**Natural Language Semantics and Pragmatics to the Rescue:**

**Action-guidingness for Realists and**

**Compositionality for Expressivists[[1]](#footnote-1)**

J.L. Dowell

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Eds. Connie Rosati and David Copp

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**NB: Fix discussion of Yalcin so that propositions are represented by Greek letters throughout.**

Here is a familiar way of framing an ongoing debate about moral language which has dominated the literature in metaethics at least since the publication of R.M. Hare’s *the Language of Morals* in 1952. On the one side, we have the idea that moral judgments can be true or false and that our ordinary use of moral language reflects this. When someone says, “you shouldn’t lie”, they are representing the moral landscape as being a certain way, namely, as prohibiting lying. On the other side, there is the idea that moral (and more broadly, normative) language is distinctively practical or action-guiding. When someone says, “you shouldn’t lie”, they are directing you to refrain from lying. According to this familiar framing, these two features are in tension with one another. The first idea suggests that moral language is *descriptive* or *representational*. Moral sentences represent the world as being a certain way. The second idea suggests that moral language is *prescriptive* or *non-representational*. Moral sentences serve as guides to action. This is where the tension is seen to arise. Ordinary representational language is not action-guiding. So, how could moral language be both?

The first idea is seen as motivating *Moral Realism*. Moral Realism as understood here is the view that the content of an utterance of a declarative sentence containing moral vocabulary is *representational*. (I will call such utterances “moral statements” for brevity.) The second idea is seen as motivating *Expressivism* about moral language. Expressivist theories are *non-representationalist*. According to such theories, moral statements express non-cognitive states of mind.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Unfortunately, if we take this framing for granted, we limit our search for the best account of moral language to the theoretical possibilities within its confines. In particular, this framing suggests that Representationalist theories of moral statements can’t account for their action-guidingness, while non-Representationalist theories cannot account for their shared behavioral profile with ordinary, declarative sentences. The overall aim of this chapter is to show how extant work in natural language semantics and pragmatics can offer avenues for further progress, revealing new options that better capture both these phenomena.

Addressing philosophical puzzles about moral language requires starting with the linguistic data and then finding the semantic theory best favored by the empirical evidence. Though there isn’t the space to explore them here, metaethicists have defended various hybrid theories of moral language.[[3]](#footnote-3) Such theories combine some Representationalist semantics with a pragmatic story that allegedly captures Expressivist-friendly intuitions. A significant drawback of some of these theories is their reverse-engineering. They begin with a philosophical challenge to Representationalism and then work backwards to a pragmatic theory which, if correct, would accommodate them. Even those hybrid theories more attentive to linguistic considerations fail or are inadequately supported on empirical grounds.[[4]](#footnote-4) In contrast, the strategy here will be to start with the Representationalist and Non-representationalist theories most plausible on linguistic grounds and show why they do not face the traditional challenges.

To do this, I will narrow our focus in two ways. First, I will focus on Realism and Expressivism about deontic modal expressions in English.[[5]](#footnote-5) Translating our terminology to this narrower range of expressions, a “moral statement” is an utterance of a declarative sentence containing a wide-scope deontic necessity or possibility modal (i.e., any of the form ‘ought/should/must/have to/may ϕ’). Second, I will focus on two of the most prominent challenges to Realism and Expressivism found in the metaethics literature. Each challenge aims to support one side of the debate about whether moral statements are representational.

The first challenge rests on *Judgment Internalism*, roughly, the thesis that sincerely made, first-personal moral statements require that the speaker has some motivation to comply.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, if I sincerely utter “I should donate to the Movement for Black Lives”[[7]](#footnote-7), I thereby have some inclination to donate.[[8]](#footnote-8) This suggests that the use of such sentences is action-guiding for the speaker. According to the familiar framing, this poses a prima facie challenge to Realism (or what I will sometimes call “Representationalism”) about the semantics of sentences fit to make moral statements. Here I’ll show that Judgment Internalism is not best thought of as placing a constraint on a semantics for deontic modal sentences and so does not tell against Representationalism. Rather, the real linguistic phenomenon that proponents of Judgment Internalism have drawn our attention to is a feature of discourses, rather than individual sentences. I call the thesis that better captures the relevant phenomenon overall “Discourse Internalism”. As we’ll see, the reasons for preferring Discourse Internalism are themselves linguistic and so quite independent of the metaethical debate between Representationalists and Expressivists. With Discourse Internalism in hand, we’ll see how an empirically well-supported, Representational semantics may account for the action-guidingness of moral language.

The second challenge rests on acceptance of *the principle of compositionality*, according to which the meanings of complex expressions in a natural language are composed of the meanings of the simpler expressions they contain. This principle enjoys near-universal acceptance by linguists and philosophers of language. For this reason, it here serves as a fixed point for the investigation of natural language semantics and pragmatics. Some metaethicisits[[9]](#footnote-9) have argued that Expressivist theories of moral language are not compositional, undercutting their plausibility. This is widely known as “the Frege-Geach problem” for Expressivism. Here I’ll show how one prominent Expressivist theory for deontic modals avoids this problem. A compositional semantics for moral statements may thus be neutral between Representationalism and Expressivism, while being fully Expressivist when combined with an Expressivist pragmatics.

Yet Expressivists must also account for the observed conversational update effects of embedded uses of deontic modal sentences. Below I’ll show why an extant, compositional Expressivist theory is unable to explain such effects in its current form. I’ll then propose a modification to that account. The result is an Expressivist theory that is compositional while accounting for the observed update effects of embedded deontic modal sentences.

To see how work in natural language semantics and pragmatics can help us make further progress on these debates about Representationalism and Expressivism, we’ll need a sample semantics for deontic modals for each of these views. Several Representationalist semantic proposals would suit our purposes. Below, I sketch the shared core of a set of them that are widely recognized as best supported by the empirical data. Yalcin’s proposed semantics for deontic modals will serve as our sample Expressivism. As we’ll see, our Representationalist semantics is compatible with a plausible account of the action-guidingness of those moral statements that are action-guiding, while our Expressivist-friendly one is compositional.

The overall lesson, then, is that Judgment Internalism presents no difficulty for Representationalism about deontic modals as such and compositionality presents no difficulty for Expressivism as such. Progress can thus be made in metaethics by focusing on the subset of Representationalist and Expressivist semantic and pragmatic theories that avoid these familiar objections.

**Judgment Internalism: Not a Sentential Constraint**

Let’s begin with two questions. First, how should Judgment Internalism be formulated? As we’ll see, that thesis is centrally about the psychological states of those who use moral language. Roughly, the thesis is that necessarily, agents who judge that they ought to A (where “A” is some action), have some motivation to A. Second, in what way would it constrain the *semantics* for deontic modal expressions? An expression’s semantics is its standing, conventional meaning, which it carries from context to context. What is the connection between a claim about the psychological states of those who use deontic modal expressions to make moral statements and the semantics of those expressions?

How best to formulate Judgment Internalism has become something of a small cottage industry.[[10]](#footnote-10) But different formulations share the core idea that sincerely made moral statements are motivating in some way that ordinary representational statements are not. Here I focus on James Dreier’s and Michael Smith’s widely influential discussions, both in formulating a concrete thesis and in providing arguments for it.

Consider an example of the kind thought to motivate the thesis. In *the Moral Problem*, Smith invites us to

[s]uppose we are sitting together one Sunday afternoon. World Vision is out collecting money for famine relief, so we are waiting to hear a knock on the door. I am wondering whether I should give to this particular appeal. …you convince me I should contribute. There is a knock on the door. What would you expect? I take it that you would expect me to answer the door and give the collector my donation. But suppose I say instead “But wait! I know I *should* give to famine relief. But what I haven’t been convinced of is that I *have any reason* to do so!’ And let’s suppose that I therefore refuse to donate. What would your reaction be?

It seems to me that your reaction would be one of extreme puzzlement. [Smith’s italics][[11]](#footnote-11)

Paraphrasing a bit to put the focus on deontic modal expressions, here is how Rosati captures the general phenomenon Smith’s case exemplifies.

