

# Normative Language in Context<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper begins to develop an improved contextualist account of normative language, focusing in particular on normative readings of modal verbs — so-called *deontic modals*. The proposed account draws on a more general framework for implementing a contextualist semantics and pragmatics, which I call *Discourse Contextualism* (SILK 2016a). The aim of Discourse Contextualism is to derive the distinctive discourse properties and embedding behavior of normative language from a particular contextualist interpretation of an independently motivated formal semantics, along with general principles of interpretation and conversation. In using normative language interlocutors can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, and general pragmatic reasoning skills, to manage an evolving system of norms. Discourse Contextualism elucidates distinctive roles of normative language in discourse and deliberation, and provides a perspicuous framework for further philosophical theorizing about the nature of normativity, normative language, and normative judgment. Delineating these issues can help refine our understanding of the space of overall theories and motivate more fruitful ways the dialectics may proceed. Discourse Contextualism provides a solid linguistic basis for a more comprehensive theory of normativity and normative discourse and practice.

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## 1 Introduction

An important function of language is to create and develop interpersonal relationships in communication. In inquiry we share and coordinate our beliefs about how the world is. But we also take a stance and socially orient ourselves toward possible acts, attitudes, and states of affairs. We evaluate possibilities as desirable, appropriate, horrible, trivial, permissible, wonderful. We make demands and grant permissions, emphasize commonality and breed antipathy. In communication we shape our identities as thinkers and feelers in a social world; we coordinate on how to act, what to feel, and whom to be.

Language affords a variety of normative and evaluative resources for doing so. One such resource is the language of modality. This includes modal verbs and adjectives, among others, as in (1)–(2).

- (1) Morally speaking, we must help reform our prison system.
- (2) Discrimination is morally wrong.

Our evaluation of sentences such as (1)–(2) depends on what moral norms we accept. (1) can seem acceptable if you accept moral norms requiring us to contribute to prison reform, but unacceptable if you accept norms permitting us not to. In using (1)–(2) speakers can express their normative views and coordinate on what norms to accept — sometimes in agreement, as in (3), sometimes in disagreement, as in (4).

- (3) A: Morally speaking, we must help reform our prison system.  
B: Yeah you're right. What should we do?
- (4) A: Morally speaking, we must help reform our prison system.  
B: No, it's fine the way it is.

The aim of this paper is to develop a novel semantic and pragmatic account of such uses of language.

Some theorists claim that the dependence of our evaluation of (1)–(2) on what moral norms we accept derives from a dependence of the interpretation of (1)–(2) on a contextually relevant body of norms. *Metaethical contextualism* treats this context-dependence as a dependence of semantic (conventional) content on features of the context of use. To a first approximation, contextualism treats the content of (1) as the proposition that the relevant moral norms in the discourse context require us to help reform our prison system (we will make this more precise in due course). Contextualism about normative language, in this sense, often goes under the head-

ing of ‘Metaethical Relativism.’<sup>1</sup> The view has a checkered past. As Chris Gowans puts it, “relativism has the unusual distinction — both within philosophy and outside it — of being attributed to others, almost always as a criticism, far more often than it is explicitly professed by anyone” (GOWANS 2012). Serious objections have been raised, on both linguistic and substantive (meta)normative grounds. Many respond by distinguishing the context-sensitivity of normative language from that of paradigm context-sensitive expressions, or by denying that normative language is distinctively context-sensitive at all.

This paper begins to develop an improved contextualist theory of normative language. Although contextualism is a linguistic thesis, contextualist theories are often motivated by normative and metanormative aims — e.g., to capture the connection between normative judgment and motivation, to avoid positing a realm of distinctively normative properties (facts, truths), and to explain the alleged “faultlessness” of fundamental normative disagreement.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that we can motivate metaethical contextualism independently of such broader issues. The proposed account draws on a more general framework for implementing a contextualist semantics and pragmatics, called *Discourse Contextualism*, which I develop in greater detail elsewhere (SILK 2016a). The aim of Discourse Contextualism is to derive the distinctive behavior of normative language from a particular contextualist interpretation of an independently motivated formal semantics, along with general principles of interpretation and conversation. In *using* normative language interlocutors can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, and general pragmatic reasoning skills, to manage an evolving system of norms. Discourse Contextualism elucidates distinctive roles of normative language in discourse and deliberation, and provides a perspicuous framework for posing various further normative and metanormative questions — e.g., concerning the nature of normativity and the distinctive practical character of normative judgment. Delineating these issues can help refine our understanding of the space of overall theories and motivate more fruitful ways the dialectics may proceed. Discourse Contextualism is thus of interest to a wide range of metaethicists, regardless of their specific metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological commitments. The project isn’t to show that no other theory can succeed. It is to investigate one avenue for developing an improved linguistic basis for a more comprehensive theory of the normative aspects of our lives.

Normative uses of language aren’t limited to expressions of a single syntactic

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., STEVENSON 1963, HARMAN 1975, 1996, DREIER 1990.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., HARMAN 1975, 1996, DREIER 1990, UNGER 1995, WONG 2006, BROGAARD 2008, FINLAY 2009, 2014a; cf. SCHROEDER 2010: 66–67.

category. For concreteness, however, I will focus specifically on normative readings of modal verbs — so-called *deontic modals* — such as in (1). Though I think there are well-motivated ways of applying the proposed framework to other categories of expressions, I won't argue for this here (see SILK 2016a: ch. 7 for developments). Hopefully what our discussion lacks in breadth of scope, it makes up for in detail of implementation.

The paper is organized as follows. §2 offers a general characterization of contextualism about deontic modals and presents a standard version of the objection from disagreement. The depth of the problem raised by disagreement phenomena hasn't been adequately appreciated by contextualists. §3 takes a step back from discourse disagreements with deontic modals and examines more general ways in which individuals manage their assumptions about context in action. Insight into these broader phenomena motivates an improved framework for implementing contextualism, which I call *Discourse Contextualism*. §4 develops the basics of a Discourse Contextualist account of deontic modals and applies it to several examples of discourse agreement and disagreement. §5 shows how the account solves the contextualist's problems with discourse disagreement and elucidates various aspects of deontic modals' meaning and use. §6 extends the Discourse Contextualist account of unembedded deontic modals to respond to a second prominent challenge to contextualism: that contextualism mischaracterizes subjects' states of mind. §7 examines how a Discourse Contextualist account of normative language integrates with substantive theorizing about the nature of normativity. §8 concludes and describes several limitations of the present discussion and possible directions for future research.

## 2 Contextualism and Discourse Disagreement

### 2.1 Characterizing contextualism

Deontic modals are interpreted — in some yet-to-be-specified sense — with respect to a body of norms (code, standard, end, etc.; differences among such types of objects won't matter in what follows). Sometimes the relevant norms are made linguistically explicit, like in (5).

(5) According to the house rules, Timmy must be in bed by 8.

Roughly, (5) says that Timmy's parents' rules require (imply) that Timmy be in bed by 8. Other times, only a general type of norm is explicitly specified, like in (6), or

none is specified at all, like in (7).

- (6) Morally speaking, Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.
- (7) Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

It is such “bare” uses of deontic modals that will be the focus of this paper. Call sentences like (6)–(7) ‘deontic modal sentences’, and utterances of such sentences ‘deontic modal utterances.’ To fix ideas let’s assume, unless otherwise noted, that all deontic modals in our examples are given the same type of normative reading — say, a moral reading, as in (1) or (6).<sup>3</sup>

Contextualists and relativists about deontic modals agree, against invariantists, that the truth-value of a deontic modal sentence may vary across parameters of interpretation (contexts of utterance, circumstances of evaluation, contexts of assessment) even if everything else in the world remains constant and a particular type of normative reading for the modal (say, moral) is held fixed. *Contextualism* treats this potential variation as due to a dependence of the semantic (conventional) *content* of a deontic modal sentence on features of the context of utterance, those features that determine a contextually relevant body of norms. Contextualism, as I will understand it, claims that (7) is context-sensitive in the same way as sentences with paradigm context-sensitive expressions — ‘here’, ‘now’, demonstratives, pronouns, etc. What information is conveyed by (8) depends on which female is most salient in the discourse context.

- (8) She won a medal.

In a context where Anna is most salient, (8) communicates that Anna won a medal; in a context where Betty is most salient, (8) communicates that Betty won a medal. Likewise, according to contextualism, in a context where Alice’s moral norms  $N_A$  are relevant, (7) communicates (roughly) that  $N_A$  requires Sally to donate 10% of her income; but in a context where Bert’s moral norms  $N_B$  are relevant, (7) communicates (roughly) that  $N_B$  requires Sally to donate 10% of her income. What (7) conventionally communicates, and hence whether it is true or false, depends on what moral norms are relevant in the discourse context.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>I use ‘deontic’ as a catchall term for any kind of practical normative reading. In calling a use ‘deontic’ I am not assuming that it need be performative, i.e. involve performing a directive/permissive speech act; more on this in §5.

<sup>4</sup>Deontic modals have also been argued to be sensitive to a contextually relevant body of information. To keep the discussion manageable I will abstract away from this latter sort of context-sensitivity (see, e.g., KOLODNY & MACFARLANE 2010, DOWELL 2013, MACFARLANE 2014: ch. 11, SILK 2016a).

It is important to be clear about what kind of context-sensitivity is at-issue in debates about metaethical contextualism. First, contextualists sometimes motivate their views by noting that many modal verbs can have different “senses” or “readings” in different contexts. For instance, the use of ‘must’ in (9) targets a relevant body of information, and the use of ‘can’ in (10) targets the relevant biological and environmental circumstances.

