Meeting 2: The Deontic Categories, and Their Logical Form

I. The Logical Form of ‘Ought’ Sentences

Consider the following:

a. Your ankle ought to be healed in about two weeks.
b. There ought to be world peace.
c. Jim ought to jam.

How many distinct senses of ‘ought’ are being used here (in a loose sense of “sense”), and what is the logical form of each sentence?

Almost everyone holds that (a) uses ‘ought’ in an epistemic sense that is distinct from its sense in (b) and (c).

On this way of understanding things, (a) means roughly, “It is likely that your broken leg is healed in about two months.”

And many authors hold that (b) uses ‘ought’ in an evaluative sense (as Schroeder calls it) that functions as an operator on propositions.

On this way of understanding things, (b) means roughly, “Were things ideal, there would be world peace.”

But what about (c) (and other agential ‘ought’ sentences, as Schroeder calls them)? Some possibilities:

the naive view: There is a distinctive deliberative sense of ‘ought’ that expresses a relation between agents and actions. So when ‘ought’ is used in (c) in this way, its logical form is $O_{delib}(Jim, jamming)$.

the Chisholm/Williams view (i.e. the semantic uniformity thesis): Sentences like (c) all employ the same evaluative sense of ‘ought’ used in sentences like (b). So (c)’s logical form is $O_{eval}(Jim jams)$.

the Broome/Wedgwood view: Sentences like (c) use ‘ought’ in a distinctive deliberative sense that expresses a relation between an agent and a proposition. So (c)’s logical form is $O_{delib}(Jim, Jim jams)$.

In my experience, most ethicists endorse the naive view, whereas most deontic logicians and linguists endorse either the C/W view or the B/W view.

II. Schroeder on the Evaluative ‘Ought’

Schroeder thinks that sentences like the following provide incontrovertible evidence for their being an evaluative sense of ‘ought’:

1c. The meeting ought to start at noon.
1d. It ought to be that the meeting starts at noon.

He writes, “None of these sentences is plausibly understood as expressing a relation between an agent and an action” (5).

This is not entirely clear to me. Contrast (1c) with

1c*. The eclipse ought to start at noon.

I have a hard time hearing (1c*) as using anything other than the ‘ought’. But what’s the difference here? Presumably the fact that whether the meeting starts at noon is under someone’s agential control. So maybe (1c) means something like “We (the people in charge of the meeting) ought to start the meeting at noon.”
Schroeder compares (1c) and (1d) to

2a. The meeting seemed to start at noon.
2b. It seemed that the meeting starts at noon.
2c. The meeting is likely to start at noon.
2d. It is likely that the meeting will start at noon.

The “trivial equivalence” of each of these pairs of sentences supposedly shows that ‘seems’, ‘is likely’, and the evaluative sense of ‘ought’ are all what linguists call raising verbs: “Raising verbs all share the feature that their subject-places are semantically null and are filled either by a nonreferring ‘it’ or ‘there’, as in the examples above, or by a noun-phrase that ‘raises’ from a lower clause in order to make the sentences grammatical” (6).

I guess I wondered whether the equivalence of these pairs of sentences is enough to establish all of this. Presumably the following two sentences are also equivalent, but this doesn’t show that they employ a distinctive sense of ‘know’ (or ‘intend’) with its own unique logical form:

2a*. The meeting is known [or: is intended] to start at noon.
2b*. It is known [or: is intended] that the meeting starts at noon.

Some raising verbs are “simple, context-invariant operators applied to the proposition expressed by their prejacent” (modeled on ‘it is necessary that ___’), and others “require further arguments that are supplied only by context” (modeled on ‘it seems that ___’, where we need to supply to whom this seems to be the case) (6).

It follows from Schroeder’s way of defending the existence of an evaluative ‘ought’ that there is a use of agential ‘ought’ sentences like (c) on which they employ the evaluative ‘ought’. On this way of reading agential ‘ought’ sentences of the form (d), they are equivalent to (d*), just as (2a) is equivalent to (2b):

d. Agent A ought to φ.
d*. It ought to be that A φ’s.

So on Schroeder’s view, (d) is ambiguous between a reading that employs the evaluative ‘ought’ and another reading that employs the deliberative ‘ought’.