The basic phenomenon of moral motivation might be given a more systematic depiction as follows, using ‘S’ to stand for some individual and ‘A’ and ‘B’ each to stand for some action:

When *S* [sincerely asserts ‘I ought to *A*’], she is ordinarily motivated to *A*; should *S* later become convinced [and asserts ‘I ought not to *A*. Instead, I ought to *B*’], she ordinarily ceases to be motivated to *A* and comes to be motivated to *B*.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In Smith’s case, the puzzlement arises from the speaker’s assertion that he should donate given his refusal to do so. This contravenes the expected pattern Rosati describes. About this phenomenon, Smith claims,

*The conversation we had was about whether or not I should give to famine relief*. But *this just seems equivalent to a conversation about whether or not I have a reason to give to famine relief*.[[13]](#footnote-13) [My italics.]

From cases like this, Smith concludes more generally,

Moral judgments seem to be, or imply, opinions about the reasons we have to behave in certain ways…and, *other things being equal*, *having such opinions is a matter of finding ourselves with a corresponding motivation to act*. (my emphasis) (1994: 7)

According to Smith, “other things are equal”, roughly, when an individual is rational and in a relevantly non-disturbed psychological state.[[14]](#footnote-14) That is, the agent’s motivational is not impaired, for example, by severe depression.

Dreier similarly writes that Judgment Internalism is the thesis that

…to accept (sincerely assert, believe, etc.) a moral judgment *logically requires* having a motivating reason….[where] [s]omeone has a motivating reason, *r*, to do *x*, just in case *r* could be cited as an explanation of his or her intentionally doing *x*.[[15]](#footnote-15) [1994: 6. My emphasis.]

Let us generalize their discussions to provide a more encompassing characterization of *Judgment Internalism* (JI):[[16]](#footnote-16)

A person in a “normal”[[17]](#footnote-17) psychological state, who sincerely asserts that she ought to A,[[18]](#footnote-18) thereby has some corresponding motivation or motivating reason to A, where the connection between her sincere assertion and motivation is logical or conceptual.[[19]](#footnote-19)

What constraint, if any, might such a thesis place on a semantics for deontic modal expressions in English? And how, if at all, might meeting that constraint pose a challenge to Representationalist theories of moral language? Since, according to Judgment Internalism, asserting that such-and-such should be the case (under the specified conditions) while having no corresponding motivation is incoherent, the connection must be analytic—necessary and recognizable by anyone who understands moral statements. An adequate semantics for deontic necessity modals should thus validate an entailment between sentences of the form,

1. S sincerely asserts that she ought to A.

and sentences of the form

1. S is somewhat motivated to make it the case that (or has a motivating reason for making it the case that) S As,

where “S” is both an agent and the asserter and “A” an action.

Call this constraint that Judgment Internalism yields the “**Semantic Constraint**”. Before we can test this constraint, we will need to clarify its content. First, recall that the semantics for an expression is its standing, conventional meaning: the meaning it carries from context to context. This argument for this semantic constraint, then, presupposes a semantic notion of entailment. Here’s the canonical one, due to Kaplan (1989).

**Semantic Entailment:** A sentence α entails another sentence β just in case every point of evaluation at which α is true [[20]](#footnote-20) is a point of evaluation at which β is true.

Thus, every point of evaluation at which a sentence with (1)’s form is true is a point of evaluation at which a sentence with (2)’s form is true. The challenge to Representationalism about “ought” would then be this: Since no claim about the sincere expression of ordinary, descriptive or representational statements semantically entails any claim about the existence of a motivation or a motivating reason to make anything the case, English “ought”-sentences cannot be representational.

Second, we need to identify the feature of the semantics of sentences with (1)’s form that allegedly generates the entailment from (1) to (2). Here we need to distinguish two different possible explanations. One possibility—call it “**‘Ought’ Entailment**”-- would be that the semantics for the modal (“ought”) alone generates it. The semantic constraint on “ought” would thus follow straightforwardly from the existence of the entailment. As we’ll see in more detail below, on the Representationalist semantics for modals canonical among linguists, the form of the modal complement in (1) is ‘ought ϕ’, i.e., a modal operator scoped over a proposition. So, if the semantics for the modal alone explains the entailment, any sentence of (1)’s form with an ‘ought ϕ’ complement should entail that S is motivated to (or has a motivating reason to) make it the case that ϕ, for any substitution of ‘ϕ’.

A second possibility holds instead that the semantics for the full sentential complement or that of the full sentence is responsible. (We’ll test these hypotheses together, so let’s call their disjunction “**‘Ought’-sentence Entailment**”.) On this hypothesis, the entailment is only generated when the modal is scoped over a sentence with a particular form (S A’s), where S is the individual who makes the ought-statement. One advantage of this hypothesis over the first is that it allows for substitutions of ϕ for which the entailment fails (example below). A second advantage is that it more straightforwardly captures the phenomena motivating **Semantic Constraint**. It makes less clear than the first hypothesis, however, why JI would place a constraint on a semantics for “ought” or pose a challenge to Representationalism.

To explore all this, let’s begin by testing the first hypothesis, that the semantics for “ought” alone secures entailments from (1) to (2). Simplifying a bit, on the semantics canonical among linguists, the complement of the speech report in (1) has the form of a necessity modal scoped over a proposition, aka the modal’s *prejacent*. So, it shares a form with

1. There ought to be less famine than there is.

The English grammatical difference between “there ought to be less famine than there is” (Ought (there is less famine than there is)) and “I ought not to lie” (Ought (I don’t lie)) is a difference in the modal’s prejacent, not a difference in the modal’s semantics. This means that, if the semantics for *“ought”* explains an entailment between sentence-forms (1) and (2), we should likewise find that a report of the sincere assertion of (3) entails something about the asserter’s motivation to make it the case that there is less famine than there is. Since the argument for **Semantic Constraint** relies on the standard notion of semantic entailment, we will use this notion in our test. To do this, we check whether every point of evaluation at which an assertion of (3) is reported is a point of evaluation at which the asserter of (3) is motivated to make it the case that there is less famine than there is. Here I adopt the standard assumption that a point of evaluation is a context, world pair, <c,w>.[[21]](#footnote-21) Imagine now a researcher, Lila, studying the global distribution of food resources. After assessing all of her data, she (sincerely, while in a sound state of mind) concludes,

1. There ought to be less famine than there is.

“Ought” in (3) is clearly deontic. Let us stipulate that it is moral. Consider now Lila’s colleague, Colin, reporting Lila’s conclusion.

1. Lila sincerely asserted that there ought to be less famine than there is.

Does it clearly follow that,

1. Lila had some motivation (or a motivating reason) to make it the case that there is less famine than there is?

Here (5)’s truth is an open question. Perhaps our researcher has some motivation to bring it about that there is less famine in the world. But she need not. Rather, in asserting (3), she may be simply observing that the food distribution we see does not match the distribution found in a state closer to the moral ideal. Call this case “Famine” and such uses of “ought” “observational”. In Famine we have a case in which a sentence with the same modal semantics exhibited in (1) does not entail a corresponding sentence of the form exhibited in (2). This suggests that *if* Judgment Internalism places constraint on a semantics for “ought”-sentences, it does not do so by placing a constraint on the semantics for “ought”.

One response here would be to propose that “ought” is ambiguous in English. One might posit a semantic difference between English sentences of the form ‘ought-to-do’ and those of the form ‘ought-to-be’.[[22]](#footnote-22) One might then hold that only the former are semantically constrained by JI. According to this explanation, (3) is of the ‘ought-to-be’ form. Thus, there is no predicted entailment between (4) and (5). However, this response is not promising. *Pace* Schroeder, there is no good linguistic evidence that “ought” is ambiguous in the way this explanation requires.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rather, linguistic evidence strongly indicates that “ought” has a unified formal semantics for both grammatical forms in English, as well as for both deontic and epistemic uses. The canonical semantics for “ought” holds that the semantics for sentences of the form ‘ought ϕ’ are in part a function of what ‘ϕ’ is. But it is indifferent to differences in the surface grammar of substitution instances for ϕ. ϕ may be “I donate to the Movement for Black Lives” or it may equally be “there is less famine than there is”. This means that the linguistic evidence favors

**Semantic Unity:** Sentences of the form *ought ϕ* (and of the form *S sincerely asserts that ought ϕ*) have a unitary modal semantics.

