained. Suppressing any reference to an agent naturally suggests that the identity of the agent is irrelevant—what is relevant is that Lucy gets kissed, no matter by whom—which will generally block a deliberative set reading for any particular agent.

³³ See also *The Oxford English Grammar*: “There is a tendency to put the most important information at the end of a tone unit, its climax... The tone is generally on the stressed syllable of just one word, but the focus of information—the part that the listener’s attention is directed to—may extend over more than one word.” (Greenbaum 1996, §10.15). This datum may also be relevant to our explanation below of why nonagential sentences resist deliberative readings, if we consider the prejacent itself as the climax.

the speaker has a special reason for using the less efficient sentence. Why doesn't she rather exploit the ability of 'ought' to raise a subject from the prejacent? While the solution to this seems less obvious to us than in the case of passive sentences, there are some plausible answers we can explore.

An obvious reason for using the nonagential sentence would be that the speaker intends to prevent a reading that would be salient if she used the most efficient, agential sentence instead. This is to invoke a pragmatic maxim to avoid potentially misleading ambiguity.³⁴ Since nonagential sentences clearly resist deliberative readings while (active voice) agential sentences at least often encourage deliberative readings (as evidenced by our ability to set up the contrast between evaluative and deliberative readings in section 1 by presenting examples of these two kinds of sentence), this suggests that use of an inefficient nonagential sentence must indicate that the speaker intends a nondeliberative set reading. Since the agential sentence is more efficient, speakers can be expected to use it for merely evaluative 'ought' claims so long as there are enough other cues to make the intended evaluative contrast set overridingly salient; for example if the proposition expressed by the prejacent isn't a deliberative option for the agent. This is what we find with (1a), 'Every election ought to be free and fair', and (2a), 'Larry ought to win the lottery', which strongly encourage an evaluative reading due to the nature of their content. Use of a nonagential sentence would therefore be warranted just in case an unwanted deliberative reading would otherwise be salient.

This tendency of nonagential sentences to indicate evaluative readings is something that contrastivism needs to explain, however, and not something it can simply help itself to. Since agential sentences are ambiguous between deliberative and evaluative readings an explanation is needed for why nonagential sentences would be used to block one kind of reading and not the other. We propose two different but complementary answers, one based on characteristics of agential sentences, the other on characteristics of nonagential sentences.

³⁴ Grice's own submaxim directs us simply to "avoid ambiguity", but as Fabrizio Cariani rightly points out this is not in general a requirement of felicitous communication.

First, we hypothesize that use of agential sentences carries a default presumption of relativization to a deliberative set. This could be a generalized conversational implicature based on the normal use of ‘ought’ for practical purposes like giving advice, expressing reproach, and concluding deliberation.³⁵ Or perhaps raising an agent-noun to subject-position functions to place focus on the action, generating a deliberative set for the agent like {(Bill) kisses Mary, (Bill) hugs Lucy, (Bill) greets Tom, ...}. Or alternatively, perhaps raising an agent-noun is simply a semi-conventionalized communicative device for indicating a deliberative set for that agent. This cue would of course be highly defeasible, given how easily we can use agential sentences to express evaluative claims, especially by use of focus. But in situations where it is not defeated such a presumption would provide a reason to use a less efficient nonagential sentence if an evaluative set is intended instead. These may include situations where the prejacent sentence naturally lends itself to a deliberative reading (e.g. ‘It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy’), or where focus is more difficult to utilize as in written communication (since italics allow less nuance than intonation).

Second, we can look at the intrinsic grammatical features of nonagential sentences themselves. One significant feature is that they provide the only natural way of forming an ‘ought’ sentence that keeps its prejacent sentence grammatically intact; i.e. ‘Bill kisses Lucy’ appears intact in ‘It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy’ (nonagential), but not in ‘Bill ought to kiss Lucy’ (agential) or in ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill’ (passive). We can therefore reason from the speaker’s choice to use an inefficient nonagential sentence rather than grammatically split the prejacent, to her having a special reason for keeping the prejacent together. This places focus on the prejacent sentence as a whole rather than on any proper part of it, which makes nonagential sentences uniquely well suited for indicating evaluative contrast sets where the whole prejacent rather than any proper part is the dimension of contrast. Neither passivization nor intonational emphasis can generate this kind of evaluative contrast class. For example, suppose two playwrights are discussing what event should occur next in their new play, and the salient set of mutually exclusive options is {Tom shoots Jack, there is an earthquake, Bill kisses Lucy}. Here the nonagential sentence

³⁵ See Copp 2001 and Strandberg 2012 for hypotheses of this kind.