- (9) It must be raining outside. Look at all those people with wet umbrellas.  
(10) Polar bears can survive here.

Such context-sensitivity in certain *words*, qua lexical items, is insufficient for contextualism, in the relevant sense (*pace* FINLAY 2009, 2014a, BJÖRNSSON & FINLAY 2010, DOWELL 2011). All types of theories — contextualist, relativist, expressivist, invariantist — can accept that (e.g.) ‘must’ is context-sensitive in the sense that the context of utterance determines what type of reading the modal receives. What is at issue is whether, given a specific type of normative reading — say, moral, as in (7) — some particular body of norms supplied by the context of utterance figures in the sentence’s semantic content. Debates about contextualism can arise for expressions whose lexical semantics already fixes a specific type of reading (e.g., aesthetic for ‘beautiful’) and for complex expressions which linguistically specify the relevant type of reading (e.g., ‘morally wrong’).

Second, the primary focus in this paper is on broadly normative uses of language. By ‘normative use of language’ I mean a use which expresses the speaker’s endorsement of a relevant body of norms or values (cf. GIBBARD 1990: 33; SILK 2015: §§3, 6). Not all uses of ‘must’, ‘wrong’, etc. which concern relevant norms or values are normative in this sense. Some uses are merely descriptive. The use of ‘have to’ in (11) simply reports what Dwayne’s parents’ rules require; (11) can be paraphrased with an explicit ‘according to’-type phrase, as in (12).

- (11) Dwayne has to be home by 10. Aren’t his parents stupid? I’d stay out if I

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When I use ‘relativism’ in referring to a position contrasted with contextualism, I mean the view that no particular body of norms figures in the semantic content of a deontic modal sentence (cf. KÖLBEL 2004, YALCIN 2007, SILK 2013, MACFARLANE 2014). For now I will gloss over differences between sentences-in-context and utterances; my talk about the semantic properties of utterances can be understood as short for talk about the semantic properties of the sentences uttered in the contexts of those utterances. I return to the importance of the distinction in §7. Following YALCIN 2014, there may be reasons to avoid using ‘(semantic) content’ as a label for a compositional semantic value in context. My use of ‘content’ for this type of object makes no assumptions about its potential broader theoretical role.

were him.

- (12) According to Dwayne’s parents’ rules, Dwayne has to be home by 10.

All parties can accept that some uses of ‘must’, etc. are context-sensitive in the same way as ‘she’ in (8). The distinctive claim of contextualism is that the intuitively *normative* uses, in the above sense — the sorts of uses characteristic of deliberation and planning — are context-sensitive in the same way as (8) or (11).<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2 Normative disagreement in discourse

Contextualism treats a particular body of norms determined by the context of utterance as figuring in the truth-conditions of a deontic modal sentence. So, to give an adequate account of the meanings of deontic modals in context, the contextualist must provide a general account of what body of norms is supplied as a function of the context of utterance and figures in deriving semantic content. The putative problem is that there doesn’t seem to be any way of specifying the contextually relevant norms that explains both (a) how we’re in a position to make the deontic modal claims that we seem licensed in making (call it the *justified use condition*), and (b) how we can reasonably disagree with one another’s deontic modal claims (call it the *disagreement condition*).<sup>6</sup>

Suppose Alice and Bert are considering how much, if anything, morality requires Sally to give to the poor. They agree on all the relevant non-normative facts, like how much Sally earns, how stable her job is, what the needs of the poor are like, and so on. Their question is fundamentally normative; it concerns what moral norms to accept. The following dialogue ensues:

- (13) *Alice:* Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.  
*Bert:* No, Sally doesn’t have to give that much. She can give less.

What body of norms should the contextualist say figures in the contents of Alice’s and Bert’s uses ‘must’, ‘have to’, and ‘can’?

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<sup>5</sup>We will return to these points in §§4.1, 5.4. Hereafter I will use ‘normative language’ as short for ‘normative uses of language’, though the qualification in the main text should be kept in mind. Though I will often treat all types of normative uses on a par, it’s possible to accept contextualism about certain types of normative language but not others.

<sup>6</sup>For discussion in the broader literature, see, e.g., GIBBARD 1990, 2003, KÖLBEL 2004, LASER-SOHN 2005, VON FINTEL & GILLIES 2008, RICHARD 2008, DREIER 2009, MACFARLANE 2014, SILK 2014, 2016a. For prescient early discussion, see MOORE 1912: ch. 3, STEVENSON 1937.

Suppose, first, that Alice's utterance of (7) is just about her moral norms. Assuming Alice is in a position to make a claim about what moral norms she accepts, this captures how Alice is justified in producing her utterance. But it becomes unclear how Bert can reasonably disagree with her. And it becomes unclear how in uttering (14) Bert is disagreeing with Alice, given that they are making claims about their respective norms.

(14) No, Sally doesn't have to give that much (=10% of her income to the poor).

Alice and Bert can agree about whether Sally's giving 10% follows from their respective moral norms while disagreeing with what one another says. Bert's denial in (13) is felicitous, whereas *B*'s in (15) is not.

(15) *A*: In view of Alice's moral norms, Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

*B*: #No, in view of Bert's moral norms, Sally doesn't have to give 10% of her income to the poor.

This puts pressure on the claim that the sentences used in (15) explicitly specify the semantic contents of the respective sentences used in (13).

Suppose instead that we treat deontic modal claims as about a relevant group's norms. Then we can capture how Alice and Bert make inconsistent claims. But it becomes unclear how Alice is in a position to make a claim about whether Sally must give 10%, which, intuitively, she is. It can be appropriate for Alice to utter (7) even if she doesn't know anything about Bert's moral views.

In sum, if we treat deontic modal utterances as about the speaker's norms ("speaker contextualism"), we capture the justified use condition but leave the disagreement condition unexplained. But if we treat deontic modal utterances as about the norms of a larger group ("group contextualism"), we capture the disagreement condition but leave the justified use condition unexplained. There seems to be no general way of specifying what body of norms is relevant as a function of context that captures all our intuitions.

Before proceeding I would like to clarify the scope of the present discussion of disagreement. First, following the consensus I assume that there is a disagreement between the speakers in discourses such as (13), and moreover that there is some aspect of the disagreement that needs to be explained by a linguistic theory. This isn't to say that a linguistic theory needs to give a general philosophical account of the nature of disagreement. Although I will focus specifically on discourse disagreements,

of course not all disagreements are expressed in linguistic exchanges.<sup>7</sup> For our purposes we can focus on a certain discourse phenomenon: the *systematic licensing of expressions of linguistic denial* (in English, ‘no’, ‘nope’, ‘nu-uh’, etc.) in discourses such as (13). These expressions signal the speaker’s discourse move of rejecting some aspect of the previous utterance. Not all cases in which speakers intuitively disagree can be marked in this way. *B*’s “disagreement in attitude” with *A* in (16) couldn’t typically be signaled with a linguistic denial.

- (16) *A*: I like Mexican food.  
*B*: #No, I don’t. I like Thai.

Our task is to generate a representation of discourses like (13) that correctly predicts the felicity of expressions of linguistic denial and the discourse moves they mark.

Second, in calling discourses like (13) ‘disagreements’ I am not making any theoretical assumptions about at what level the disagreement ought to be explained. My usage is compatible with semantic or pragmatic explanations. A common strategy is to posit that the semantic or asserted contents of the speakers’ utterances are incompatible. However, no such specific account of disagreement is built into the data itself to be explained. Alternative explanations are possible, at least in principle (and, I will argue, not *merely* in principle).

Third, many authors have expressed the intuition that disagreements like (13) are in some sense “faultless.” Saying that Alice and Bert disagree needn’t imply that one of them is making a cognitive mistake. Yet nothing in the above characterization of the objection to contextualism, or in the following discussion, requires taking a stand on this issue one way or the other (more on this in §7).<sup>8</sup>

The epicycles from here are involved. I will spare the reader many of the details (see n. 6). I simply want to mention one not uncommon initial reaction. A prominent contextualist strategy is to try to explain disagreement phenomena pragmatically, in terms of non-conventional aspects of use. Many contextualists note that denials can target various non-truth-conditional aspects of utterances.<sup>9</sup> *B*’s denial in (17), for instance, targets a scalar implicature.

- (17) *A*: Some of the students passed.  
*B*: No, all of them did.

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<sup>7</sup>For discussion of inter-conversational disagreement, see, e.g., MACFARLANE 2007, SILK 2016a: §3.4.2, and references therein.

<sup>8</sup>For general discussion of the notion of faultless disagreement, see, e.g., WRIGHT 2001, MACFARLANE 2014.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., BJÖRNSSON & FINLAY 2010, SUNDELL 2011, PLUNKETT & SUNDELL 2013a.

So, the speaker contextualist might say that the proposition targeted by Bert's denial in (13) isn't Alice's "autobiographical report" — the semantic content of her utterance — but rather "the proposition that he would have asserted by uttering the same sentence" (BJÖRNSSON & FINLAY 2010: 20). One might say that even though Alice's utterance semantically makes a claim about her moral norms, the primary implication Alice intends to convey is a pragmatically related proposition to which Bert is licensed in objecting — e.g., that Bert ought to conform his moral views to Alice's. It is this implication, the reply continues, which is felicitously targeted by Bert's denial. In uttering (7) and (14), Alice and Bert "pragmatically advocate" (PLUNKETT & SUNDELL 2013a) for their respective moral views.