Let’s sum up. We’re assuming **Semantic Unity** as most strongly supported by our best empirical evidence. And we’re assuming both **Semantic Entailment** to ensure that the alleged entailment between (1) and (2) requires an explanation in terms of the semantics for “ought” in ordinary English and **‘Ought’ Entailment** for the purposes of argument.

**‘Ought’ Entailment:** There is an entailment in virtue of the semantics for “ought” between sentences of the form exhibited by

1. S sincerely asserts that ought ϕ

and those exhibited by

1. S is motivated or a motivating reason to make it the case that ϕ.

Famine is a counterexample to the conjunction of these three theses. Since **Semantic Entailment** is required for the alleged connection between (1) and (2) to require a semantic explanation and **Semantic Unity** is required by our best evidence, the explanation for the lack of an entailment between (4) and (5) must be that **‘Ought’ Entailment** is false. The argument from JI to **Semantic Constraint** that depends upon **‘Ought’ Entailment** therefore fails.

Now consider our second explanation for the alleged entailment between sentences with the form of (1) to those with the form of (2). On this second explanation, the semantics for “ought” is *not alone* responsible for generating the entailment. Rather, either the semantics for the full modal complement of the speech report in (1) or that of the entire sentence is. This new hypothesis avoids the prediction that (4) entails (5). Instead, it predicts an entailment between what I will call “coordinated ‘ought’-assertion reports” and sentences of (2)’s form. A “coordinated ‘ought’- assertion report” will be any in which the prejacent of the modal has the form ‘S As’ where “S” is the agent to whom the assertion is attributed. Thus, it fits with the observation that there seems to be a motivational asymmetry between first-personal and third-personal uses of “ought ϕ”. A first-personal use has the form “I ought to A” (i.e., ought (I A)), while a third-personal use has the form “they ought to A” (i.e., ought (they A)). On the present hypothesis, only the sincere assertion of first-personal uses necessitates that the asserter is motivated to A, while third-personal uses do not.

Instead of **‘Ought’ Entailment**, we’re now assuming for argument,

**‘Ought’-sentence Entailment:** There is a semantic entailment between sentences of the form exhibited by

1. S sincerely asserts that ought (S As)

and

1. S is motivated or a motivating reason to make it the case that (S As).

To begin testing this hypothesis, consider the sentence,

(6) Sobel ought to be on the second floor of the library.

Suppose that, looking at his watch and remembering his promise to his students, Sobel acknowledges the truth of (6) in his situation by sincerely asserting

(6’) I ought to be on the second floor of the library.

Consider now the following speech report of (6’).

1. Sobel sincerely asserts that he ought to be on the second floor of the library.

(6’) in the context we’re considering is a first-personal, deontic, assertional use of “ought”.[[24]](#footnote-24) (7) in this situation reports that use. Our question is: Does the sentence (7) *in virtue of its semantics* entail

1. Sobel has a motivation or has a motivating reason to make it the case that he’s on the second floor?

Before answering, we need to distinguish this question from a closely related one: Does the proposition expressed by (7) in the context we are considering settle the truth of the proposition expressed by (8) in that same context? That is a question about propositional entailment. Readers who share the JI-friendly intuitions will answer “yes” to this second question, but a “yes” answer to that question does not suffice to settle the first question in the affirmative. That is because propositional and semantic entailment are different. ***Semantic* Entailment**, recall, requires that *every* point of evaluation <c,w> at which sentence (7) is true, is one at which sentence (8) is true. To test that, we need to test whether (7) and (8) are both true not only in the single context we have considered, but in every context.

Recall now that we are also assuming **Semantic Unity**. On the canonical, unitary formal semantics for modals, possibility and necessity modals share a single semantics. The different “flavors” of modality, deontic, epistemic, alethic, or teleological, are the result of modifications supplied by the context of utterance. In addition to their deontic use, “ought”, “must”, and “may” each have a dedicated epistemic or evidential use.[[25]](#footnote-25) Thus, (6) and (6’) in both their epistemic and deontic uses share a single semantics. Differences in contexts of use generate different propositions expressed by their utterance. But, to borrow Korta and Perry’s phrase, these differences are a matter of “near-side pragmatics”, not semantics.[[26]](#footnote-26)

If the semantics for the modal complement or the semantics of the whole sentence in (7) guarantees the truth of (8), then *any* context, world pair at which the former is true will also be one at which (8) is true, even contexts which give (7) an epistemic reading. To test this, imagine now that Sobel, lost in a book, has forgotten which floor he’s on. Coming out of his absorbed state, he remembers that the philosophy books are all on the second floor. Since he’s reading a philosophy book, he concludes,

(6’) I ought to be on the second floor of the library.

Consider now the following speech report of (6’).

1. Sobel sincerely asserts that he ought to be on the second floor of the library.

Even if Sobel is motivated to or has a motivating reason to be on the second floor of the library, (7) in this context clearly does not guarantee the truth of,

1. Sobel has a motivation or has a motivating reason to make it the case that he’s on the second floor of the library.

However, if **Semantic Unity**, **Semantic Entailment**, and **‘Ought’-sentence Entailment** are all true, (7) should guarantee the truth of (8) in this context. But it doesn’t. Since the explanation we’re considering presupposes **Semantic Unity** and **Semantic Entailment**, the culprit must be **‘Ought’-sentence Entailment**. Thus, if there is a constraint on an overall account for moral language needed to account for our JI-friendly judgments, it cannot be on a semantics for coordinated ‘ought’-assertion reports.

Here are two final attempts to make sense of the data ostensibly friendly to **Semantic Constraint** (i.e., the idea that the JI intuitions must be explained in terms of a semantics for “ought”). First, against our best empirical evidence, one could simply reject **Semantic Unity**. Doing so would clearly be ad hoc. But it would also be question-begging against Representationalism. Surely, the Representationalist, in defending herself against JI-based challenges, is permitted to help herself to the most empirically well-confirmed extant Representationalist semantics. If she does, she will have principled, independent grounds for rejecting **Semantic Constraint**.

Second, one might respond to these considerations by restricting the alleged constraint to uses of “ought” that are both deontic and in some sense deliberative,[[27]](#footnote-27) as in Smith’s example. The hypothesis would then be that S cannot sincerely assert a sentence of the form ‘ought (S As) in the course of practical deliberation, while remaining completely unmotivated to A. Such a hypothesis would not cover observational, deontic uses, such as (3) or epistemic uses, such as (6’) in the case of library-lost Sobel. However, restricting JI to particular *uses* of “ought” would make it a *pragmatic*,not a semantic claim. A lesson from context-sensitivity in language is that not every difference in the use of a sentence corresponds to a difference in semantics. Accepting this last hypothesis, then, is to concede that Judgment Internalism places no constraint on a semantics for “ought”. And conceding that is just to concede that there is no JI-based challenge to Representationalism about “ought”.

Let’s be careful about what this shows. It does not show that there is no interesting phenomenon that Hare, Smith, Dreier, and others have identified in their discussions of moral language and its action-guiding uses. Rather, what this shows is that the phenomenon is not semantic. Wisdom begins with the observation just made. Only particular uses of “ought ϕ”, the deliberative ones, seem to generate the JI-friendly intuitions. There is nothing odd about observing that things aren’t as they morally ought while feeling no inclination to change that state of affairs. But there is something odd about deliberating to the conclusion that one ought to do something in answer to a practical question, while feeling no inclination to do so. This suggests we look for the source of these intuitions in the features of deliberative contexts, such as Smith’s, that give rise to them.

**Motivational Internalism: A Discourse Coherence Constraint**

Here I suggest that the phenomenon these philosophers draw our attention to is a feature of *discourses*, rather than a feature of the semantics of individual English sentences. To see this, notice that Smith’s example, in contrast to Famine, features a discourse that is organized around answering a practical question, a question of what-to-to. This makes the context in which that conversation occurs *deliberative*. An agent is deliberating about what-to-do. In contrast, our researcher’s assertion is *observational*. She is merely observing that the current distribution of food resources falls below the standard established by morality. This suggests that the discourses that give rise to the intuition behind JI are deliberative. They are structured around a *practical question*, a question of *what-to-do*.[[28]](#footnote-28) An attractive feature of a discourse-level explanation of our JI-friendly intuitions is that it posits no new linguistic resources, relying only on those already well attested to in empirical linguistics. Seeing how those intuitions can be captured at the discourse level, then, will first require an introduction to the needed linguistic resources.