III. Schroeder against the Semantic Uniformity Thesis

Schroeder understands the deliberative ‘ought’ to be a relation between an agent and an action, where ‘action’ is construed broadly to encompass other things that an agent can do, such as believe that p or be saddened by x (24).

Schroeder takes deliberative ‘ought’ sentences to have five hallmarks (9–10):

i. They matter directly for advice.
ii. They close deliberation about what to do.
iii. When someone (knowingly? without excuse?) fails to do what they deliberatively ought to do, they are accountable.
iv. Deliberative ‘ought’ sentences entail the ‘can’ of ability.
v. Deliberative ‘ought’ sentences are more closely connected to the notion of obligation than evaluative ‘ought’ sentences are.

Schroeder’s argument against the semantic uniformity thesis has two stages:

First, he argues that agential ‘ought’ sentences are systematically ambiguous between deliberative and evaluative senses.

Second, he argues that this ambiguity is due to an ambiguity in ‘ought’ and not due to an ambiguity in the rest of the sentence.
He argues for an ambiguity in agential ‘ought’ sentences by considering the following sentence (where Luckless Larry is someone who has just suffered a string of severe misfortunes through no fault of his own):

e. Luckless Larry ought to win the lottery.

Schroeder argues that there is one way of reading (e) on which it fails all five of our hallmarks of deliberative ‘ought’ sentences.

But he thinks there is another way of reading (e) on which it does satisfy all five hallmarks of deliberative ‘ought’ sentences.

side note #1: Confusingly, it turns out that (e) must be false on this second reading because of our fourth hallmark, on the most natural way of filling in the details of the Larry case. It would be nice to have a version of this argument on which the sentence in question can be true on both readings.

side note #2: Some of Schroeder’s other examples of evaluative ‘ought’ sentences could be argued to pass all five of his hallmarks of deliberative ‘ought’ sentences, provided we’re careful about who we consider to be the deliberating agent. Consider again

1c. The meeting ought to start at noon.

If I’m running the meeting and deliberating about whether to start it at noon, then: (1c) would close my deliberations; you could offer (1c) to me as good advice; if I (knowingly) violate (1c) then I’m accountable; (1c) is false if it’s already 2 p.m. on the relevant day and the meeting has not yet started; and (1c) seems connected to my obligations as person running the meeting.

Next Schroeder argues that the ambiguity in (e) is not due to an ambiguity in the parts of the sentence other than ‘ought’ by arguing against one prominent proposal which holds exactly that.

Let us distinguish between agential uses of the sentence “Agent A φ’s” (when it expresses something A does) and circumstantial uses of that sentence (when it expresses something that happens to A).

Let us analyze the agential reading of such sentence as follows:

the stit analysis: “Agent A φ’s” on the agential reading is equivalent to “A stit: A φ’s,” where ‘stit’ is short for ‘sees to it that’ (or ‘brings it about that’), and where what follows the colon is given a circumstantial reading.

(One worry: some verb phrases have no circumstantial reading; for example: ‘apologizes’.)

(Another worry: isn’t ‘stit’ being used in this analysis with an agential reading?)

Here then is the prominent proposal that Schroeder considers:

the agency-in-the-prejacent theory: “Agent A ought to φ” always means “It ought to be that A φ’s.” But that sentence has a deliberative meaning when it means “It ought to be that: (A stit that: A φ’s),” and it has an evaluative meaning when it means “It ought to be that: A φ’s,” where the material after the colon is given a circumstantial reading.

(Note that we could also consider a variant of this proposal that does not assume the stit analysis.)

Schroeder’s first objection is that agency-in-the-prejacent theory overgenerates:

The agency-in-the-prejacent theory predicts that “It ought to be that Larry wins the lottery” should be ambiguous between a deliberative and an evaluative reading, but Schroeder argues that on every reading of this sentence it fails to have all five hallmarks of deliberative ‘ought’ sentences.

(Note that if “It ought to be that p” entails “It is possible that p,” then he’s wrong that “It ought to be that: (Larry stit: Larry wins the lottery)” fails to have the fourth hallmark.)
Schroeder’s second objection is that agency-in-the-prejacent theory undergenerates:

Consider (where the genders have been switched to make the example less sexist):

4a. Bill ought to kiss Bob.
4b. Bob ought to be kissed by Bill.