I am sympathetic with the informal impression that in discourses like (13) the speakers are disagreeing about what sort of context to be in — specifically, about what norms to accept in the conversation. Intuitively, Alice and Bert are disagreeing, not about whether Sally's giving 10% is required by such-and-such norms, but about what norms *to accept*. Simply noting this, however, is insufficient. The question isn't whether such "discourse-oriented" negotiations are *possible*. The challenge is to explain *why they are so systematic* with normative language, given that a contextualist semantics is correct.

The above contextualist replies posit that the implications systematically targeted by linguistic denials — and affirmations, for that matter — in normative discourse are implications other than the utterances' semantic contents. However, surprisingly little attention has been given to what specific mechanisms are responsible for this, or how these mechanisms are linguistically constrained — i.e., how (dis)agreement phenomena can be derived from the specific semantic contents, general conversational principles, and general features of contexts of use, *and* why they can be derived so systematically with deontic modals but not with paradigm context-sensitive language. According to contextualism, deontic modal sentences have ordinary representational contents; they have a mind-to-world direction of fit. Even if we find examples of ordinary descriptive claims sometimes having normative implications — consider 'It's cold in here'  $\rightsquigarrow$  'You should shut the window' — it's not as if they systematically carry those particular normative implications across uses. Why, then, should uttering a sentence which conventionally describes given bodies of norms systematically communicate something about what norms to accept? 'I'm hungry' doesn't (systematically) trigger an implication that the addressee ought to be hungry. 'That [demonstrating *b*] is a cute baby' doesn't (systematically) trigger an implication that the addressee ought to be demonstrating *b*. Denials like *B*'s in (18)–(19) are typically infelicitous.

- (18) A: I'm hungry.  
 B: #No, I'm not hungry.
- (19) A: That is a cute baby. [said demonstrating *b*]  
 B: #No, that isn't a cute a baby. [said demonstrating *b'*]

When speakers use paradigm context-sensitive expressions with different intended asserted contents, the norm isn't disagreement, but talking past. One is left wondering why the assumed pragmatic mechanisms which license linguistic denials with deontic modals couldn't, and systematically don't, also apply with paradigm context-sensitive expressions. Why would the asserted contents of normative utterances, unlike other utterances, typically not have main point status? Why, with deontic modals, would speakers systematically assert "normative propositions" they don't have a "fundamental interest" in (FINLAY 2014b: 133; cf. 2014a: 147–150, 184–188, 217–222)?

In sum, the worry is that the distinctive role of deontic modals in discourse is unexpected given the contextualist's semantics. If we cannot explain the discourse properties of deontic modals in terms of independently attested aspects of conventional meaning and general interpretive and pragmatic principles, then we should give up being contextualists. The force of this challenge has been underappreciated by contextualists.<sup>10</sup>

The general consensus is that the objection from discourse disagreement is devastating for standard versions of contextualism (cf. EGAN ET AL. 2005: 149; MACFARLANE 2010: 1, 11; 2014: 248–249). But I am more optimistic. In the next section I would like to take a step back from discourse disagreements with deontic modals, and examine agreement and disagreement phenomena more generally. Perhaps better understanding the role of context in collaborative action will shed light on the role of deontic modals in managing the context and what norms to accept.

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<sup>10</sup>In the broader literature, see CAPPELEN 2008, BJÖRNSSON & FINLAY 2010, VON FINTEL & GILLIES 2011, SUNDELL 2011, PLUNKETT & SUNDELL 2013a,b, FINLAY 2014a,b, STALNAKER 2014: chs. 6–7. PLUNKETT & SUNDELL (2013a: 4) claim to have an aim of explaining disagreement phenomena in terms of general, independently motivated semantic and pragmatic mechanisms (cf. FINLAY 2014a: 246). Plunkett & Sundell nicely highlight examples of discourse disagreement over non-truth-conditional content. On this basis they claim *that* speakers negotiate about the values of contextual parameters, and "pragmatically advocate" for their proposed values in using normative language (2013a: 13–19, 28; 2013b: 262–263, 267). However, as far as I can see, no substantive explanation is given as to how precisely this happens, given the contextualist's semantics, or, more pressingly, why normative language contrasts with paradigm context-sensitive language in its tendency for this kind of use. For further discussion of these points, see SILK 2014, 2016a.

### 3 Managing the Context: Toward Discourse Contextualism

Suppose it's common knowledge between Clara and Dan that several days ago she said something to him that could have been construed as rude. Clara isn't sure whether Dan took what she said that way, and, if he did, whether he is offended. She doesn't want to bring up their previous interaction explicitly since she wouldn't want to make something out of nothing. So the next time she sees Dan she acts as though everything is normal between them. She is warm and open as usual. Since Dan wasn't offended by Clara's earlier remark, he responds in kind to Clara. Since Clara knows that Dan wouldn't respond this way if he was annoyed, and Dan knows that she knows this, etc., it becomes common ground that they are on good terms and that he didn't take her remark as rude.

Now consider a variant on the case. Suppose that Dan was in fact offended by Clara's remark, and, though he didn't say so at the time, Clara knows this. Nevertheless she still doesn't want to bring up their previous interaction. She wants to avoid the potential conflict if she can. So she acts as if everything is copacetic, even though she knows it isn't. However, Dan doesn't want to go along with Clara's behavior. He *could* object by making their clash in attitudes explicit. He might say something like, "Why are you acting as if everything is okay between us? Don't you remember what you said?" Or perhaps, "I know you're just trying to get everything back to normal, but, listen, it isn't." But Dan needn't object in this way. Instead he simply acts aloof. In return Clara might continue to act amiably, hoping that he will eventually respond in kind. Clara and Dan can thus manage their assumptions about the status of their relationship without explicitly raising the issue.

My point in working through these examples is to highlight how commonplace a certain sort of reasoning about context is. The appropriateness of our actions often requires that circumstances are a certain way. *In acting*, we can thus exploit our mutual world knowledge and general pragmatic reasoning skills to communicate information and manage our assumptions about these circumstances. This can streamline collaborative action. The lesson: *by acting in such a way that is appropriate only if the context is a certain way, one can implicitly propose that the context be that way*. If the other party accommodates by proceeding in like manner, it can become taken for granted that the context is that way. If she doesn't, this can lead to negotiation over the state of the context. Crucially this can all happen without explicitly raising the issue of what the context is like.

I suggest that the linguistic case — the case of linguistic action, discourse, and

interpretation — is a special instance of these phenomena. I propose the following structure for a contextualist account of deontic modals:

**Discourse Contextualism (outline):**

1. *Compositional semantics*: Deontic modals are semantically associated with a contextual parameter  $x$  for a body of norms.
2. *Interpretive constraints*: Utterances of deontic modal sentences (*a*) assume that the conversational situation determines a value for  $x$  that would make the utterance appropriate, and (*b*) assert something about the world given this value.
3. *Discourse-oriented effects*: Assuming that speakers' assumptions about the value of  $x$  are readily retrievable, speakers can manage the value of  $x$  by using deontic modals — e.g., in direct affirmations and denials.

I call an account with these components *Discourse Contextualism*. The aim of Discourse Contextualism is to derive the distinctive linguistic behavior of deontic modals from a particular sort of contextualist semantics — one which associates them with a relevant contextual variable (or variables) — along with general principles of interpretation and pragmatic reasoning. With a more nuanced understanding of the role of context in interpretation, we can provide an improved contextualist account of the function of deontic modals in managing an evolving body of norms. (See SILK 2016a for additional applications.)

## 4 Deontic Modals in Discourse.

### The Basic Account

The following sections begin to develop a Discourse Contextualist semantics and pragmatics for deontic modals. The strategy is to start with a particular contextualist interpretation of a standard semantics for modals, and show how this formal semantics generates constraints on the interpretation of deontic modals and predicts distinctive features of their use.

#### 4.1 Components 1 and 2: From formal semantics to interpretive constraints

The compositional semantic component basically comes for free. It's standard in linguistic semantics to treat modals as semantically associated with a parameter or

variable  $\mathbf{P}$  that ranges over sets of premises (propositions). Roughly, ‘Must  $\phi$ ’ says that  $\phi$  follows from these premises, and ‘May  $\phi$ ’ says that  $\phi$  is compatible with these premises.<sup>11</sup> This contextually supplied set of premises determines the reading of the modal (epistemic, deontic, teleological, etc.). Broadly *deontic* readings call for a premise set that encodes the content of a body of norms. For instance, a moral premise set might include propositions like that no one steals, that everyone keeps their promises, etc. Different types of deontic readings — moral, legal, evaluative, etc. — are associated with different deontic premise set variables.

It’s common to include in a model of context a parameter representing (roughly) the norms accepted for the purposes of conversation.<sup>12</sup> In conversation we not only share information in coordinating our beliefs about the world. We also express our normative views and coordinate our plans. Inquiry is, in part, inquiry about what to do. It is thus natural to link the deontic premise set variable with this discourse-level norms parameter, at least in the uses of deontic modals we have been considering (more on this in §5.4). These uses call for a deontic premise set variable  $\mathbf{P}_m$  that represents the (in this case moral) norms endorsed in the conversation. This reflects the paradigmatic role of deontic modals in communal planning and deliberation. (Complications to these natural moves will follow in due course. Unless otherwise

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<sup>11</sup>Treating propositions as sets of worlds, for a proposition  $p$  and set of propositions  $S$ ,  $p$  follows from  $S$  ( $S$  implies  $p$ ) iff  $\bigcap S \subseteq p$ , and  $p$  is compatible with  $S$  iff  $\bigcap (S \cup \{p\}) \neq \emptyset$ . I will use boldfaced type for parameters/variables, and italics for their values in context. I treat ‘ $\phi$ ’, ‘ $\psi$ ’, etc. as schematic letters to be replaced with declarative sentences. For convenience I sometimes refer to the possible worlds proposition expressed by ‘ $\phi$ ’ by dropping the single quotes.