**Discourse Goals and Discourse Coherence**

Successful discourses are organized into coherent structures. Discourse Goals are a fundamental source of coherence. These are the joint goals that interlocutors aim to achieve in the discourse itself. Answering a question under discussion (QUD) is a common Discourse Goal and the one of central interest here. To achieve their goals, discourses may be organized into overall and sub-strategies, overall questions and subquestions.[[29]](#footnote-29) These give rise to structured relations between sentences across a discourse. One role Discourse Goals play in modal interpretation is determining a flavor of modality. Consider (6) again.

(6) Sobel ought to be on the second floor of the library.

What determines whether (6) takes an epistemic or a deontic reading? This will depend upon the context’s Discourse and Domain Goals. A Domain Goal is an extra-linguistic goal a successful discourse is to serve. Are we looking for Sobel? If so, the acceptance of (6) will only serve that Domain Goal on an epistemic reading. Are we settling a question of what he is to do, given his teaching commitments? If so, (6) will require a deontic reading to serve as an answer to that practical question. In other words, (6) will take different readings, depending on which of these goals is active in a context.

This suggests that whether a modal is deontic is a feature of its use: Deontic modals will be those that serve as answers to deontic questions. Further, what distinguishes deliberative from evaluative or observational uses of deontic modals is the type of question each may serve as an answer to. Deliberative uses are proposed answers to deliberative questions. Such questions are questions about what an agent should, must, or may do the answers to which help settle on a course of action; they are subquestions which serve to address the larger question of what an agent is to do. Answers to purely evaluative or observational questions, in contrast, have no such practical upshot.[[30]](#footnote-30) Instead, those answers assess some state of affairs along some measure of ideality. To better appreciate the difference, consider first a doctor who hands a patient a prescription while saying

(9) You should take this.

This is a deliberative use, identifying the course of action necessary to improve the patient’s health. Here we have a practical Domain Goal (improving the patient’s health) that gives rise to a distinctively practical question. The explanation of (9)’s action-guidingness is its role as an answer to the deliberative question “what should the patient do to promote her health, given her physical condition and medical options?” That question receives its practical import, in turn, by serving as a subquestion to the larger practical question of what the patient is to do. The answer to that question identifies an action that promotes the Domain Goal of the context, namely, improving the patient’s health. Thus, the practicality of deliberative uses is explained at level of the Discourse Coherence.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In contrast, consider again the researcher who concludes,

(3) There should be less famine than there is.

(3) doesn’t settle on a course of action. Its significance is not determined by its ability to serve a practical Domain Goal or answer a deliberative question. Rather, it answers an evaluative question regarding the comparative ideality of the actual distribution of food resources relative to the morally ideal distribution.[[32]](#footnote-32) Similarly, in (6’), library-lost Sobel is not answering a question of what-to-do (or where-to-be): He is wondering where he is located. Here too the absence of action-guidingness is explained at the level of Discourse Coherence Relations.[[33]](#footnote-33) Moreover, as we’ll see in the next section, this explanation fits nicely with the unified semantics for “ought” most widely accepted by linguists and philosophers of language. We now have an empirically well-grounded, independently well-motivated explanation of our JI-friendly intuitions.[[34]](#footnote-34) “Ought”, in its deontic and epistemic, deliberative and non-deliberative uses, has the unified semantics widely accepted among linguists and philosophers of language. What modulates the flavor of modality is the context of use. Different discourse goals generate different contexts. The different sorts of discourse goals we’ve discussed account for the differences both in flavors of “ought” and different deontic uses.

**A Contextualist Semantics for Deontic Modals, Discourse Relations,**

**and Conversational Scoreboards**

So far, we have the idea that the practicality of a deontic modal sentence is a feature of its use, where the relevant features of use are determined at the level of Discourse Relations. What gives a use its practicality is the practicality of the QUD it is to address. To see how these ideas fit into a Representationalist framework I’ll briefly introduce a basic, contextualist semantics for modals in English, as well as a standard scoreboard representation of their conversational dynamics. The basic semantics introduced is the most widely accepted semantics among linguists and philosophers of language alike. With these resources on the table, we can then see how to formulate a more accurate thesis in the neighborhood of JI and how to capture it at the discourse-level within a Representationalist semantic framework.

Modal expressions, roughly, are those that modify the truth of the sentence they scope over according to its strength, as necessary or possible. Modal expressions that have a dedicated deontic use (for example, “ought”, “may”, and “must”), are members of that family. The most widely-accepted semantic proposals treat modals as quantifiers over a domain of possibilities. On the dominant view, the different “flavors” of modality, deontic, epistemic, alethic, or teleological, are the result of modifications supplied by the context of utterance, which restricts the domain of the modal quantifier.[[35]](#footnote-35) The details of any specific contextualist semantics need not concern us. We need only the widely accepted idea that, in their deontic uses, the contextual contribution to the determination of a modal proposition is twofold. First, contexts supply a set of relevant circumstances and, second, they supply some standard of ideality.[[36]](#footnote-36) The domain of the modal is the set of worlds at which the relevant circumstances obtain that are most highly ranked by the relevant standard of ideality. Recall that the sentence a modal quantifier scopes over its *prejacent*. A sentence in which a necessity modal takes widest scope is true when the prejacent is true at all of the worlds in the modal’s domain,[[37]](#footnote-37) while a possibility modal is true when it is true in at least one. To illustrate, imagine again a doctor who says to a patient while handing her a prescription,

(9) You should take this.

Here, the circumstances restricting the modal’s domain will be those that fix the patient’s physical condition and medical options, while the goal of health promotion provides the relevant standard of ideality. (9) will be true, then, when all of the worlds compatible with the patient’s physical condition in which her health is best promoted are worlds in which she takes the prescription.

**Contexts and Conversational Scoreboards**

Here I show how to represent these ideas in a standard linguistic framework for modeling contexts of utterance and conversational dynamics. On the standard way of marking the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, this model is a part of pragmatic theory.[[38]](#footnote-38) In addition to making these ideas a bit more concrete, familiarity with this framework will prove helpful background for those unfamiliar with the resources Yalcin relies on in formulating his Expressivism.

Contexts are here represented by the elements on a conversational scoreboard, where such a scoreboard represents the state of a conversation at a given moment. Those elements represent those features of a conversational situation that speakers need to track in order for communication to occur. They play three roles in facilitating communication, one static and two dynamic. On the static side, they represent what is jointly accepted for the purposes of conversation at any point. On the dynamic side, they first play a role in determining the content of an utterance. Second, they serve as that which is updated when an utterance is accepted by discourse participants.To help fit our discussion here with our discussion of Yalcin’s Expressivist pragmatics below, I’ll call whatever is represented on a conversational scoreboard at any point in a conversation a “conversational state”. Thus, conversational states both determine contents and are updated by accepted conversational contributions.

For utterances of deontic modal expressions to interact with contexts in both of these ways, our scoreboards will need to register four elements. First, they will need a Common Ground, a set of propositions presupposed for the purposes of conversation. Following Stalnaker, call the set of worlds at which all of the Common Ground propositions are true “the Context Set”.[[39]](#footnote-39) Second, following Stojnic (2021), the propositions in the Common Ground will need to be ranked for prominence, where prominence reflects a degreed, joint attentional state. We may think of a conversation’s attentional state as differentiating between presuppositions that are directly relevant for what is currently under discussion and those that are backgrounded or not at-issue. I’ll call the worlds at which all of the propositions relevant for the conversation at a given moment are true “the Prominent Context Set”.