Schroeder thinks we can tell a story (on which Bill and Bob don’t know each other, each have their own series of ill-fated romances, and clearly are perfectly suited for one another) such that (4a) and (4b) are both true when given an evaluative reading.

Moreover, Schroeder thinks (4a) can be given a deliberative reading in which Bill is the agent, whereas (4b) cannot be given a deliberative reading in which Bill is the agent.

He argues that the only way for agency-in-the-prejacent theorists to get this result for is them to argue that “Bill kisses Bob” can be given an agential reading on which Bill is the agent, whereas “Bob is kissed by Bill” cannot be given an agential reading on which Bill is the agent, but Schroeder thinks it is implausible to argue this.

Thus he concludes that agency-in-the-prejacent theorists are unable to account for the deliberative reading of (4a).

I would say, rather, that the problem seems to be that agency-in-the-prejacent theorists are committed to an extra deliberative reading of (4b) that isn’t there, namely one that is agential with respect to Bill, so once again the problem is one of overgeneration.

Moreover, it’s not clear to me that agency-in-the-prejacent theorists are committed to this result. Schroeder is interpreting their proposal as follows:

First, we translate “Agent A ought to φ” as “It ought to be that: A φ’s.” Next, we look to see whether there are any agential versus circumstantial readings of “A φ’s” with respect to any agent mentioned in that sentence.

But here’s another way of interpreting the theory:

One way of reading “Agent A ought to φ” is as “It ought to be that: A φ’s.” Another way of reading “Agent A ought to φ” is as “It ought to be that: (A stit: A φ’s).” The presence of A in the subject position of the original sentence blocks readings such as “It ought to be that: (B stit: A φ’s),” where B is someone other than A.

However, this version of the theory still yields the implausible result that there is a reading of (4b) on which it means “It ought to be that: (Bob stit: Bob is kissed by Bill).” So a third version of the proposal involves removing any commitment to the stit analysis:

If “__ φ’s” has a circumstantial reading, then there is a reading of “Agent A ought to φ” on which it means “It ought to be that: A circumstantially φ’s.” And if “__ φ’s” has an agential reading, then there is a reading of “Agent A ought to φ” on which it means “It ought to be that: A agentially φ’s.”

Since “__ is kissed by Bill” does not plausibly have an agential reading, the last problematic result is avoided. (I take it that allowing oneself to be kissed by Bill is not the same as being kissed by Bill.)

More generally, Schroeder takes the lack of equivalence of (4a) and (4b) to be one of several signs that ‘ought’ functions as a control verb in (4a). Control verbs such as ‘wants’ typically fail a passivization test:

4c. Bill wants to kiss Bob.
4d. Bob wants to be kissed by Bill.
Another thing that worries Schroeder about the agency-in-the-prejacent view:

Suppose Strategic Bomber’s bomb will decimate the ammunition factory only if it decimates the elementary school.

Schroder is fine with the conclusion that if it ought_{eval} to be that Strategic Bomb drops a bomb that decimates the ammunition factory, then it ought_{eval} to be that Strategic Bomb drops a bomb that decimates the elementary school.

However, he considers it unacceptable to conclude that if Strategic Bomber ought_{delib} to drop a bomb that decimates the ammunition factory, then Strategic Bomber ought_{delib} to drop a bomb that decimates the elementary school.

However, agency-in-the-prejacent theorists are not necessarily committed to this last result! They need not make the following assumption:

(*) If \(<p> \) entails \(<q>\), then \(<\Lambda \ \text{stit}: \ p> \) entails \(<\Lambda \ \text{stit}: \ q>\).

Indeed, as McNamara in effect notes, many agency-in-the-prejacent theorists often build it into their systems that we don’t bring about logical tautologies. But if (*) is true, then anyone who brings anything about also brings about every logical tautology.

I wonder, though, whether agency-in-the-prejacent theories can get off the hook so easily. McNamara reports that “[v]irtually all accounts” of the ‘stit’ or ‘brings it about’ operator take it to satisfy the following rule:

(**) If \(<p \ \text{iff} \ q>\) is a theorem, then \(<\Lambda \ \text{stit}: \ p> \ \text{iff} \ (<\Lambda \ \text{stit}: \ q>)\) is a theorem.

But now we get the result that if I bring it about that my cup is on the table, then I also bring it about that (my cup is on the table and everything is self-identical).