On the standard semantic framework for modals, see esp. KRATZER 1977, 1981, 1991. The premise semantic implementation adopted here is equivalent (LEWIS 1981) to the perhaps more familiar implementation in KRATZER 1981, 1991 which uses a set of propositions (ordering source) to induce a preorder on the set of accessible worlds. Kratzer’s semantics makes use of two premise sets, calculated as a function of the world of evaluation: one premise set (a “modal base”) that describes a set of relevant background facts and another premise set (an “ordering source”) that represents the content of a relevant ideal. These complications won’t be relevant here (for discussion see SILK 2016a: §§3.3.5, 3.5.1, 4.2.1, 5.6). For simplicity I assume our premise sets are consistent. I assume that premise set parameters are syntactically realized as variables (VON FINTEL 1994, FRANK 1996, SCHAFFER 2011). It’s common in linguistic semantics to treat variables as receiving their values from a contextually supplied assignment function (e.g., HEIM & KRATZER 1998). My talk about context supplying values for variables can be understood as short for talk about contextually supplied assignment functions. For additional formal semantic details see SILK 2016a: §3.5.1.

<sup>12</sup>See esp. PORTNER 2007; also LEWIS 1979, LOCHBAUM 1998, STARR 2010. I needn’t commit here to a particular account of the nature and representation of context. For instance, I am not assuming that contexts are determined wholly by speaker attitudes. (More on this in §7.) What is important for the present discussion is simply that contexts determine premise sets for the interpretation of modals.

noted, I will assume our deontic premise sets are specifically moral.)<sup>13</sup>

Treating deontic modals as semantically associated with a deontic premise set variable places interesting constraints on their felicitous use and interpretation. When this variable is free, a value must be contextually supplied in order for the sentence to have a specific interpretation in context. For communication to succeed, the hearer must be able to infer how the speaker takes the discourse context to be such that it determines such-and-such content for her utterance. Uttering ‘The baby is laughing’ assumes that context supplies a salience ordering on which some individual *b* is the most salient baby, and asserts that *b* is laughing. Likewise an utterance of moral ‘Must (/May)  $\phi$ ’ assumes a value for  $P_m$ , say  $P_{m_c}$ ,<sup>14</sup> and asserts that  $\phi$  follows from (/is compatible with)  $P_{m_c}$ .

To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that the standard semantic framework for modals calls for contextualism about deontic modals.<sup>15</sup> As noted in §2.1, all parties can accept that the modal verbs (qua lexical items) are context-sensitive, in the sense that the context of utterance determines what type of reading the modal receives. What is at issue is whether, given a certain type of normative reading (e.g., moral), some specific body of norms supplied by the context of utterance is used in calculating the semantic content, or compositional semantic value, of the sentence in context (see n. 4). Non-contextualist accounts deny this.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>There may be reasons to treat the norms parameter as consisting of a sequence of premise sets, representing different types of norms that may be relevant in the conversation (cf. PORTNER 2007). As we are focusing on a single type of normative reading, I bracket this complication.

<sup>14</sup>Or, in some cases, at least a relevant range of values; for detailed discussion of this issue and the presuppositional properties associated with deontic modals and relevantly similar expressions, see SILK 2016a: esp. §§3.3.6, 3.5, 4.4, 5.2.5, 6.3; see also nn. 4, 20.

<sup>15</sup>*Pace* VON FINTEL & GILLIES 2008, FINLAY 2009, 2014a, BJÖRNSSON & FINLAY 2010, DOWELL 2011, 2012.

<sup>16</sup>For the invariantist, a specific body of norms figures in the semantic content, but it is determined by the world of evaluation. To capture this in the standard framework one might posit a substantive lexical constraint that (e.g.) moral premise sets be determined solely by the evaluation world. For the relativist/expressivist, no particular body of norms figures in the semantic content. To capture this in the standard framework one might treat what context supplies for interpreting a modal as a function from judges (centers, overall normative perspectives) to premise sets. What would be special about (e.g.) moral readings is that the supplied function non-trivially depends on the value of the judge.

## 4.2 Component 3: Agreeing and disagreeing with deontic modals

Normative disagreement gets a lot of press. Before turning to disagreement cases I would like to look at cases where communication proceeds successfully. The preoccupation in the literature on non-ideal examples — e.g., where communication fails, where there is disagreement, or where speakers aren't even involved in the same conversation — can obscure how deontic modals typically function in discourse. Starting with prototypical collaborative cases will better illuminate the phenomena. This can demystify what goes wrong in the non-ideal case.

Suppose there is an annual charity drive coming up for children in need, and we are deliberating about how much to give. We are modestly well off, but not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. We are generally financially comfortable, though the stability of our jobs isn't entirely secure. We must exercise care in planning for our children's education, ensuring the bills get paid, and so on. I ask you how much you think we are to give, in light of our financial, personal, and family situations, on the one hand, and the severe plights of the poor, on the other. You say:

(20) We must give 10% of our incomes for the children.

Given the grammatical properties of deontic modals, your utterance assumes a body of norms relevant for the particular task at hand, namely, resolving an issue on the conversational table: how much we are morally required to give. Since our plans depend on how this question is resolved, you ought to make available to me your grounds for answering it as you do. You continue as in (21).

(21) We must give 10% of our incomes for the children. That should leave us with more than enough for ourselves and our own families. The starving children need it more anyway.

Recognizing your communicative intentions (more on which below), I successfully restrict the range of possible interpretations for 'must', the basis for your utterance of (20) becomes common ground, and we plan for giving 10%.

The body of norms assumed by your utterance of (21) can affect the interpretation of subsequent utterances. This delimits the interpreter's computational task of determining the intended contents of future uses of deontic modals, and facilitates a more efficient exchange of information and coordination of plans in future collaborative endeavors.<sup>17</sup> Suppose we consider Sue, and reflect on how much we

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<sup>17</sup>See n. 18 for research in psycholinguistics and artificial intelligence. See, e.g., GUNLOGSON 2001,

should give if we were in her shoes. Her financial situation is more uncertain. Her specialized health problems incur additional and sometimes unpredictable medical expenses, and her job security is more precarious. Still, she could make do with less, and her medical treatments aren't strictly necessary. I ask how much Sue should give. You reply:

- (22) I'm not sure. Sue can also give 10%. But maybe, given her medical and financial situation, she only has to give 5%.

The norms that served as the basis for your utterance of (20) prompt my further question about the newly raised case of Sue. Though you cannot resolve this question, you raise additional considerations which are plausibly normatively relevant. Our normative views are refined to be compatible with Sue's giving 10%, and we proceed accordingly.

These commonplace examples highlight an important point. Deontic modal utterances presume an implicit, semantically unspecified body of norms. Nevertheless, utilizing general principles of pragmatic reasoning, interlocutors can integrate relevant features of the (past, present, and projected future) conversational situation to interpret deontic modals and coordinate on an evolving normative view. The *semantics* for deontic modals generates constraints on the *interpretation* of uses of deontic modals in particular contexts. By reasoning from these constraints speakers can effectively share information and coordinate action.

With these points in mind, let's return to our discourse disagreement in (13).

- (13) *Alice*: Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.  
*Bert*: No, Sally doesn't have to give that much. She can give less.

Alice and Bert are discussing our moral obligations to the poor. They consider the case of Sally. Alice utters (7) 'Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor'. Upon hearing Alice's semantically underspecified utterance, Bert might (tacitly) reason roughly as follows (where  $g$  is the proposition that Sally gives 10% of her income to the poor):

- (23) "Alice is intending to say something about the possibility  $g$ . In order to do so, given the grammatical properties of modals, a set of premises must be contextually supplied. Since Alice wouldn't intend to say something false, she must be assuming a premise set  $P$  that implies  $g$ . The current ques-

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FARKAS & BRUCE 2010, LAUER 2013 on the importance of representing projected future states of the conversation in discourse models.

tion under discussion concerns the extent of Sally's moral obligations to the poor. Since Alice is cooperative, her utterance of (7) must be relevant and realize an intention to provide at least a partial answer to this question. Assuming  $P$  as a value for  $P_m, P_{m_c}$ , would do so by ensuring that the moral norms endorsed in the conversation require Sally to give 10%. So, Alice must be assuming a value for  $P_m, P_{m_c}$ , and have meant that  $P_{m_c}$  implies  $g$ ."

Rather than formalize this reasoning here, let's consider its principal features.<sup>18</sup> The appropriateness of Alice's linguistic act of uttering (7) requires that the discourse-level moral norms imply  $g$ . Since it's mutually presupposed that Alice is obeying the conversational maxims (GRICE 1989), in uttering (7) Alice implicitly proposes that it become taken for granted that such norms be endorsed in the conversation. In accepting an utterance one normally accepts what the speaker committed to in uttering it. So, since it's common knowledge that Alice can expect Bert to undergo an abductive reasoning process like in (23), it's also common knowledge that he will object if he has different moral views, given their common goal of settling on what moral norms to accept. So if Bert doesn't object, this will confirm that the context is as the appropriateness of Alice's act requires, and the discourse-level moral norms parameter can be set to a value that implies  $g$ .