In addition, our scoreboards must register a Discourse Goal (its QUD) and a Domain Goal. Deontic questions serve to make the considerations relevant for determining their range of possible answers prominent.[[40]](#footnote-40) These considerations will be part of the Common Ground and determine the Prominent Context Set. For example, in the imagined context in which (9) is uttered, relevant considerations include what’s presupposed about the patient’s health and the available medical options. More generally, those considerations include the circumstances and standard modal interpretation requires.[[41]](#footnote-41) Finally, this prominent context set supplies the modal domain. In this way, the Common Ground, Discourse and Domain Goals registered on the conversational scoreboard prior to an utterance of a deontic modal sentence determine both its interpretation and whether or not the use is action-guiding.

Our sample Representationalist semantics tells us what parameter values a context must supply for the determination of a modal content. It also tells us on what the truth of that content depends. That is the full job of a formal semantics. This semantics neither requires nor rules out that uses of sentences with that semantics have an action-guiding use. Thus, it is compatible with a variety of pragmatic theories. The pragmatic theory sketched here, which explains the action-guidingness of deliberative uses in terms of Discourse Relations, relies only on independently available linguistic resources and fits with an independently plausible account of modal interpretation in terms of such relations.[[42]](#footnote-42) These are significant advantages in an empirical theory.

For this overall Representationalist semantic and Representationalist-friendly pragmatic theory to capture our intuitions behind Judgment Internalism, it should provide an explanation for what gives rise to those intuitions in the relevant cases. We have already seen how the distinction between deliberative and non-deliberative uses may be explained in terms of Discourse Relations and conversational scoreboards. To further test this explanation of the action-guidingness of deliberative uses, let’s now return to Smith’s example and see how the account here can explain what gives rise to our sense that there is something incoherent in the speaker’s refusal to donate.

Smith’s example is set in a deliberative context. The interlocutors are deliberating about what to do. Settling on a course of action—to give or not—is their Domain Goal. This Domain Goal gives the answer to the question “what should the speaker do?” its practical import. What makes that deontic question deliberative is its status as a subquestion the answer to which aids in settling on a course of action. In answering a deliberative question, the utterance of “I should donate to World Vision” in that context serves as a guide to action. Since the Domain Goal is accepted by the interlocutors, the acceptance of that utterance into the conversational record is to treat it as a guide to action for them.[[43]](#footnote-43) To fail to be moved to act on a guide that one accepts when the question of how to act is front and center is to exhibit a form of practical incoherence. In contrast, when an exchange is not structured by a practical Domain Goal, as in the case of our food researcher, the sense of incoherence we find in Smith’s case is absent. Thus, our explanation of the distinction between deliberative and non-deliberative uses in terms of Discourse Relations also explains the distinction between action-guiding and non-action-guiding uses. The action-guidingness of the action-guiding uses Smith vividly draws our attention to are explained at the level of Discourse Coherence. To capture this, I propose substituting the following for JI.

**Discourse Internalism** (DI): Deliberative uses of deontic modal sentences serve as guides to action. To accept the Discourse and Domain Goals in virtue of which such a use is action-guiding while feeling no inclination to comply is to exhibit a form of practical incoherence.

Let’s note a few advantages of DI. First, it omits language about psychological normality. This language is unnecessary to capture the phenomenon. To see this, consider someone who is severely depressed. She may sincerely assert that she should do what she needs to do to fulfill her obligations while feeling no motivation for doing so. This is not a counterexample to DI. That’s because her assertion is not an answer to a practical question. Her depression renders deliberation about whether to fulfill her obligations otiose. Her condition has already settled any practical question by making it psychologically impossible for her to fulfill them. Thus, fulfilling her obligations is not a live action-option for her to deliberate over. This feature of DI gives it a significant advantage over JI. To avoid counterexample, JI needs to set aside cases in which an agent has a motivational disorder. Without a principled explanation for this exception, this way of avoiding counterexample is ad hoc. DI, in contrast, has a principled, independently well-motivated explanation for the contrast in terms of the distinction between deliberative and non-deliberative Discourse Goals.

Second, DI does not build in a first- and third-personal asymmetry. Rather, it provides an explanation for why it is more common for utterances of “I ought to A” to be motivating than “they ought to A”. That’s because the former commonly have deliberative uses, while the latter do not. This gives DI an additional advantage over JI, which simply builds in the asymmetry without explaining it.

Thus, DI is preferable to JI both by better capturing the relevant phenomenon and better fitting with the linguistic evidence. The recognition that the canonical, Representationalist semantics for “ought” is straightforwardly compatible with DI and thus a more careful understanding of the phenomenon of action-guidingness provides new avenues for research. The considerations here suggest that there is fruitful investigation to be made into the discourse dynamics of the deliberative uses of expressions that have such an action-guiding use.

**Compositionality and the Frege-Geach Problem**

Let us turn now to the alleged Frege-Geach Problem for Expressivist theories of deontic modals. As noted earlier, that puzzle rests on the principle of compositionality, a near-universally recognized constraint on any semantic theory. One test of a semantic theory for an expression, then, is its embedding behavior in larger constructions. According to Expressivists about deontic modal expressions, the use of sentences in which the modal takes widest scope do not express representational states of mind. This claim is a bit surprising, given the declarative form of such sentences and that sentences with declarative form are paradigmatic examples of representational discourse. For example, suppose in explaining why our friend Alex is happy, I say

(10) Pat is in town.

(10) straightforwardly represents the world as being a certain way. But suppose I say instead,

(11) Alex may skateboard.

On the face of it, (11) has the same representational function as (10). The difference is that, in the latter case, unlike the former, the world is represented it terms of what it makes permissible. One reason to think this hypothesis is on the right track is that (10) and (11) share embedding behavior. In other words, sentences like (10) and (11) are felicitously embeddable in the same larger linguistic constructions, such as negation and disjunction. Expressivists, however, do not take this to be decisive evidence against their central thesis. The challenge for Expressivists is to explain that behavior. This is *the Frege-Geach problem* for Expressivism, the problem of providing a compositional, Expressivist semantics for deontic modal expressions. Mark Schroeder (2018) has argued that the most difficult such challenge stems from Expressivism’s alleged inability to explain mixed disjunctions, disjunctions of representational sentences, such as (10), with putatively non-representational ones, such as (11). Suppose, for example, I am uncertain why Alex is happy, but have winnowed the possible explanations to two. In that case, I might say,

(12) Either Pat is in town or Alex may skateboard.[[44]](#footnote-44)

According to Schroeder, the challenge for the Expressivist is to explain, compositionally, what overall state of mind sentences like (12) express.

Stated as such, this challenge rests on a confusion. On the standard way of separating semantics and pragmatics, associating a state of mind with the use of a sentence is part of pragmatic theory.[[45]](#footnote-45) Compositionality, however, is a constraint on a semantic theory. There is no extant analogue constraint on pragmatic theories and rightly so. Compositionality is posited as a way of explaining how competent speakers of a natural language are able to produce and understand entirely new sentences. If the meanings of those sentences are the product of the meanings of the simpler expressions that make them up, as compositionality requires, and speakers understand those simpler expressions and the rules of composition, we have a nice explanation of these productivity facts.

What would an analogue of compositionality about states of mind look like and what would its motivation be? Presumably the principle would be: The use of each meaningful expression, including the subsentential ones, expresses a state of mind. The states of mind expressed by complete sentences are composed of these simpler states of mind and how they are put together. Call this thesis “Compositionality about States of Mind”. There is no reason to think states of mind compose in this way or that our ability to identify the states of mind expressed by the use of a complete sentence depends upon an ability to identify such ‘simpler’ states of mind. Indeed, the empirical data on language-learning best supports a theory on which we learn language by “mind-reading”, i.e., identifying the complete thoughts of others.[[46]](#footnote-46) This widely-recognized, pre-linguistic capacity to mind-read shows that we have no need for recognizing sub-thought-level states of mind in order to recognize thought-level ones. This means that, not only do we have no reason to posit states of mind expressed by the use of subsentential expressions, we have positive reason not to posit them, as, unlike subsentential semantic values, they play no role in explaining our ability to communicate using language. But if there is no need to posit simple states of mind expressed by the use of subsentential expressions, there is no need for a principle dictating how the states of mind expressed by the use of sentence are “composed” out of them.[[47]](#footnote-47)

As we’ve seen, the core Expressivist idea is that the moral use of language expresses non-representational states of mind. What this discussion shows is that to build on this idea, an Expressivist should relegate her distinctive Expressivist commitments to her pragmatic theory of the use of language and not to her semantics.[[48]](#footnote-48) This is just the Expressivist program Seth Yalcin pursues.

