

## Disagreeing about ‘ought’

Robin McKenna

University of Geneva

rbnmckenna@gmail.com

**Abstract** In their ‘Metaethical contextualism defended’ (*Ethics*, 2010) Gunnar Björnsson & Stephen Finlay argue that metaethical contextualism - roughly, the view that ‘ought’ claims are semantically incomplete and require supplementation by certain parameters provided by the context in which they are uttered - can deal with two influential problems. The first concerns the connection between deliberation and advice (the ‘practical integration problem’). The second concerns the way in which the expression ‘ought’ behaves in intra- and inter-contextual disagreement reports (the ‘semantic assessment problem’). I argue that, while Björnsson & Finlay can deal with the first problem, they can’t deal with the second.

### 0. Introductory remarks

Gunnar Björnsson & Stephen Finlay (2010) defend a version of *metaethical contextualism*, on which a sentence of the form ‘S ought to  $\phi$ ’ expresses the proposition that a subject S ought, relative to some body of information  $i$  and standard  $m$ , to  $\phi$ , where  $i$  and  $m$  are provided by the context.<sup>1</sup> Metaethical contextualism is motivated in part by the need to give a uniform semantic analysis of both the ‘objective ought’ (what one ought to do given the facts) and the (many) ‘subjective oughts’ (what one ought to do given some body of information). However, as Björnsson & Finlay note, their view faces two objections. First, the view disconnects deliberation and advice (pp. 11-12). Following Björnsson & Finlay, call this the *practical integration problem*. Second, the view can’t explain certain patterns of linguistic data (pp. 17-25). For instance:

AGENT: Agent needs to rescue a missing child. She knows that the child is down one of two wells - call them well A and well B - but, unfortunately, she doesn’t know which. Agent has good but not conclusive evidence that the child is in well A. Agent says ‘I

---

<sup>1</sup> Three things: First, unless otherwise stated all references are to Björnsson & Finlay (2010). Second, following Björnsson & Finlay I remain neutral about what the relevant body of information is (p. 10; pp. 12-13). Third, I set aside standard-relativity and focus on information-relativity. The problems I raise for information-relativity will have analogs for standard-relativity.

ought to go to well A'. Now imagine that Advisor, who is monitoring Agent's activities on CCTV, has excellent (better than Agent's) but still not conclusive evidence that the child is in well B. Advisor says 'No, Agent's wrong. She ought to go to well B'.<sup>2</sup>

AGENT raises two problems. First, it looks like Advisor disagrees with Agent. But, if the metaethical contextualist is right, what Advisor said doesn't contradict what Agent said (it may well be that, relative to Agent's information, Agent ought to go to well A while, relative to Advisor's, Agent ought to go to well B). So what do they disagree about? Second, if Agent and Advisor don't disagree about anything, how does the metaethical contextualist explain Advisor's use of the 'disagreement markers' 'No' and 'Agent's wrong'? While Björnsson & Finlay lump both problems together under the label 'the semantic assessment problem' I'll occasionally keep them apart (I explain why below).

My thesis is that, while Björnsson & Finlay deal with the practical integration problem, they can't deal with the semantic assessment problem. I start by, first, motivating two desiderata for a solution to the semantic assessment problem (§1) and, second, sketching Björnsson & Finlay's solution (§2). I then argue that, insofar as their solution satisfies the second desideratum, it fails to satisfy the first. Consequently, their solution fails (§3). I finish by drawing a moral from my discussion (§4).

## 1. Two desiderata

For the metaethical contextualist the 'ought' of deliberation is relativised to the information at the deliberator's disposal whereas the 'ought' of advice is relativised to the information at the advisor's disposal. The intuitive idea behind the practical integration problem is that - as in AGENT - the two bodies of information may differ. Consequently, the two oughts don't 'mesh'. In rough outline, Björnsson & Finlay's response is to argue that deliberation and advice are connected via a common concern with ensuring that decisions are made based on the best possible information, rather than via a common body of information (pp. 11-17).<sup>3</sup> Advisor and Agent are concerned with ensuring that Agent acts on the best possible information, and Advisor's 'ought' claim is made relative

---

<sup>2</sup> This simplified variant on the case Björnsson & Finlay discuss will serve my purposes in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Björnsson & Finlay say that deliberation and advice are connected via a common end (in AGENT, rescuing the missing child) and Agent and Advisor have a common concern (with ensuring that Agent acts on the basis of the best information) because that would put Agent in a better position to attain that end (pp. 15-16). This simplification doesn't affect the argument of §3.

to the best possible information. Consequently, Advisor's 'ought' claim addresses Agent's concern.

This deals with the practical integration problem, but it leaves the semantic assessment problem untouched. Advisor may address Agent's concern, but why does Advisor seem to disagree with Agent, and why is Advisor's use of the disagreement markers 'No' and 'Agent's wrong' felicitous? In what follows I motivate two desiderata for a solution to the semantic assessment problem.