However, since Bert has incompatible moral views, he objects.<sup>19</sup> He replies as in (13). For reasons parallel to those above, his doing so is appropriate only if the discourse-level moral norms are compatible with Sally's giving less than 10%. As he expects, Alice goes through an analogous abductive reasoning process and infers that he must wish to take for granted that the discourse-level moral norms are that way. If Alice accommodates, and accepts Bert's justification for his denial, it can become taken for granted that the context is as their present actions mutually require. If she

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<sup>18</sup>For rigorous formalizations in artificial intelligence and logic of this sort of process and the tacit reasoning behind it, see, e.g., HOBBS ET AL. 1993, ASHER & LASCARIDES 2003, THOMASON ET AL. 2006. As these literatures have documented, we are quite skilled at inferring one another's intended context and coordinating interpretation, action, and planning accordingly (cf. RAILTON 2009 for rich related discussion of our fluency in tacit reasoning and integrating it in action). Research in psycholinguistics also establishes the ease with which speakers coordinate on linguistic meaning and use, both at the level of individual conversations in establishing local sub-languages (entrainment) and at the level of communities in establishing more stable linguistic conventions (e.g., CLARK & WILKES-GIBBS 1986, GARROD & DOHERTY 1994). See STALNAKER 2014 for discussion of various philosophical motivations.

<sup>19</sup>The fact that Alice and Bert disagree doesn't imply that they aren't engaged in a "cooperative" conversation, in the sense relevant for interpreting their utterances. Denials are compatible with Gricean cooperativity (ASHER & LASCARIDES 2013; *pace* FINLAY 2014a: 124, 180).

doesn't, further negotiation may ensue. By producing utterances that assume incompatible values for the contextual variable  $P_m$  — i.e., by acting in ways that would be appropriate only if  $P_m$  was assigned such-and-such contrary values — Alice and Bert can negotiate over what moral norms to accept. In using deontic modals Alice and Bert can exploit their mutual grammatical knowledge, along with general pragmatic reasoning, to manage their assumptions about the conversational situation itself.

## 5 Features

This basic Discourse Contextualist account elucidates various features of the meaning and use of deontic modals.

### 5.1 Justified use

First, Discourse Contextualism captures the justified use condition from §2.2: it explains how Alice and Bert are in a position to make their deontic modal claims. Since Alice can reasonably expect Bert to undergo the sort of pragmatic reasoning in (23) and retrieve her intended interpretation, she needn't be overstepping her epistemic bounds in using deontic 'must' and assuming a value for the discourse-level norms parameter. Similarly, since Bert knows that Alice has similar semantic and pragmatic competencies, he can express his disagreement with Alice's assumption with a direct denial — i.e., by performing an act, the linguistic act of uttering (14), which assumes an incompatible value for  $P_m$ . In assuming a value for the contextual variable  $P_m$  one needn't believe that the assumed norms are (already) commonly accepted. The relevant attitude toward the proposition that the context, and hence value for  $P_m$ , is thus-and-so isn't belief but acceptance for the purposes of the conversation (e.g., STALNAKER 1974, THOMASON 2002). Given how skilled we are at inferring one another's intended context (n. 18), we can use deontic modals as a way of testing one another's normative views, inviting them to object if they accept different norms.

### 5.2 Locus of disagreement

The account captures the disagreement condition from §2.2 as well: it makes sense of how speakers can reasonably disagree with one another's deontic modal claims, and express normative disagreements via discourses like (13). For all I have said, the intended contents of Alice's and Bert's utterances may be compatible (more on which

in §7). It may be that Alice’s assumed value for  $P_m$ ,  $P_A$ , implies  $g$ , and that Bert’s assumed value for  $P_m$ ,  $P_B$ , is compatible with  $\neg g$ . Even so, contextualism needn’t treat Alice and Bert as talking at cross-purposes. Our representation of the discourse dynamics locates a precise sense in which Alice and Bert disagree: they disagree over the grammatically backgrounded content of what value for the contextual deontic premise set variable  $P_m$  is determined by the concrete conversational situation. Their utterances carry incompatible assumptions about what moral norms are operative in their context.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to be clear about the level at which Alice and Bert’s disagreement is explained as being “about the context.” The present challenge for contextualism is to explain the licensing of expressions of linguistic denial in discourses like (13), and to represent how the hearer rejects the speaker’s discourse move and issues a counter-move (§2.2). For this purpose what is important is that our formal pragmatics locates a specific incompatibility in the updates from Alice’s and Bert’s utterances: their utterances make incompatible assumptions about the conversational situation (n. 20). This needn’t imply that the disagreement is fundamentally “about the context,” how to use words, etc. More fundamentally, Alice and Bert’s disagreement concerns what moral attitudes to take up regarding Sally’s giving to the poor. Alice and Bert disagree about what moral norms to accept and why. This grounds the incompatible representations of context presupposed by their respective utterances.

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<sup>20</sup>Slightly more formally: Successfully updating with Alice’s utterance would result in a context set in which, for all worlds in that set, the conversational situation determines a value for  $P_m$  that implies  $g$ ; whereas successfully updating with Bert’s utterance would result in a context set in which, for all worlds in that set, the conversational situation determines a value for  $P_m$  that is compatible with  $\neg g$ . (The context set is the set of worlds compatible with what is taken for granted in the conversation (STALNAKER 1978).) As noted above (n. 14), in concrete discourses there may be various ways of accommodating a value for  $P_m$  that bears the relevant relation to the embedded proposition, given the speakers’ existing commitments. Our purposes often don’t require us to commit for the future course of the conversation to a particular body of norms. This observation also helps make sense of cases of discourse *agreement*. In discourse agreements about particular normative issues, speakers needn’t accept the same overall systems of norms. What is important for modeling the discourse dynamics, e.g. in (20), is that updating with the speakers’ utterances results in a context set in which, for all worlds in that set, the conversational situation determines a value for  $P_m$  that implies that we give 10% of our incomes for the charity drive. Though different norms may be determined by the concrete conversational situation in different worlds, these norms will agree in implying that we give 10%. The basis for our discourse agreement concerns our moral attitudes regarding our donating to help the children in need. Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to clarify this. Note that the above points about contextual underspecification in the dynamics of deontic modal utterances are compatible with treating the compositional semantics as taking a particular value for the premise set variable (§4.1). We will return to this in §7; see SILK 2016a: §§3.3.6, 3.6, 5.2.5, 6.3 for detailed discussion.

For these reasons I avoid classifying Discourse Contextualism as a “metacontextual” or “metalinguistic” account of discourse disagreement (*pace* FINLAY this volume; contrast PLUNKETT & SUNDELL 2013a,b).

### 5.3 Expressing states of mind

A common complaint against contextualism is that it incorrectly treat normative utterances as *reporting*, rather than *expressing*, speakers’ states of mind.<sup>21</sup> Discourse Contextualism avoids this worry. Common characterizations of contextualism notwithstanding,<sup>22</sup> deontic modal utterances, on the present account, aren’t fundamentally about an individual or group. They make logical claims *given* a deontic premise set. Alice’s utterance of (7) *assumes* a value for  $P_m$  which represents the moral norms operative in the conversation. Given Alice and Bert’s (assumed-to-be) common goal of settling on what moral norms to accept, Bert can reasonably infer from Alice’s act that she accepts moral norms requiring Sally to give 10%. Alice expresses her state of mind in the sense of performing an act that is appropriate only if she is in that state of mind (cf. BACH & HARNISH 1979). Her utterance expresses her acceptance of certain moral norms via what it asserts *and* presupposes. Discourse Contextualism can capture the core expressivist claim that normative uses of language express the speaker’s state of mind.

### 5.4 Normative uses and open questions

Discourse Contextualism elucidates the informal ideas from §2.2 concerning deontic modals’ role in managing what norms to accept. Following C.L. Stevenson, Allan Gibbard (1990) observes that when making a normative assertion, the speaker “is making a conversational demand. He is demanding that the audience accept what he says, that it share the state of mind he expresses” (172) — albeit in a “more subtle, less fully conscious way” than by issuing an explicit imperative (STEVENSON 1937: 26). In making normative assertions we *make claims on* our interlocutors. “Normative” claims are the claims by which we “give people advice” (PARFIT 2011: 288), the claims which “direct, guide, or obligate us” (KORSGAARD 1996: 226). Discourse Contextualism locates this feature of normative discourse in the presuppositions of normative utterances.

Though the truth-conditions of deontic modal sentences are ordinary representational contents, speakers can use deontic modals to communicate normative

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<sup>21</sup>See, e.g., AYER 1936, STEVENSON 1937, GIBBARD 1990; see also n. 31.