‘It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy’ seems a more natural choice than ‘Bill ought to kiss Lucy’ (with any kind of emphasis), or ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill’.³⁶

We conclude that by adopting a contrastivist semantics the champion of the Uniformity Thesis can provide a pragmatic explanation of the difficulty of obtaining deliberative readings of nonagential and passive ‘ought’ sentences, resolving the Overgeneration problem. However, we have shown only that such an explanation is possible and not that it is correct. How can we tell which is superior: our contrastivist and pragmatic explanation on behalf of the Uniformity Thesis, or the control verb theory of the Ambiguity Thesis? The two theories do generate some different predictions. According to the Ambiguity Thesis the difference between evaluative and deliberative readings is fully determined by the semantics—two different meanings for the word ‘ought’—and therefore deliberative readings of nonagential and passive ‘ought’ sentences will be not merely difficult to obtain but impossible. But on our contrastivist supplement to the Uniformity Thesis the difference is partly pragmatic, and therefore depends upon particular circumstances of use. It therefore predicts that in some atypical circumstances it should be possible to get deliberative readings of nonagential and passive ‘ought’ sentences. If Schroeder’s claims about the data are correct this would favor the Ambiguity Thesis over the Uniformity Thesis. However if our challenge to these claims at the end of section 2 was correct (the dating game show case, for example³⁷), this would give the advantage to the Uniformity Thesis. In our judgment the Uniformity Thesis fares better than the Ambiguity Thesis here.

³⁶ As this account predicts, nonagential sentences also seem particularly appropriate for signaling a simple contrast set like $\{p, \text{not-}p\}$. This presents a puzzle. While these sentences resist deliberative readings in many cases a set like this will satisfy our definition of a *deliberative* set since both p and $\text{not-}p$ may be in an agent’s power. (Bill might ponder, ‘To kiss Lucy or not to kiss Lucy? That is the question!’) However, we claimed merely that a deliberative set is *necessary* for a deliberative reading, not that it is sufficient. We’ve just provided one explanation why nonagential sentences would resist deliberative readings: that those readings are favored by agential sentences. We also speculate that in weighing options in deliberation it is more natural to focus on the actions than on the whole propositions, so that any focus that includes the agent tends toward an evaluative reading; ‘Bill ought to *kiss Lucy*’ seems to prefer a deliberative reading more strongly than ‘Bill ought to *kiss Lucy*’.

³⁷ In this context the speaker’s special reason for using a passive or nonagential sentence is his desire to create suspense.

5. Concluding Thoughts

We have argued that the central objection raised by ambiguity theorists against the Uniformity Thesis, that it overgenerates by making false predictions about the availability of deliberative readings of ‘ought’ sentences, fails. The alleged evidence can be accommodated and explained by appeal to intuitive and well-established pragmatic principles if we adopt a uniform contrastivist semantics for ‘ought’ that is already popular and independently well-motivated. While we leave open the possibility that competing, noncontrastivist semantics for ‘ought’ might be able to offer parallel pragmatic defenses of the Uniformity Thesis, the solution we have offered here exploits resources that seem proprietary to a contrastivist semantics. It depends crucially on the idea that the effect of focus on the interpretation of ‘ought’ sentences is to control the salience of contrast classes, in keeping with the standard view of focus. In addition to defending the Uniformity Thesis this paper therefore provides a novel argument in favor of contrastivism about ‘ought’.³⁸

The failure of one objection to the Uniformity Thesis does not prove it correct, or that ‘ought’ lacks a control sense. But parsimony requires that senses of a word not be multiplied beyond necessity, so the burden is on the ambiguity theorists to provide other, better arguments for a control sense.³⁹ We do not believe this burden is met. If our suggestion above is also correct that the linguistic evidence more strongly supports the pragmatic, contrastivist explanation of the deliberative-evaluative distinction than the

³⁸ Other arguments appeal to contrastivism’s ability to solve puzzles from deontic logic (e.g. Sloman 1970, Jackson 1985, and Cariani forthcoming), to capture intuitive relations between ‘ought’ and other normative terms (e.g. Sloman 1970, Snedegar forthcoming), and to find an underlying semantic unity between deontic and epistemic uses (e.g. Finlay 2009, 2010, ms).