First, Advisor uses the disagreement markers 'No' and 'Agent's wrong'. But there are other disagreement markers that Advisor could have used, for instance:

- (1) Advisor: What Agent said/thinks/believes - that she ought to go to well A - is false.

She ought to go to well B.

A solution to the semantic assessment problem has to deal with the full range of disagreement markers, not just 'No' and 'Agent's wrong'. This is the first desideratum, which I'll call RESPECT THE DATA.<sup>4</sup>

Second, a natural assumption is that disagreement and semantic assessment always concerns the proposition literally asserted (so, in particular, disagreement about and semantic assessment of 'ought' claims always concerns the proposition literally asserted). But, as Björnsson & Finlay argue, the assumption is implausible (pp. 19-20). For instance:

- (2) Fred: I was told that Barney stole the money.

Wilma: No, you're wrong, Barney didn't steal the money.

If the assumption were right then the natural interpretation of (2) would be that Wilma disagrees with Fred about whether Fred was told that Barney stole the money, and she is expressing that disagreement via the disagreement markers 'No' and 'You're wrong'. But that's implausible. Rather, Wilma disagrees with Fred about whether Barney stole the money, and she is expressing that disagreement via the disagreement markers 'No' and 'You're wrong'. Cases like (2) suggest that disagreement and semantic assessment always concern the *most salient* proposition, where the most salient proposition depends on a range of contextual factors (conversational interests and the like). Because Fred and Wilma are primarily concerned with who stole the money, the proposition that Barney

---

<sup>4</sup> Crucially (for my argument) Björnsson & Finlay accept the first desideratum (p. 19).

stole the money is most salient. Wilma disagrees with Fred about whether Barney stole the money, and she expresses that via the disagreement markers ‘No’ and ‘You’re wrong’.

However, even the suggested modification isn’t right. For instance:

(3) Frank: I love haggis.

Stephen: No way! Haggis is disgusting.

On the modified assumption, Stephen and Frank don’t disagree (Stephen may accept that Frank loves haggis). But Stephen’s rejoinder seems perfectly in order, which suggests that they do disagree. To make sense of that one can distinguish different ‘senses’ of disagreement, one of which involves incompatibility in non-doxastic attitudes. Frank loves haggis whereas Stephen hates it, and Stephen couldn’t coherently adopt Frank’s attitude without thereby abandoning his own (and vice versa). Note that disagreement in this sense licenses the use of certain disagreement markers (‘No way!’, perhaps ‘You’re wrong’) but it certainly doesn’t license the use of the full range of disagreement markers. For instance:

(4) Stephen: What you said/think/believe is false. Haggis is disgusting.

In contrast with his rejoinder in (3), Stephen’s rejoinder in (4) is bizarre. The moral is that different senses of disagreement license the use of different ranges of disagreement markers. This will be important in what follows, and it explains why I’m keeping the two parts of the semantic assessment problem apart. A candidate explanation of what disagreement about a certain class of claims concerns might not explain the use of the required range of disagreement markers.

Just as the interpretation of (2) and (3) identified the sense of disagreement in play, and then appealed to that sense in explaining the use of certain disagreement markers, a solution to the semantic assessment problem has to identify the sense of disagreement in play in AGENT, and then appeal to that sense in explaining the use of various disagreement markers. This is the second desideratum, which I’ll call LOCATE DISAGREEMENT.

## 2. The solution

In this section I sketch Björnsson & Finlay’s solution to the semantic assessment problem. The sketch draws on an analogy with (2). Just as Wilma assesses something other than the proposition Fred literally asserted and their disagreement is about

something other than that proposition, Björnsson & Finlay hold that Advisor assesses something other than the proposition Agent literally asserted and that their disagreement is about something other than that proposition. I'll take what Advisor assesses first, and what Agent and Advisor disagree about second.

Recall that, as Björnsson & Finlay argue, the fundamental concern motivating our assessments of ‘ought’ claims is with ensuring that decisions are made on the basis of the best information. Consequently, concern with the truth or falsity of particular ‘ought’ claims is always derivative. In any context, one’s best guess as to the thing to do is just going to be whatever ‘ought’ claim is true in one’s context. But any ‘ought’ claim is conversationally relevant only insofar as it’s the best guess as to the thing to do. Once new information becomes available, ‘ought’ claims based on older information become conversationally irrelevant.

Applying this to AGENT, both Agent and Advisor are concerned with ensuring that Agent acts on the best information. But Advisor has better information than Agent, which means that the truth or falsity of Agent’s ‘ought’ claim is irrelevant. Consequently, the proposition that Agent ought, relative to Advisor’s information, to go to well A is the salient proposition for semantic assessment. The idea is that the ‘target’ of semantic assessment shifts with the context. Advisor targets the claim that Agent ought, relative to Advisor’s information, to go to well A rather than the claim that Agent ought, relative to Agent’s information, to go to well A. I’ll call this the *shifting target view* of semantic assessment, and I’ll refer to the target of semantic assessment as the ‘target content’.