Does this mean that there is no Frege-Geach challenge for Expressivism as such? Yes. Yalcin’s Expressivist-neutral semantics is compositional. But, as Starr (2016) shows, there is a somewhat related challenge for Expressivist pragmatic theories, namely, to identify what would be communicated by the use of a sentence like (12). After introducing Yalcin’s Expressivism, we’ll explore how his view is able to address Starr’s challenge. As we’ll see, this will require a modification of the way Yalcin represents conversational states, i.e., the joint states of mind that are updated when an utterance is accepted into the conversational record.

**Yalcin’s Expressivism[[49]](#footnote-49)**

Following Gibbard (1990), Yalcin’s semantics for deontic modals is motivated by the Expressivist idea that the states of mind expressed by the use of deontic modal sentences are not representational, but plan-laden. This is a pragmatics-first approach. We begin with the states of mind expressed by the use of such sentences and the conversational effects of their acceptance. We then work backwards to identify the semantics they must have in order to play their pragmatic role.[[50]](#footnote-50)

To identify the state of mind expressed by a deontic use of a sentence like (6), Yalcin considers what would make a sentence like (13) true.

(13) The chair believes that Sobel ought to be on the second floor of the library.

Following Gibbard, Yalcin holds what would make (13) true is not the chair’s having an ordinary belief that represents the world as being a certain way. Rather, it would be true were the chair in a certain *plan-laden* state of mind. Such plan-laden states of mind are modeled using a set *H* of hyperplans. A *hyperplan* is a view about what to do, given an information state, for example, what to do, given the information that Sobel has in his circumstances.[[51]](#footnote-51) He models an information state as a set *s* of possible worlds representing a choice situation, such as the doctor’s in deciding which drug to prescribe. A hyperplan *h* is modeled as a function from an information state *s* to a subset of that state, namely, those worlds in *s* with permissible outcomes according to *h*, (2012: 147) Again following Gibbard (1990), Yalcin builds from these ingredients a view about what it is for a proposition to be required, forbidden, or permissible. Treating propositions as sets of possible worlds, the definitions are:

*Requirement:* Realizing a proposition p is *required* in *s* just in case for every hyperplan *h*∈ H, *h*(*s*) ⊆ p.

*Forbidden:* Realizing a proposition p is *forbidden* in *s* just in case for every hyperplan *h*∈ H, *h*(*s*) ⊆ ~p.

*Permission:* Realizing a proposition p is *permissible* in *s* just in case for every hyperplan h∈ H, *h*(*s*) ∩ p is non-empty.

To be unopinionated about the deontic status of p is for H to be such that none of these conditions obtain.

To capture Gibbard’s ideas compositionally, Yalcin’s proposes the following semantics for “ought”:

[[ought ϕ]]w,h,s=1 iff ∀w’∈h(s): [[ϕ]]w’,h,s =1

Here ‘ϕ’ stands for the modal’s prejacent and the double brackets for the interpretation function which assigns ‘ought ϕ’ a truth (or acceptability)-value relative to a point of evaluation. Here points of evaluation are represented by a world *w*, a hyperplan *h*, and a body of information, *s*. According to this semantics, ‘ought ϕ’ is true (or acceptable) at a point of evaluation just in case every world w’ in the set of worlds that results from applying *h* to *s* is a ϕ-world. As with any formal semantics, this semantics is silent on what states of mind are expressed by the use of sentences of the form ‘ought ϕ’.

Yalcin’s Expressivism is captured in his pragmatic story about how unembedded deontic modal claims update a conversational state. Recall that we are thinking of conversational states as whatever joint mental states are represented on conversational scoreboards. Scoreboards are representations of whatever plays the dynamic role of contexts of utterance in being that which constrains the acceptability of an utterance and that which is updated when an utterance is accepted. Yalcin’s conversational states represent what is jointly presupposed about that the world is like and what is jointly planned.[[52]](#footnote-52) The needed conversational states will be plan-laden information states, represented by a pair of an information state *s* and a set of hyperplans, *H*. The pragmatic function of a deontic claim is to add a constraint on each of the hyperplans *h* in *H*.[[53]](#footnote-53) For example, updating the conversational state represented by <s, H> with “must ~p” will result in a state <s, H’> such that for every hyperplan *h*∈ H’, *h*(*s*) ⊆ ~p. We may think of accepting “must ~p”, then, as jointly planning to rule out realizing p-worlds.[[54]](#footnote-54)

By relegating the distinctively Expressivist features of his proposal to its pragmatic component, Yalcin’s proposal neatly avoids the Frege-Geach problem. Compositionality, recall, is a semantic constraint, not a pragmatic one. It holds that the meanings of complex linguistic expressions be composed of the meanings of the expressions that make it up, together with the rules of composition. *Pace* Schroeder and others, there is no well-recognized principle that the states of mind expressed by the use of a complex expression be composed out of the states of mind expressed by the expressions which compose it.[[55]](#footnote-55) As Yalcin himself notes, his formal semantics is compatible with both representational and non-representational construals of the states of mind expressed by the use of deontic modal expressions.[[56]](#footnote-56)

However, a different, distinctively pragmatic challenge lurks in the neighborhood. Yalcin’s pragmatics includes an account of the update effects of accepting unembedded uses of deontic modal expressions into the conversational record. This is a necessary part of any pragmatic theory, as updating the conversational record is a feature of the use of sentences. It is easy to see from his account how the updates will go for the use of such sentences embedded under negation. For example, “~May p” will rule any hyperplan *h* such that *h*(*s*) ∩ p is non-empty, resulting in a set H of hyperplans such that each *h*(*s*) ⊆ ~p. This renders the update for “~May p” equivalent to that for “must ~p”, as desired. But consider now Starr’s challenge to identify the update associated with the acceptance of a mixed disjunction like,

(12) Either Pat is in town or Alex may skateboard.

Since conversational updates are a part of pragmatics, this is a question a Yalcin-style Expressivist will need to answer.

To see the difficulty for Yalcin, first recall the context for (12) supplied above. We are using (12) to explain why Alex is happy. Pat being in town or being permitted to skateboard would each make Alex happy. But we don’t know which one is the cause. Next, let’s identify the updates associated with each of the disjuncts in (12), given his semantics and pragmatics. First, consider,

(10) Pat is in town.

An utterance of (10) is a representational use of language. Given this, an acceptance of its utterance will update s, not H in the <s, H> that represents the conversational state. Recall that *s* is an information state represented by a set of worlds. The acceptance of (10), then, throws out every world *w* in *s* such that Pat is not in town in *w*.

Next, consider,

(11) Alex may skateboard.

According to Yalcin, an utterance of (11) is a non-representational, plan-laden use of language. To see the update associated with (11), let ‘q’ be the proposition that Alex skateboards. Updating a conversational state <s, H> with a use of (11) requires checking that every *h* in H is such that *h*(*s*) ∩ q is non-empty and throwing out any *h* in H that fails to meet this condition. The result will be a conversational state such that every h ∈ H is such that *h*(*s*) ∩ q is non-empty. Treating disjunction in the standard way, then, any conversational state that meets either of these two conditions will be a state that accepts (12). At first blush, we have an answer to Starr’s question: Updating a conversational state with (12) involves simply updating with (10) or updating with (11).

However, if we think about the context in which (11) is uttered in our example, we can see that this can’t be right. While it’s true that any conversational state that accepts either (10) or (11) will be a conversational state that accepts (12), the disjunction of those updates does not represent the conversational effect of accepting (12) in conditions of uncertainty about each disjunct. To bring out the problem, consider typical cases of disjunction use. As Grice noted, disjunctive sentences are uttered when we are uncertain which of the two disjuncts is true. If we knew that Pat were in town and that this explained why Alex is happy, then we would simply assert (10). If we update the conversational record with (12) by updating it with (10), the result will be a conversational state that is too opinionated about whether Pat is in town. Communicating that either Pat is in town or that Alex may skateboard is not the same as communicating that Pat is in town. So, the conversational effect of accepting (10) and of accepting (12) need to be different.