<sup>22</sup>E.g., SILK 2013: 212–213, MACFARLANE 2014: 146–147, a.m.o.

claims about what norms to accept. Since deontic modal sentences require a value for a contextual variable in order to express a proposition, the assignment of such a value is a precondition for making a deontic modal assertion. Doing so thus creates a discourse context in which that precondition is taken for granted.<sup>23</sup> This puts pressure on the hearer to conform her normative views to the assumed deontic premise set. In cooperative conversations, exerting such conversational pressure will be able to be supported by a normative justification for why it would be reasonable to rely on the relevant presupposed norms in the conversation (cf. (21)), or epistemic story about why it would be reasonable to treat one as relevantly authoritative on the issue in question. This can promote normative consensus. Consensus isn't always in the offing, but that is no different from the ordinary non-normative case.<sup>24</sup>

The nature of deontic modal sentences' truth-conditions may help explain their propensity for discourse-oriented uses. There is much to be said about the distinctive linguistic behavior of deontic modals, and the contrasts between deontic modals and paradigm context-sensitive expressions. For present purposes let's simply observe the following (see SILK 2016a for extensive further discussion). The asserted contents of deontic modal utterances are propositions about (e.g.) implication/compatibility relations between propositions and premise sets. Such logical matters can be at issue when working out the specific content of a general normative ethical view given the non-normative facts. But this isn't the usual case in normative inquiry. What is typically interesting in a speaker's deontic modal utterance is what value is being assumed for the discourse-level norms parameter, i.e. what norms the speaker is presuming to be endorsed in the conversation. Given the ease with which we can retrieve one another's intended interpretation (as described above), using a deontic modal affords an efficient means of managing our assumptions about these norms. General pragmatic principles concerning efficiency and effectiveness in communication call for us to do so (cf. LEVINSON 1987, GRICE 1989, HEIM 1991). So, it wouldn't be surprising if the primary discourse function of deontic modals came to be to facilitate coordination on a body of norms. Capturing this is often taken to be a distinctive advantage of relativist, expressivist, and dynamic theories.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Compare STALNAKER 1978: "the context on which an assertion has its ESSENTIAL effect is not defined by what is presupposed before the speaker begins to speak, but will include any information which the speaker assumes his audience can infer from the performance of the speech act" (86). For discussion and technical implementations, see THOMASON ET AL. 2006, MURRAY 2014, SILK 2016a (§§3.5, 5.2.5, 6.2.2, 6.3).

<sup>24</sup>For further discussion, see GIBBARD 1990: Part III; cf. BRANDON 1994, HAUGH 2013.

<sup>25</sup>See STEVENSON 1937, GIBBARD 1990, YABLO 2011; cf. RICHARD 2008, drawing on LEWIS 1979, also MACFARLANE 2010, YALCIN 2012, SWANSON 2016.

Discourse Contextualism captures it in terms of a static contextualist semantics and general pragmatic effects of using sentences with this semantics.

In §2.1 we noted a distinction between intuitively normative versus non-normative uses of language. Recall (11).

- (11) Dwayne has to be home by 10. Aren't his parents stupid? I'd stay out if I were him.

Intuitively, it's consistent for the speaker to dismiss the act of getting home by 10 because she isn't endorsing the norms that require it — the rules in Dwayne's household. She is simply reporting what these norms require. It's common to distinguish what we can call *expressive* uses of modals, like in (13), from *non-expressive* uses, like in (11). Adapting terminology from LYONS (1977, 1995), say that an unembedded modal is used *expressively* if the speaker is presented as endorsing the considerations with respect to which the modal is interpreted; and say that a modal is used *non-expressively* if the speaker isn't presented in this way. (Non-expressive uses are compatible with speaker endorsement; they simply fail to present it.) Call expressive uses of deontic modals *normative* uses, and non-expressive uses of deontic modals *non-normative* uses.<sup>26</sup> Normative uses present the speaker as endorsing the norms that justify the modal claim; non-normative uses don't.

We can capture the distinction between normative and non-normative uses of deontic modals while giving them a uniform type of analysis. This improves on disjunctive, non-contextualist accounts, which are forced to give a contextualist semantics for some but not all uses of deontic modals.<sup>27</sup> In both kinds of uses the modals are interpreted with respect to a contextually supplied set of premises. The difference lies in what premise set variable is supplied. The non-normative use in (11) calls for a variable  $P_{hr}$  that refers to Dwayne's parents' house rules. These rules may be endorsed in the discourse context, but they may not be. What distinguishes intuitively normative uses is that they call for a discourse-level contextual variable, like  $P_m$ , which represents norms accepted in the conversation. Normative uses don't simply say what is permitted, required, etc. according to a given body of norms. They assume that the norms are endorsed in the context.<sup>28</sup>

This way of representing the distinction between normative and non-normative

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<sup>26</sup>This distinction has been noted under various descriptions in many areas. See also, e.g., HARE 1952, HART 1961/1994, VON WRIGHT 1963, LASERSOHN 2005, NUYTS ET AL. 2010. For critical discussion, see SILK 2015.

<sup>27</sup>In the broader literature, see, e.g., STEPHENSON 2007, YALCIN 2007, MACFARLANE 2010, 2014, MOSS 2015.

<sup>28</sup>For refinements and additional formal semantic details, see SILK 2016a: §§3.3-5, 3.5.1, 4.1.2, 4.2.

uses provides a framework for further theorizing about the distinctive features normative language. First, analytic naturalists aside, it's often accepted that normative concepts are irreducible to non-normative concepts. Our semantics reflects this. Even if, say, classical utilitarianism is correct at the substantive normative level, speakers can coherently accept (24) without accepting (7); (7), unlike (24), presupposes a body of norms endorsed in the context.<sup>29</sup>

(7) Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

(24) Sally's giving 10% of her income to the poor maximizes happiness.

However, given a context where a "bridge" principle like (25) is accepted, (7) is accepted iff (24) is.

(25) What maximizes happiness is what must be done.

Discourse Contextualism captures the intuition that we shouldn't build particular substantive normative assumptions into the conventional meanings of deontic modals,<sup>30</sup> while also capturing how deontic modals, given their conventional meaning, can be used to express speakers' particular normative views.

Second, we can locate substantive questions about different types of norms and normative language in a broader metasemantic+metaethical account of *what it is* to accept different types of norms and to make discourse moves that presuppose such acceptance. What must a concrete discourse context be like for an utterance to call for being interpreted with respect to a discourse-level norms parameter? Must the use play a regulative, directive role in the planning and practical reasoning of the speaker or relevant group? What makes it the case that such-and-such deontic premise set (or range of premise sets (n. 14)) represents norms compatible with what has been accepted in a given conversation? Does accepting a body of moral norms (alternatively: prudential norms, norms of rationality, all-things-considered norms, etc.) essentially involve having certain motivational dispositions or emotional capacities? Does accepting (e.g.) 'Morally, I must  $\alpha$ ' — accepting that the value for  $\mathbf{P}_m$  determined in one's concrete context implies that one does  $\alpha$  — necessarily involve taking oneself to have normative reason to  $\alpha$ ? Discourse Contextualism provides a perspicuous framework for posing further questions about the distinctive practical character of intuitively normative uses of language (more in this vein in §§6.2, 7).

<sup>29</sup>A notion of acceptance in a context can be defined in the usual way (simplifying by identifying  $c$  with the context set): A sentence ' $\phi$ ' is *accepted* in  $c$  iff for every world  $w \in c$ , ' $\phi$ ' is true in  $c$  at  $w$ .

<sup>30</sup>See LEWIS 1978: 85–86, STALNAKER 1988: 151, FORRESTER 1989: chs. 2, 13, SILK 2013: 195–204; cf. GIBBARD 1990: ch. 1, 2003: ch. 2. We will return to this point in §7.

## 5.5 Recap

Let's take stock. I have argued that a more nuanced understanding of the role of context in interpretation provides the basis for an improved contextualist semantic and pragmatic theory. The aim of Discourse Contextualism is to start with a particular contextualist interpretation of a standard semantics for modals, and derive distinctive features of the use of deontic modals from this formal semantics and general conversational principles. Semantically, normative uses of deontic modals are associated with a contextual parameter representing norms endorsed for the purposes of conversation. Pragmatically, the "discourse-oriented" effects of such uses arise via general pragmatic reasoning from (inter alia) the requirement that a value for this parameter be assumed as input to semantic interpretation. In *using* deontic modals, speakers can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, along with general pragmatic reasoning, to manage an evolving body of norms.

## 6 Attitude Ascriptions and Normative Thought

So far we have focused on various discourse properties of deontic modals — how context affects the interpretation of deontic modals, on the one hand, and how deontic modals are used to change the context and manage what norms to accept, on the other. This section extends the Discourse Contextualist account developed in §§4–5 by examining a second prominent worry for contextualism: that contextualism mischaracterizes normative states of mind. This isn't the only worry that might be raised concerning deontic modals in embedded contexts. But the following discussion should give a flavor for certain explanatory resources available to contextualist theories. These resources may be integrated in a more comprehensive Discourse Contextualist treatment of embedding phenomena (see SILK 2016a: esp. ch. 4). I will argue that the proposed account of deontic modals in belief contexts constitutes an attractive framework for further theorizing about the nature of normative thought.

### 6.1 First-order states of mind

Call an attitude ascription like (26) with a deontic modal sentence as its complement clause a *normative attitude ascription*.

(26) Alice thinks Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

Given that contextualism treats the contextually relevant norms as figuring in the

content of a deontic modal sentence, contextualism seems to treat (26) as ascribing to Alice the belief that her moral norms require Sally to give 10% to the poor. The worry is that this incorrectly treats normative attitudes as states of mind about what norms one accepts.

Consider the following example from SILK 2013 (207–208):

Suppose you encourage Gabriel, your infant brother, to put his fingers into the electrical outlet. Gabriel, smart chap that he is, recoils; his mother has repeatedly scolded him not to do so. You say:

[(27)] Gabriel knows he shouldn't put his fingers into the outlet.

This seems true; you are attributing a certain normative belief to Gabriel. But it is implausible that [(27)] is true only if Gabriel has a belief about his, or anyone else's, normative views. He's just a baby.

Intuitively, "Whether one can represent or take a certain perspective on normative standards is independent of whether one can *have* a normative standard" (SILK 2013: 208).