That seems to me to be just as bad a result as saying that I bring it about the everything is self-identical.

The final stage of Schroeder’s attack on the semantic uniformity thesis involves responding to Williams’ influential argument for the view. Williams notes that (6a) is ambiguous between readings roughly paraphrasable as (6b) and (6c):

6a. Someone ought to tell the boss.
6b. It ought to be that someone tells the boss.
6c. Someone is such that they ought to tell the boss.

Williams argues as follows:

P1. (6b) has the logical form \(O_{\text{eval}}(\exists x: x \ \text{tells the boss}).\)

P2. The ambiguity in (6a) is due to a mere scope ambiguity.

C. So, (6c) has the logical form \(\exists x: O_{\text{delib}}(x \ \text{tells the boss}).\)

Schroeder denies (P2). He holds that (6a) is three ways ambiguous, and on its third reading it has the logical form \(\exists x: O_{\text{delib}}(x, \text{telling the boss}).\)

**IV. Schroeder against the Broome/Wedgwood View**

Broome and Wedgwood agree with Schroeder that there is a deliberative sense of ‘ought’, and they agree that it expresses a relation between an agent and something else. But whereas Schroeder holds that something else to be an action (broadly construed), Broome and Wedgwood hold it to be a proposition.

The “Basic Problem” with the B/W view, according to Schroeder (24):
“. . . if OUGHT is just a relation that you can stand in to some proposition—for example, the proposition that you exercise daily—then it is a relation of which it makes sense to ask whether you stand in it to arbitrary other propositions—for example, to the proposition that I exercise daily. But I don’t think that it makes sense to ask whether you stand in the OUGHT relation to the proposition that I exercise daily.”

Broome argues that the fact that ‘ought’ takes an infinitival clause for its complement gives us good reason to treat ‘ought’ as expressing a relation to a proposition.

An analogy: “Jon wants Mary to get rich” plausibly means the same as “Jon wants it to be the case that: Mary gets rich.” So, it is thought, we should take “Jon wants to get rich” to mean “Jon wants himself to get Rich,” which in turns means “Jon wants it to be the case that: Jon gets rich.”

Schroeder’s objection: there are a number of other verbs that take infinitival clauses but that don’t plausibly express a relation to an arbitrary proposition. Some of his examples:

7a. Maria neglected to show up for the talk.
7b. The speaker forgot to bring his notes.
7c. Jake proceeded to criticize the speaker’s argument.

Some other relevant examples: ‘intended to’, ‘tried to’.

V. The Traditional Scheme in Deontic Logic

The Traditional Scheme in deontic logic involves the following five normative statuses (where it is now being assumed that they are operators on propositions):

‘OB\(p\)’ = ‘It is obligatory that \(p\)’
‘PE\(p\)’ = ‘It is permissible that \(p\)’
‘IM\(p\)’ = ‘It is impermissible that \(p\)’
‘OM\(p\)’ = ‘It is omissible that \(p\)’ [note: a better term might be ‘unrequired’ or ‘nonmandatory’]
‘OP\(p\)’ = ‘It is optional that \(p\)’

Any of the first four can be used to define the rest, but the most standard approach is to take ‘OB’ as basic and define the rest in terms of it as follows:

\[ PE\(p\) \iff \neg OB\neg p \]
\[ IM\(p\) \iff OB\neg p \]
\[ OM\(p\) \iff \neg OBp \]
\[ OP\(p\) \iff (\neg OBp \& \neg OB\neg p) \]

How should these definitions go if we accept the naive view that these normative statuses are relations between agents and actions (rather than operators on propositions)? Presumably like so:

‘OB\(_A\phi\)’ = ‘It is obligatory for \(A\) to \(\phi\)’
‘PE\(_A\phi\)’ = ‘It is permissible for \(A\) to \(\phi\)’
‘IM\(_A\phi\)’ = ‘It is impermissible for \(A\) to \(\phi\)’
‘OM\(_A\phi\)’ = ‘It is omissible for \(A\) to \(\phi\)’
‘OP\(_A\phi\)’ = ‘It is optional for \(A\) to \(\phi\)’

The first of these biconditionals is the property that I called duality last week: obligation and permissibility are duals of each other. Notice, though, that the outer and inner negations are not exactly the same: the outer negation is an operator on propositions, and the inner negation is an operator on actions.