One might initially think that the updates differ on Yalcin’s proposal because with (12) we also have the option of updating with (11). However, this too would result in a conversational state that is more opinionated than speakers are when they accept a disjunction like (12). What’s needed is an update that results in a conversational state that rules out that both Pat is out of town and Alex is forbidden from skateboarding, but remains otherwise unopinionated about either disjunct.[[57]](#footnote-57)

There is a difficulty capturing this in Yalcin’s framework. But the difficulty is primarily technical and here I’ll offer an independently well-motivated fix. To see this, let’s start with the considerations that motivate the fix. In his early work, Stalnaker introduced the notion of a Common Ground to help explain linguistic communication. Under what conditions is communication successful? What happens when an utterance is accepted by interlocutors? Simplifying a bit, his picture is this: We communicate to become more jointly opinionated about what the world is like. Successful communication, in other words, reduces our joint uncertainty. To capture this idea, he posited a Common Ground, a set of propositions presupposed for the purposes of conversation. Treating propositions as sets of possible worlds, we can derive from this notion the notion of a Context Set, a set of worlds at which all of the propositions in the Common Ground are true. With these notions, Stalnaker introduced his influential model of linguistic communication. When we accept an assertion with a certain propositional content, we throw out worlds in the Context Set incompatible with that content. For example, if we are uncertain about whether Pat is in town, we will start with a Context Set that contains some worlds in which they are and some worlds in which they aren’t. When we accept an utterance of (10), we reduce the Context Set by throwing out the worlds in which Pat isn’t in town. The resulting Common Ground represents our new, more opinionated, joint state of mind. Thus, in Stalnaker’s story, the reduction of the Context Set gives us a way to model successful communication as the reduction in our joint uncertainty.

Stalnaker’s model for representing and explaining communication has been enormously successful. Yalcin’s proposal is set in the same broad tradition. The Common Ground is but one way of modeling conversational states. Yalcin’s states are another. The challenge for Yalcin is to identify an Expressivist-friendly structure of a conversational state that is rich enough to adequately represent the way in which we become more jointly opinionated when we accept an utterance of a mixed disjunction like (12) into a conversational record. Borrowing Stalnaker’s idea of using sets to represent uncertain states of mind, I propose that the fix for the update problem for Yalcin’s pragmatic theory is to model conversational states not by <s, H> pairs, but by sets of them. This will give us the structure needed to avoid conflating the update for (12) with the option to update either (10) or (11).

Let’s see how this revision to Yalcin’s proposal addresses Starr’s challenge. We now represent a conversational state C in Yalcin’s framework as a set of <si, Hj> pairs. Call each such pair a “substate” of C. The pragmatic function of a deontic sentence ϕ is now to add a constraint to each of the hyperplans *h* in Hj, for each substate <si, Hj>. The pragmatic function of a representational sentence ϕ is to eliminate worlds from *si* in each substate <si, Hj> that are incompatible with its content. We may now build the overall conversational update associated with the use of a sentence like (12) out of the updates associated with each disjunct and their disjunction. The conditions on an updated conversational state that accepts (12) in this revised framework will be the following. Letting p=Pat is in town and q=Alex skateboards,

1. “Pat is in town” is accepted by any conversational state *C* such that si in each substate <si, Hj> is such that *si* ⊆ p.
2. “Alex may skateboard” is accepted by any conversational state C such that for each substate <si, Hj>, each *h* ∈ Hj is such that *h*(*si*) ∩ q is non-empty.
3. (12) is accepted by any conversational state C which is a union of substates meeting either (i) or (ii).

On this proposal, (12) has an update effect on a conversational state that is not equivalent to the option of updating with either (10) or (11). To see this, note that the conversational state, C’, that results from this proposed update will include both substates at which Pat is in town and Alex’s skateboarding is impermissible and ones at which Pat is not in town and Alex’s skateboarding is permissible. This means that C’ does not encode either the update associated with (10) or with (11)—it is less opinionated than that.

Starr’s objection to this sort of solution on behalf of the pragmatic Expressivist seems to be that it that would give “or” a wholly pragmatic meaning (2016: 374). But this is not so. It gives “or” a pragmatic conversational effect that is compatible with its having its usual truth-conditional meaning. The only difference will be that, on Yalcin’s semantics, contents are true and false (or accepted or unaccepted) relative to enriched indices, which require a hyperplan and a state of information in addition to a world.[[58]](#footnote-58) We can see that this is already a part of his view from his formal semantics for “ought”, above.

**Conclusion**

The metaethics literature is currently dominated by a framing of the debate over Representationalism about moral language that constrains the theoretical options to those that do not include the most plausible semantic theories on either side of that debate. According to that framing, Representationalist theories of moral language must explain the action-guiding use of such language in terms of a feature of their semantics at the sentential level, thereby forcing action-guidingness to be a universal feature of the use of the sentences with the form ‘ought ϕ’ (or more narrowly, such sentences in the first person). On the other side, the standard framing holds that Expressivist theories must equate the meanings of declarative sentences and their subsentential units with the states of mind expressed by their use. As we’ve seen in the case of deontic modal expressions, neither of these requirements is plausible on independent, linguistic grounds. It is no surprise, then, that the narrow range of theories that aim to meet them are not plausible either. The good news is that this means that considerations of compositionality do not favor Representationalism over Expressivism and the intuitions motivating JI do not favor Expressivism over Representationalism. This expands the live semantic and pragmatic options for theorizing about moral language.

That said, these considerations show that we must explore these new options with empirical humility. It is not enough that a proposed semantics and pragmatics for moral language is consistent with a cursory familiarity with philosophy of language. Semantic and pragmatic theories of natural language are empirical and subject to the standards of science. To be plausible, they must be explanatory of a broad range of language use and (at a minimum) fit with what is antecedently established by linguists and philosophers of language with a good working knowledge of linguistics. Positing linguistic mechanisms to explain the use of such language should be justified on independent, empirical grounds, not on the grounds that, were they to exist, they would help avoid philosophical puzzle.

By offering empirically more plausible constraints on a semantics and pragmatics of moral language, I hope to have provided some initial foundations for future research. DI is a more plausible linguistic constraint than JI. In light of this, we should now ask: How should a thesis like Discourse Internalism best be formulated? Which semantic and pragmatic theories of normative and evaluative language best fit with the resulting thesis? Compositionality is a constraint on a semantics, not a pragmatics. But pragmatic theories need to be systematic and explanatory in their own way just as much as semantic theories do. A central job of any pragmatic theory is to explain how competent speakers are able to communicate using the target expressions. To be plausible, a full account of how we communicate using expressions that have normative or evaluative uses must fit with existing, well-confirmed linguistic frameworks for explaining communication, such as the broadly Stalnakerian one sketched above. Here we should ask: Which semantic and pragmatic theories best explain the update behavior of the use of such language? Since the debate between Representationalists and Non-representationalists are debates about natural language semantics and pragmatics, the grounds that determine which overall theory is best will be empirical and continuous with linguistics and cognitive science. For this reason, progress on these debates will require familiarity with the relevant empirical literature.