Likewise, (28) doesn't ascribe to Bert the sort of attitude ascribed in (29):

(28) Bert fears that he must give 10% of his income to the poor.

(29)  $\approx$ Bert fears that his/our/whomever's moral views imply that he gives 10% of his income to the poor.

Bert's fear is about the moral status of his giving 10% to the poor, not about himself or the stringency of his moral views.

Normative attitude ascriptions don't seem to ascribe meta-attitudes about a relevant individual/group or their norms. They seem to characterize the subject's first-order normative views themselves. It's (30b), not (30a), with which (26) has an important semantic connection.

- (30) a.  $\approx$ Alice thinks that, according to her/our/whomever's moral views, Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.  
b.  $\approx$ According to Alice's moral views, Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

(26) characterizes Alice as accepting moral norms which require Sally to give 10% to the poor. The challenge is to capture this within a contextualist semantics.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>In the broader literature, see, e.g., GIBBARD 1990: 7–8, 83, 153–154; KÖLBEL 2004: 303–304;

First, I want to emphasize that on a Discourse Contextualist semantics there is no reference to the discourse context or to “the relevant norms,” considered *de dicto*, in the content of the attitude ascribed. (26) ascribes to Alice the belief that a certain set of propositions implies the proposition *g* that Sally gives 10% to the poor (cf. §5.4). But how does treating (26) as ascribing to Alice this sort of logical belief capture the intuition that (26) characterizes Alice’s norms themselves?

It is well-known that many embedding environments introduce *local* (derived, subordinate) contexts. These local contexts can provide a basis for interpreting embedded material, as in an attitude complement, supposition, or question. In (31), using ‘Ursula’ (/‘it’, /‘the unicorn’) is felicitous even though the presupposition that a suitable discourse referent exists isn’t “globally satisfied,” i.e. implied by the discourse common ground.

- (31) There are no unicorns, but Fred thinks there are. In fact, he thinks he has a pet unicorn named ‘Ursula’. He thinks Ursula (/it, /the unicorn) can fly.

The existence presupposition associated with ‘Ursula’ (/‘it’, /‘the unicorn’) is, however, satisfied in the expression’s *local* context, i.e. the context representing (what is presupposed about) Fred’s beliefs (STALNAKER 1988, 2014, HEIM 1992, GEURTS 1998). This licenses using the name (pronoun, description).

I will call readings such as the felicitous reading of (31) *local accommodation readings*. Though ‘local accommodation’ is often used for a specific mechanism in dynamic theories of presupposition, I use the label more theory-neutrally simply to designate certain readings of sentences with presuppositional expressions — roughly put, readings on which the presupposition is treated as contributing to the local content. Local accommodation (in this more-or-less pretheoretic sense) not only allows one to use ‘Ursula’ (‘it’, ‘the unicorn’) in (31) without presupposition failure. It also guides how the expression is interpreted. Likewise, I suggest that we capture the intuition that (26) characterizes Alice’s normative views in terms of the communicative upshot of locally interpreting the embedded deontic modal, and locally accommodating a value for  $P_m$ .<sup>32</sup>

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YALCIN 2007: 997; YABLO 2011: 271; SILK 2013: 207–208. Note that the objection concerns normative uses of deontic modals. In attitude ascriptions these are uses in which the relevant norms are assumed to be endorsed by the attitude subject (see below; for discussion see SILK 2016a: §§4.1.2, 4.2).

<sup>32</sup>It’s contentious how to formalize a general notion of local context. What is important for our purposes is simply that concrete states of mind are like concrete discourse contexts in being representable by abstract objects which supply semantic values for variables and other context-sensitive expressions, and that the local contexts figuring in the interpretation of attitude ascriptions and suppositions represent concrete states of mind (perhaps among other things). This assumption is com-

Moral uses of deontic modals presuppose a value for  $P_m$ ; they presuppose a body of moral norms endorsed in the context. With normative attitude ascriptions the relevant context is the *local* context of the attitude state; the locus of endorsement is the attitude subject (see n. 31). In locally accommodating the presuppositions of ‘must’ in (26), one assumes that Alice’s state of mind characterizes a value for  $P_m$ ,  $P_A$ , that makes the belief ascription true. One communicates that Alice endorses moral norms which require Sally to give 10% to the poor. Ascribing to Alice the belief that  $P_A$  implies  $g$  via (26) communicates something about Alice’s first-order normative views because of how the presuppositions of  $P_m$  are assumed to be locally satisfied.

## 6.2 Cognitivism and non-cognitivism

This account of deontic modals in attitude contexts lends itself to an attractive picture of normative thought, one which may capture intuitions from both cognitivist and non-cognitivist camps.

For the normative attitude ascription (26) to be true, two things must be the case. First, Alice must accept some body of norms or other. This licenses locally satisfying the presupposition associated with the deontic premise set variable. Second, this body of norms must imply (given Alice’s non-normative beliefs) that Sally gives 10% to the poor. This ensures that (26) correctly characterizes Alice’s normative views.

The truth in cognitivism is that the *content* of Alice’s belief is an ordinary representational content. Suppose Alice accepts classical utilitarianism. Then (26) is true iff Sally’s giving 10% maximizes overall happiness. However, having the normative belief isn’t simply a matter of being in this representational state. Alice must also *accept* the norms in question. Believing that Sally must give 10% isn’t equivalent in general to believing that Sally’s giving 10% maximizes happiness, since the content of the former belief varies across subjects who accept different norms. Moreover, these beliefs aren’t identical even for someone who accepts classical utilitarianism. The normative belief, unlike the non-normative belief, requires being in a certain state of norm-acceptance (cf. §5.4).

This latter component makes room for a way of capturing the common idea that normative judgment isn’t reducible to non-normative judgment. Normative attitude ascriptions are interpreted with respect a body of norms assumed to characterize the subject’s normative views. Questions about the distinctive practical character of normative judgment can be situated in a broader account of the correctness-

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patible with various technical approaches to local contexts and accommodation. See SILK 2016a: §4.2 for additional discussion.

conditions of such assumptions — i.e., a metaethical account of the psychology of norm-acceptance. (No doubt GIBBARD 1990 will be relevant here.) For instance: What makes it the case about an agent that such-and-such deontic premise set (or range of premise sets (n. 14)) characterizes her normative state of mind? Do facts about the agent's conative, practical, or motivational state play an essential role in this sort of content determination? If so, what role and which facts? Does norm-acceptance essentially involve having certain motivational dispositions or emotional capacities? These questions will plausibly receive different answers for different types of norms.

Discourse Contextualism makes perspicuous how normative beliefs might involve both representational and motivational elements — the former in the content of the belief, and the latter in psychological preconditions for its counting as normative, or its being ascribable in normative terms. Putting the point in terms of normative belief ascriptions, we can locate the representational component in the *semantics* — i.e., in the semantic content of the complement clause, given that its presuppositions are locally satisfied; and we can locate the putative practical component in the *metasemantics* — i.e., in what makes it the case about the subject that such-and-such way of satisfying those presuppositions is correct. An account of normative judgment developed along these lines may thus be able to capture intuitions driving “hybrid” expressivist views while avoiding some of their apparent counter-intuitive commitments — e.g., that everyone with a given normative belief accepts the same representational claim (e.g., BOISVERT 2008), or that all normative beliefs of a certain type involve the same motivational attitude (e.g., RIDGE 2006, BOISVERT 2008).<sup>33</sup>

To be clear I am not claiming that Discourse Contextualism commits one to views about the nature of normative judgment. It doesn't. It doesn't commit one to internalism, or to saying that normative beliefs are essentially practical in ways that non-normative beliefs are not. These are extra-semantic issues in philosophy of mind and psychology. Discourse Contextualism provides a framework for articulating further metanormative questions about the distinctive features of normative language and judgment; it doesn't itself require particular answers to them (cf. §5.4). The next section briefly examines one additional way in which Discourse Contextualism can fruitfully integrate with broader normative and metanormative theorizing.

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<sup>33</sup>See SCHROEDER 2009 for extensive critical discussion of hybrid theories.

## 7 Normative Truth

As the reader may have noticed, nowhere in our developments of Discourse Contextualism have we appealed to intuitions about the truth-values of deontic modal sentences. This is surprising: truth-value judgments are often regarded as a primary type of data for semantic theorizing. But it is no accident.

There is a distinction which has cropped up throughout the previous sections, and it will be helpful to introduce it explicitly. Following Lewis (1975), distinguish speakers' *concrete* discourse context, or conversational situation, from an *abstract* context that represents it. I take it that the central questions for formal semantics and pragmatics — an account of a language's conventional meaning and use — are the following:

- *Compositional Semantics*: Given an assignment of values to context-sensitive expressions, what are the conventional contents of expressions of the language, and how are the conventional contents of complex expressions calculated as a function of the conventional contents of their parts?
- *Formal Pragmatics*: Given a compositional semantics for the language, how do individual utterances and sequences of utterances change the discourse context? How should we model the dynamics of uses of language with this semantics?

Crucially, compositional semantics *takes as given* an abstract representation of context that assigns values to variables and other context-sensitive expressions. This leaves open the following broadly *metasemantic* question of which abstract context (or perhaps range of abstract contexts) represents a given concrete conversational situation.

- *Metasemantics*: What makes it the case, for a given concrete discourse context, that such-and-such abstract context represents it, i.e. that such-and-such values are assigned to free variables and other context-sensitive expressions?