³⁹ Considerations of parsimony weigh more heavily here than might be appreciated, since the deliberative-evaluative distinction is plausibly found not merely in ‘ought’ sentences but across the entire class of deontic modals: ‘must’, ‘have to’, ‘may’, ‘can’, etc. If it is to be attributed to a semantic and logical ambiguity between raising and control senses, then it must apparently be a systematic ambiguity. This raises the question whether contrastivist semantics should be posited for all these words. One of us (see Snedegar forthcoming) favors this view, but the other (SF) is presently unconvinced. If contrastivism is the right explanation of the ambiguity involving ‘ought’, then it might be presumed also the right explanation for these other cases. But arguably the ambiguity is not as clearly grammatically marked there; e.g. saying ‘Lucy may be kissed’ sounds to our ears like a natural way to give (permissive) advice. Since our explanation of deliberative readings is fundamentally pragmatic, we can hypothesize that factors other than the composition of contrast classes control the availability of these readings.

hypothesis of a distinct control sense of ‘ought’, and that the control hypothesis is also subject to significant linguistic objections (as argued in Chrisman forthcoming), then it would be safe to conclude that the alleged control sense of ‘ought’ representing a relation between an agent and an action is one ‘ought’ too many.

Mark Schroeder has suggested that this debate over the semantics and logical form of ‘ought’ has important bearing for normative branches of philosophy. While we agree that there may be important philosophical lessons to be learned from the correct analysis of ‘ought’, we are skeptical that any such lesson follows directly from settling whether or not ‘ought’ has a control sense representing a relation between agents and actions in addition to its raising sense representing a propositional operator. Much depends on the details of the semantic and logical analyses provided for these senses. ‘Ought’ sentences may still harbor significant ambiguities even if the Uniformity Thesis is correct, including an ambiguity between deliberative and merely evaluative readings as we’ve demonstrated. These different readings may also be indicated by grammatical differences so that there is no license to pass from ‘Bill ought to kiss Lucy’ (as naturally interpreted in a particular context) to ‘It ought to be that Bill kisses Lucy’ or ‘Lucy ought to be kissed by Bill’ (as naturally interpreted in the same context), or vice versa. And despite our skepticism about a control sense of ‘ought’ we agree with ambiguity theorists that on a deliberative reading, utterance of ‘ought’ sentences communicates that the agent stands in a special normative relation with the action; roughly the relation of *having most reason to perform it*. On our view this is simply because this is how agents are related to the action ϕ such that it is better⁴⁰ that they ϕ than that they do any relevant alternative in their power. Hence this relation need not be semantically represented in order to be communicated by an ‘ought’ claim. (Just as, for example, telling someone that they ought to ϕ communicates that they have the ability to ϕ without that being part of what is said.)

What if the Ambiguity Thesis were correct, despite our arguments? Schroeder suggests this would jeopardize certain metaethical theories about the nature of normativity. Some arguments for these theories would indeed require modification. But the *plasticity* of natural language—the ease with which words of one syntactic category can be transformed

⁴⁰ Perhaps only in an appropriately agent-relative sense; see note 27.

into related words of a different category—shouldn't be overlooked.⁴¹ For example, the creation of new verbs out of nouns (and vice versa) has a simple template. If there is a noun 'N', and some behavior of ϕ -ing is saliently characteristic of Ns, then a verb 'to N' can spontaneously come into use as meaning *to* ϕ (e.g. 'to snake', 'to hammer'). Similarly, if there is a raising verb/sentential operator 'V_{raising}', and some relation R characteristically holds between an agent S and an action of ϕ -ing when 'It is V_{raising} that S ϕ s' is true, then a cognate control verb 'V_{control}' can naturally come into use for the relation R.⁴² As we observed there is such a relation closely associated with at least agential 'ought' sentences. So although we've challenged the alleged evidence that a control sense of 'ought' exists in ordinary usage, it would be a mistake to insist this couldn't happen. But little of philosophical importance seems to depend on whether it does.

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⁴¹ Many deontic modals including 'ought' itself were in fact originally ordinary verbs meaning *to own*, with neither raising nor control syntax.

⁴² Consider 'seems' (or 'appears'), one of Schroeder's exemplars of a raising verb, as in (1) 'It seems that John is flying'. Arguably, in (2) 'John seems to fly', 'seems' can be interpreted rather as a control verb, while in 'John seems sad' it is arguably neither a raising nor a control verb. While (1) would be naturally used to communicate uncertainty about a report that John is flying, (2) seems appropriate rather to communicate uncertainty about whether John is as he appears. However, given our stance in this paper we shouldn't rule out the possibility of an explanation compatible with a uniform raising semantics.

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