Still, one might wonder why Advisor responds to Agent’s claim by ‘saying ‘No, Agent’s wrong’ rather than as follows (p. 19):

- (5) Advisor: That’s nice. But Agent ought to go to well B.

On Björnsson & Finlay’s view, ‘ought’ claims function pragmatically as *recommendations*, the idea being that ‘ought’ claims recommend courses of action. So, in saying that she ‘ought’ to go to well A Agent recommends that she go to well A but, because Advisor recommends that Agent go to well B, they disagree about whether to recommend Agent going to well A. As Björnsson & Finlay put it (p. 22), this is a sort of *quasi-expressivism* (‘expressivism’ because recommendations are non-doxastic attitudes; ‘quasi’ because this is part of the pragmatics, not semantics, of ‘ought’ claims).

Putting the pieces together, Björnsson & Finlay defend the shifting target view, on which the target of semantic assessment shifts with the context, and a sort of quasi-expressivism, on which disagreement about ‘ought’ claims involves a sort of non-doxastic attitude. The upshot is that Advisor semantically assesses the proposition Agent would have asserted if she had made her utterance in Advisor’s context (rather than the proposition Agent literally asserted) and Advisor and Agent disagree about whether to recommend Agent going to well A.

### 3. Why the solution fails

In this section I’ll argue that, insofar as Björnsson & Finlay’s solution satisfies LOCATE DISAGREEMENT (the second desideratum) it fails to satisfy RESPECT THE DATA (the first). Consequently, their solution fails.

As a preliminary, compare AGENT and (2):

(2) Fred: I was told that Barney stole the money.

Wilma: No, you’re wrong. Barney didn’t steal the money.

Again, Fred and Wilma disagree about whether Barney stole the money, and the proposition that Barney stole the money is the target of semantic assessment. So the target content here is the proposition that Barney stole the money, Fred and Wilma disagree about whether that proposition is true, and Wilma expresses that via her use of the disagreement markers ‘No’ and ‘You’re wrong’. In contrast, in AGENT the target content is the proposition that Agent ought, relative to Advisor’s information, to go to well A, but Advisor and Agent disagree about whether to recommend Agent going to well A, not about the target content. So in (2) disagreement concerns the target content whereas in AGENT disagreement concerns something other than the target content.

I’m going to raise three problems. The first two are relatively minor, and I’ll suggest how Björnsson & Finlay could deal with them. However, the third is far deeper. I’ll canvass a possible response on Björnsson & Finlay’s behalf, but I’ll explain why I don’t think it helps.

First, isn’t (2) meant to give us a handle on the sort of phenomenon that Björnsson & Finlay appeal to in order to solve the semantic assessment problem? Just as we can make sense of Fred and Wilma’s disagreement in (2), we can make sense of Agent and Advisor’s disagreement in AGENT. But, as I’ve just argued, (2) and AGENT are

disanalogous in certain respects. So it's unclear that (2) gives us a handle on the relevant phenomenon.

Response: Given the obvious disanalogies between (2) and AGENT - for instance, it's plausible that Fred saying that he was told that Barney stole the money pragmatically conveys that Barney stole the money whereas it's not plausible that Agent's 'ought' claim pragmatically conveys that Agent ought, relative to Advisor's information, to go to well A - it would be somewhat surprising if Björnsson & Finlay's argument rested on an analogy. But, charitably interpreted, the only role (2) need play in their argument is to provide support for their view that semantic assessment need not concern the proposition literally asserted.

Second, one might think that the disanalogy is crucial. Fred and Wilma disagree about the same thing that Wilma semantically assesses, whereas Agent and Advisor's disagree about something other than the thing that Advisor semantically assesses. But one might worry that it's at least not obvious that disagreement and semantic assessment can be disconnected in this way.

Response: This looks much like the practical integration problem, and the same response is available. Just as deliberation and advice are integrated via a common concern (with acting on the basis of the best information), semantic assessment and disagreement are integrated (or connected) via the same common concern. I see no reason why this response is any less plausible than the response to the practical integration problem.