We have been able to address various aspects of the semantics and pragmatics of deontic modals without taking a stand on the metasemantics of deontic modals. For instance, the dynamics of Alice and Bert's conversation were captured in terms of facts about the compositional semantics, about what their utterances assume about the (concrete and abstract) context, and thus about the intended contents of their utterances given those contextual assumptions (cf. n. 20). However, one cannot evaluate a deontic modal utterance as true or false without making assumptions about

what value for the deontic premise set variable is determined by the concrete discourse context in which the utterance was produced. We can thus capture core features of the conventional meaning and discourse function of deontic modals while remaining neutral on the truth-values of deontic modal utterances.

This has several interesting upshots. First, settling on the truth-values of normative utterances may be less critical in capturing our semantic competence with normative language than we initially thought. There is a range of factors which may be relevant to fixing the value of the contextual variable  $P_d$  (for some type of norm  $d$ ) — speaker intentions, previous utterances and discourse moves, information structure, features of the concrete conversational situation, substantive normative principles, etc. How these factors, whatever they are, interact to determine the relevant value is plausibly highly complex, and even variable across utterances. Detailed descriptions of concrete discourse contexts will likely fail to specify all the contextual features that might be relevant to determining the value of  $P_d$ . Speakers may fill in the details in different ways (cf. KECSKES 2008). Even given a complete description of any plausibly relevant features of context, speakers may disagree about how the value for  $P_d$  is determined as a function of these features. Speakers may thus arrive at diverging truth-value judgments based on substantive normative differences and other metasemantic differences. Nothing less than a stipulation of a value for  $P_d$  may suffice for delivering truth-value judgments that are stable across speakers and reflect genuinely *semantic* competence with deontic modals. But this amounts to the point implicit in the Compositional Semantic question above: semantics for deontic modals — an account of their conventional meaning — *takes as given* an abstract representation of context, and hence a specific body of norms. Thus far I have bracketed differences between (concrete) utterances and (abstract) sentences-in-context, but we can now see the importance of the distinction.<sup>34</sup> It's judgments about truth-values and truth-conditions of deontic modal sentences *given an abstract context* — rather than of deontic modal utterances given an informally characterized concrete conversational situation — that provide essential data for semantic theorizing.

In this way Discourse Contextualism avoids building substantive normative views into the conventional meanings of deontic modals. It offers a way of representing the conventional meanings of deontic modals (at a relevant level of abstraction), and of modeling how uses of deontic modals conventionally change the context. It doesn't tell us what context to be in. Maintaining this sort of neutrality is often regarded as a distinctive feature of relativist and expressivist theories,<sup>35</sup> but we can now see that

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<sup>34</sup>Cf. KAPLAN 1989: 522, 584–585, 591.

<sup>35</sup>See GIBBARD 1990: ch. 1, 2003: ch. 2; CHRISMAN 2007: 243; SILK 2013.

contextualism can capture it as well. Semantic competence with normative language doesn't presuppose some particular view on how to live (cf. §5.4).

Delineating questions about the metasemantics of deontic modals suggests precise ways of posing substantive questions about the nature of normativity, and of locating them in an overall theory. For instance: What property, if any, do all and only morally required actions have? Fundamentally, what determines which body of (say) moral norms, and hence value for  $P_m$ , is operative in a given concrete context? What is the relation between these operative norms and individuals' evaluative attitudes? For such-and-such type of contextual norm variable (moral, aesthetic, etc.), is a single value determined by all contexts? Or can the relevant norms vary across contexts? What are the relations among different types of norms, and hence among the values for different types of norm variables determined in concrete contexts? Metaethicists can all accept Discourse Contextualism in giving a formal semantics and pragmatics for normative language. Where they will differ is on such further philosophical questions.

To take one example, consider debates about the universality of morality. To capture "relativist" claims, one could say that different contexts can determine different moral norms. Conflicting moral judgments about a particular case could thus both be true. Those who defend the objectivity of morality — or at least the objective purport of moral language — would deny this. They could treat the moral norms variable as representing the correct moral norms in the conversational situation, determined independently of speaker attitudes. If the same moral norms were correct across contexts, a universal body of moral norms would be supplied. This would be a substantive normative matter rather than something built into the conventional meaning of moral language. Questions about the objectivity and universality of morality can be teased apart from the semantics, and located in the metasemantics of what determines the value of the moral norms variable in concrete contexts.

For all I have said, in some cases there may nothing in the world, independent of our intentions and what we accept, that determines precisely which body of norms is supplied. Even if there isn't, this needn't undermine normative disagreement. Suppose Alice and Bert's disagreement is such a case. Alice might have good reason to persist in her claim that Sally must donate 10% of her income. As we have seen, previously accepted norms can serve as a basis for interpreting subsequent normative claims. Alice might think, "Why is Bert being so lax? Sally is so much better off than nearly everyone in the world. Would Bert be so stingy if he were in Sally's place? I don't want to live in a world where people think someone in her shoes can't spare 10%. I'm not letting this one slide." If Bert comes to agree with Alice, perhaps he won't learn any facts that held independent of their conversation (again, for all I

have said thus far). But what norms he accepts will have changed — arguably for the better. What norms we accept matters to us. Persisting disagreement needn't imply realism.<sup>36</sup>

We have seen that various Discourse Contextualist-based accounts of normative thought and talk are possible depending on one's broader philosophical commitments. This isn't a trivial feature. Modifying a point of Kaplan's, by delineating issues concerning the meaning of deontic modals and the nature of normativity and normative judgment, "the result can only be healthy for all... disciplines" (1989: 537). Distinguishing these further issues from the semantics proper can free up our normative and metanormative investigations. This can motivate clearer answers and a more refined understanding of the space of possible views.<sup>37</sup> Discourse Contextualism provides a solid linguistic basis for an overall (meta)normative theory.

## 8 Conclusion

The central aims of this paper have been twofold: first, to begin to develop an improved account of the meaning and use of normative language, focusing specifically on deontic modals; and, second, to illustrate how this account can be integrated with broader theorizing about normativity and normative judgment. The proposed account draws on a more general framework for contextualist semantics and pragmatics, which I call *Discourse Contextualism* (SILK 2016a). The aim of Discourse Contextualism is to derive features of the meaning and use of deontic modals from a particular contextualist interpretation of a standard semantics for modals, and general principles of interpretation and conversation. First, I argued that various agreement and disagreement phenomena with deontic modals can be understood in terms of speakers' assumptions about what body of norms is determined by their conversational situation. Normative uses of deontic modals presuppose a lexically unspecified value for a discourse-level parameter representing the norms operative in the context. In using deontic modals speakers can exploit their mutual grammatical and world knowledge, and general pragmatic reasoning skills, to manage the value of this parameter and coordinate on an evolving normative view. Next, I sug-

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<sup>36</sup>On this I disagree with sentiments in CAPPELEN & HAWTHORNE 2009: 117–120, ENOCH 2011: ch. 2.

<sup>37</sup>For points in a similar spirit, see FORRESTER 1989: chs. 2, 13; PLUNKETT & SUNDELL 2013b: 275–277; SILK 2013, 2015, 2016a,b. See SILK 2016a: §§3.6, 5.4, 7.5 for further discussion on the relations among the formal semantics, metasemantics, and (meta)normative theory, and the role of truth-value judgments in semantic theorizing.

gested that normative attitude ascriptions be treated in terms of independently attested mechanisms of local interpretation: normative belief ascriptions characterize a subject's normative views by assuming a locally accommodated value for the norms variable that represents those views and makes the ascription true. Discourse Contextualism provides perspicuous ways of posing further (meta)normative questions about the nature of normativity, normative language, and normative judgment. For instance, questions about the practical character of normative language and judgment can be situated in broader philosophical and social-psychological accounts of the nature of norm-acceptance and what is involved in making discourse moves that presuppose such acceptance. Questions about the nature of normativity, morality, etc. can be located in the metasemantics of what determines the values of different types of norm variables in concrete contexts. Delineating these issues can help refine our understanding of the space of overall theories and motivate more fruitful ways the dialectics may proceed. A Discourse Contextualist semantics and pragmatics provides an empirically adequate and theoretically attractive basis for a broader account of normative discourse and practice.

The development and defense of Discourse Contextualism offered here is far from complete. For instance, I focused on context-sensitivity in the normative aspect of the interpretation of deontic modals, i.e. in which body of norms is supplied. But there is a prominent second respect in which deontic modals have been argued to be context-sensitive: they appear sensitive to a contextually relevant body of evidence (see n. 4). We can ask not only about what one ought to do given all the facts, known and unknown, but also about one ought to do given the evidence. In using deontic modals speakers can manage evolving bodies of norms *and* ordinary information about the world. Second, I focused on applying the Discourse Contextualist framework to deontic modals, and to moral readings in particular. Yet there are important differences among categories of normative expressions and types of normative readings. It is non-trivial how precisely to implement a Discourse Contextualist account in each case. Third, the objections considered in this paper are certainly not the only challenges facing contextualist semantics. While we examined conversational explanations for certain distinctive linguistic phenomena with deontic modals, more thorough comparisons of the discourse properties and embedding behavior of various types of normative expressions and paradigm context-sensitive expressions is required. (For a start on these issues, see SILK 2016a,b.) Developing a Discourse Contextualist-based overall theory will require careful examination of how the semantic and broadly metasemantic issues interact and constrain theory choice. Detailed comparison with alternative frameworks will be necessary. I leave developments of a more general Discourse Contextualist account, and investigation

of its prospects, for future research.

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