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1. Many thanks to David Copp, Connie Rosati, Gideon Rosen, and Dave Sobel for feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a representative sample of this familiar framing, see Schroeder (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These include Boisvert (2008), Copp (2001), (2009), (2018), Finlay (2014), and Silk (2014) and (2016).The most empirically sophisticated of these are Finlay (2014) and Silk (2014) and (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a critical discussion of the most empirically sophisticated hybrid proposals, see Dowell (2016), (2018), and (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. By “deontic modal expressions” I mean natural language modal expressions that have a dedicated deontic use, e.g., “ought”, “must”, and “may” in English. I do not mean to suggest that their deontic flavor is a feature of their semantics. Indeed, as we’ll see, on the semantics for modals canonical among linguists, deontic modal flavor is a feature of their use, not of their semantics. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For seminal discussions for Judgment Internalism, see Darwall (1983), Dreier (1990), Smith (1994), Wallace (1998), and Svavarsdottir (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://m4bl.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A more careful statement of Judgment Internalism will be offered below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Schroeder (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a good overview, see Rosati (2016). For a more recent overview, see King, (this volume). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Smith 1994: 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rosati (2016). Since I reserve Greek letters to stand for propositions or sentences, I have altered her notation. Capitalized letters from the beginning of the alphabet stand for actions. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The relevant counterfactual will need to be more precisely formulated so as to avoid trivializing Dreier’s thesis. But we’ll set this issue aside. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Judgment Internalism” was originally coined by Darwall (1983) as a sincerity condition on moral judgments. In our terms, his idea is that, necessarily, if a speaker *S* sincerely asserts “ought ϕ” and her use of “ought ϕ” is moral, then S is disposed to making it the case that ϕ. (Here I am letting “ϕ” stand for a proposition, rather than a predicate, to fit with the dominant semantics for modals.) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Recall that “normal” here simply means “motivationally unimpaired”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The connection between moral judgment and assertion comes via the standard assumption that moral judgment is whatever psychological state expressed by a sincere assertion of “I ought to A” under a moral reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As Rosati (2016) writes “As currently characterized in the literature, judgment internalism makes the conceptual claim that a necessary connection exists between sincere moral judgment and either justifying reasons or motives” (2016). Some fans of JI may regard the flavor of the necessity in its formulation as metaphysical without being conceptual. I focus on the conceptual formulation here, as it is both wide-spread and most promising as a thesis which helps generate a semantic constraint on deontic modals. (Thanks to Gideon Rosen for discussion here.) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In linguistics, points of evaluation serve as formal representations of the elements on which the truth of a sentence depends. The context parameter *c* represents the features of the world that determine the content of a sentence token, while the index parameter *i* represents those features which determine the truth or acceptability of a sentence token, given its content. A point of evaluation is then represented as an ordered pair, <c,i>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Nothing here hangs on treating indices as worlds. We might treat the index as something more fine-grained than a world, such as a world, time pair or a world, state of information pair. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For one such proposal, see Schroeder (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Chrisman (2012), Bronfman & Dowell (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Recall here that we are accepting, on the basis of our best linguistic evidence, that there is no ambiguity in English between ‘ought to be’ and ‘ought to do’ forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Krazter (1991), Cariani, Kaufmann, and Kaufmann (2013), Cariani (2016), Rett (2016), Stojnic (2021), and Dowell (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Korta and Perry (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For more on how to mark the distinction between deliberative and evaluative or observational uses of deontic modals, see Dowell (forthcoming) and Bronfman & Dowell (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For details and argument for this characterization of the so-called ‘deliberative “ought”’, see Dowell (Under Review). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Roberts (2012) for a seminal discussion of discourse structure and QUDs. For seminal discussions of the variety of Discourse Relations and the ways they interact with contexts, see Kehler (2002) and Asher and Lascarides (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For further discussion and argument for the claim that modal flavors are question-sensitive in this way, see Dowell (Under Review). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. One might see this as a way of developing Railton’s (1989) proposal for capturing the practicality of some uses of language within a Representational framework. There he proposes to capture the way that the use of some descriptive assessments, such as the seaworthiness of a vessel, perform an action-guiding function in the context of a discourse in which the properties in virtue of which a vessel is seaworthy are of practical interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For more discussion of this way of marking the distinction between deliberative and evaluative or observational uses of deontic modals, see Dowell (*forthcoming*). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Here I haven’t addressed the question of how Discourse and Domain goals get added to the conversational scoreboard. For a discussion of that issue, see Dowell (Under Review). See also Roberts (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Though there is not space here to fully defend the point, these features give the present account a significant advantage over more ad hoc, less empirically well-grounded hybrid accounts of the semantics and pragmatics of “ought” in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For statements of the canonical semantics, see Kratzer (1991) and (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Some prominent contextualist theories (e.g., Cariani (2016) and Cariani, Kaufmann, and Kaufmann (2013)) treat deontic modals as information-, rather than circumstance-sensitive. The differences between these views need not concern us here. For reasons to prefer a circumstance-sensitive treatment, see Dowell (2013) and Bronfman and Dowell (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. These truth-conditions don’t distinguish between weak and strong necessity modals. However, how best mark to that distinction is not at issue here. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Korta and Perry (2019). To keep things simple, I am here setting aside a discussion of dynamic semantics, which incorporates the update potential of an utterance of a sentence into the semantics for that sentence. For discussions of deontic modal expressions in a dynamic semantic frameworks, see Willer (2014) and Starr (2016). For a discussion of the comparative strengths and weaknesses of these proposals, see Dowell (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Stalnaker (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For further discussion of the linguistic mechanisms in play here, see Dowell (Under Review). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Here I assume for simplicity that it is part of the Common Ground that interlocutors aim for their discussion to serve the Domain Goal of promoting the patient’s health. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For an independently plausible account of how Discourse Relations serve to determine the interpretation of modals in their epistemic use, see Stojnic (2021). For prominent discussions of Discourse Relations, see Asher and Lascarides (2003) and Kehler (2002). See Karttunen (1977) and Roberts (2012) for influential discussions on the semantics and pragmatics of questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For an alternative, but in some ways complimentary account of the action-guidingness of deontic modals in a contextualist framework, see Silk (2016). For an assessment of Silk’s proposal, see Dowell (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The example is from Starr 2016: 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Korta and Perry (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. For a summary of the relevant studies, see Bloom (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. What does this mean for Schroeder’s famous compositionality-based case against Expressivism in *Being For* (2008)? What it shows is that the Expressivist should reject a thesis that Gibbard accepts and, following Gibbard, Schroeder attributes to her, namely that, “the meaning of a sentence is the mental state it expresses”, (2008: 177). This thesis rests on a conflation of semantics with pragmatics. Instead, she should accept the standard division of labor between semantic and pragmatic theories. Semantic theories are theories of linguistic meaning and hence are constrained by Compositionality. Pragmatic theories are theories of the use of linguistic expressions, where attitudes expressed are features of use. Pragmatic theories are not constrained by Compositionality or any pragmatic analogue. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. To keep the discussion simple, I have set aside dynamic expressivist theories, such as Starr’s (2016) which blur somewhat the traditional separation of semantics and pragmatics. For more on Starr’s proposal, as well as a discussion of its strengths and weaknesses, see Dowell (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. For a proposal similar to Yalcin’s, see Silk (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Yalcin 2012: 132-135. This is in contrast to Gibbard’s own view, on which the states of mind expressed by the use of a sentence is its meaning. This idea rests on the conflation of semantics and pragmatics discussed in footnote 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The addition of an information state to the points of evaluation ‘ought ϕ’ is sensitive to is motivated by the observation that deontic modals sometimes exhibit ‘serious information dependence’. For details, see Yalcin 2012: 148 & 150. To see how the standard Kratzerian semantics can represent serious information dependence without positing new, more complex indices, see Dowell (2013), Bronfman and Dowell (2016), and Dowell (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. More precisely, Yalcin holds that a sentence ϕ is part of an overall conversational state if the state of mind of each participant reflects the update associated with ϕ. When ϕ is an unembedded deontic modal sentence, that update will be reflected in the set H of hyperplans of each participant. (2012: 133.) [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Yalcin 2012: 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. To illustrate, consider the acceptance of “one must not take a life unnecessarily” into a conversation. For this to occur, each conversational participant must rule out making it the case that lives are taken unnecessarily. In Yalcin’s model, this is represented by a joint state of mind (a pair of a state of information sand a set of hyperplans, H) such that each hyperplan h in H applied to the information state s results in a set of worlds none of which is a world in which a life is taken unnecessarily. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Schroeder (2008, 2010) argues that Expressivists cannot explain the behavior of deontic modals sentences under negation. As can be seen here, this is not correct. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Yalcin 2012: 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. For a complimentary statement of the problem, see Dowell (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. A further complaint might be that the truth-conditional content for “or” will guarantee that any conversational state in which one of the disjuncts is accepted is a conversational state in which the disjunction is accepted and that this is counter-intuitive. However, that result will be found in any semantics that assigns “or” its usual truth-conditional meaning and assigns that meaning an update effect on conversational states. Thus, there is no special problem for the Expressivist here. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)