Third, and more importantly, in order to satisfy LOCATE DISAGREEMENT a solution to the semantic assessment problem has to identify the sense of disagreement in play in AGENT. On Björnsson & Finlay's quasi-expressivism the relevant sense is a sort of incompatibility in non-doxastic attitude. Again: Agent recommends that she go to well A whereas Advisor recommends that Agent go to well B, and Agent could not coherently adopt Advisor's attitude without thereby abandoning her own (and vice versa). Now recall that in order to satisfy RESPECT THE DATA a solution has to explain why Advisor can felicitously express her disagreement with Agent not just via disagreement markers such as 'No' and 'Agent's wrong' but also via disagreement markers such as 'What Agent said/thinks/believes is false'. But, as we've already seen, incompatibility in non-doxastic attitude licenses the use of some disagreement markers ('No', 'You're wrong') but not others, in particular 'What you said/think/believe is false'. So Björnsson & Finlay's

quasi-expressivism doesn't license the use of the required range of disagreement markers. In short, insofar as Björnsson & Finlay satisfy LOCATE DISAGREEMENT, they fail to satisfy RESPECT THE DATA. But, as I've argued, a solution to the semantic assessment problem has to satisfy both desiderata.

Possible response: Björnsson & Finlay's shifting target view provides a proposition that Advisor can semantically assess (the target content), and a proposition is exactly the sort of thing one can assess via disagreement markers such as 'What you said/think/believe is false'. Contrast this with (3):

(3) Frank: I love haggis.

Stephen: No way! You're wrong. Haggis is disgusting.

In (3) there isn't any proposition for Stephen to assess (at least, not that Frank and Stephen disagree about), whereas if the shifting target view is right then in AGENT there is a proposition for Advisor to assess (viz. the proposition that Agent ought, relative to Advisor's information, to go to well A).

I don't think that this helps much. The shifting target view does provide a proposition that Advisor can semantically assess, and perhaps one could appeal to this in developing an alternative explanation why Advisor's use of the required disagreement markers is felicitous. But that alternative explanation would have nothing to do with the way in which Björnsson & Finlay satisfy LOCATE DISAGREEMENT. Again: Incompatibility in non-doxastic attitude doesn't license the use of the full range of disagreement markers. Consequently, Björnsson & Finlay's way of satisfying LOCATE DISAGREEMENT fails to satisfy RESPECT THE DATA. Perhaps there's some other way of satisfying LOCATE DISAGREEMENT that can satisfy RESPECT THE DATA, and perhaps that way makes use of the observation that in AGENT there is a proposition for Advisor to assess. But the appeal to incompatibility in non-doxastic attitude doesn't help here.

#### 4. The moral

Björnsson & Finlay suggest that their strategy will work for other plausibly context-sensitive expressions that face analogous problems (p. 36). I suspect that it won't. I'll focus on a small range of such expressions, 'tasty', 'funny', 'beautiful', 'might' and 'knows'.

Torfinn Huvenes (2012) has suggested a way in which the contextualist about ‘tasty’ claims can deal with the semantic assessment problem. Consider:

(6) Alec: Haggis is tasty.

Torfinn: Yuck! Haggis is not tasty.

It’s plausible that ‘tasty’ claims pragmatically express non-doxastic attitudes, the idea being that Alec’s ‘tasty’ claim pragmatically expresses a pro-attitude towards haggis whereas Torfinn’s pragmatically expresses a con-attitude towards haggis. Again, this is a sort of incompatibility in non-doxastic attitude, and this is a sort of quasi-expressivism. But consider:

(7) Torfinn: What you said/think/believe is false. Haggis is not tasty.

Unlike his rejoinder in (6), Torfinn’s rejoinder in (7) doesn’t strike me as particularly natural. This suggests that one can’t felicitously express disagreement about ‘tasty’ claims using these sorts of disagreement markers. Consequently, an appeal to incompatibility in non-doxastic attitude will suffice to deal with the semantic assessment problem for the contextualist about ‘tasty’ claims.<sup>5</sup>

This suggests that Björnsson & Finlay’s strategy will only work for certain expressions, viz. about which one can only express disagreement using a limited range of disagreement markers (‘No’, ‘You’re wrong’). So the strategy will work for ‘tasty’ and perhaps ‘funny’, but not for ‘might’, ‘knows’ and perhaps ‘beautiful’. The moral is that, while an appeal to incompatibility in non-doxastic attitude will deal with the semantic assessment problem for the contextualist about certain expressions (‘tasty’, ‘funny’), it won’t deal with the problem for the contextualist about other expressions (‘ought’, ‘might’, ‘knows’).<sup>6</sup>

## Bibliography

Björnsson, G. & Finlay, S. (2010). Metaethical contextualism defended. *Ethics* 121 (1): 7-36

Huvenes, T. (2012). Varieties of disagreement and predicates of taste. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1): 167 - 181

---

<sup>5</sup> And, *mutatis mutandis*, for contextualism about ‘funny’ claims.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to two anonymous reviewers, Gunnar Björnsson, Matthew Chrisman, Stephen Finlay, Sebastian Köhler, Henry Richardson and the audience at the 2013 Ethics Fest in Edinburgh. The research for this paper was funded by the Carnegie Trust.