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METAETHICAL CONTEXTUALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF DISAGREEMENT: WHEN

SOMEBODY MUST BE WRONG

by

BRADLEY LOVEALL

Under the Direction of Eddy Nahmias, PhD

ABSTRACT

Metaethical contextualism is a form of moderate contextualism according to which the truth-conditions of normative utterances are sensitive to some salient standard, norm, or theory that is determined by the context of utterance. Metaethical contextualism implies that two speakers might utter grammatically contradictory normative sentences without expressing contradictory propositions, leaving the view vulnerable to the 'problem of lost disagreement'. The problem of lost disagreement occurs when two parties to a dispute disagree, but their utterances don't express exclusionary truth-conditional content: they might both be right. While metaethical contextualists have proposed plausible solutions to the problem of lost disagreement, these solutions are ultimately unsatisfying, at least in contexts where one would expect exclusionary truth-conditional content. In this paper, I develop a form of metaethical contextualism that predicts exclusionary truth-conditional content in some contexts of disagreement, thereby

assuaging any concerns that metaethical contextualism fails to adequately account for normative disagreement.

INDEX WORDS: Contextualism, Metaethics, Moral realism, Language, Disagreement, Truth-
Conditional semantics, Belief holism, Semantic holism

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DEDICATION

Thanks to my wife, Sarah Stone-Loveall, for your many sacrifices these last two years. I hope to one day repay you.

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1   INTRODUCTION

Contextualism is a theory of language according to which certain expressions don't have fixed semantic values, or meanings. Rather, their semantic values are 'context-sensitive' and depend upon features of the context of utterance, such as who the speaker is and where she's at. Contextualists and non-contextualists alike agree that some expressions are context-sensitive. Everyone agrees, for example, that the semantic values of indexical expressions like 'I', 'here', 'now', and 'today' are context-sensitive. The truth-conditions of a Chicago resident's utterance at midnight of the sentence 'It's cold here now' will be different than the truth-conditions of a Miami resident's utterance of the same sentence at noon. What sets contextualists apart from non-contextualists is that they think that expressions in addition to these are also context-sensitive. For example, contextualists about gradable adjectives think that expressions like 'rich', 'tall', and 'fast' are context-sensitive. Suppose that Maya has $200,000 in her bank account and that Oskady utters the sentence 'Maya is rich'. Is Oskady's utterance true? As we will see, contextualists about gradable adjectives argue that it depends on features of the context of Oskady's utterance. Similarly, epistemic contextualists think that the expression 'knows' is context-sensitive. According to epistemic contextualists, the truth-conditions of one's utterance at a casual dinner party that 'I know I've eaten Ethiopian food before' are different than the truth-conditions of one's utterance of that very same sentence in a philosophy seminar, where the epistemic standards are higher.[1]

Metaethical contextualists (or normative contextualists) believe that certain moral expressions, such as 'wrong', 'good', 'should', 'must', and 'ought' are context-sensitive.[2] Moral

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[1] See, e.g. Keith DeRose (1992).
[2] I use the terms 'normative' and 'moral' essentially interchangeably. However, the reader will notice that I tend to use the term 'moral' to apply to questions about certain actions (like having abortions) that I take to be paradigmatically moral in nature and tend to use the term 'normative' to apply to

expressions, like 'wrong' and 'should' don't have fixed semantic values that are invariant across contexts. Rather, the semantic values of moral expressions depend on the norms endorsed by the speaker or by the speaker and her audience. According to metaethical contextualism, speakers who endorse different norms will express different propositions when they utter the same moral sentence. Assume, for example, that Jessica endorses some set of norms like Divine Command Theory (DCT). On contextualist construals, her utterance that (1) will express a proposition like (2).

1. Abortion is always wrong.

2. Abortion is always wrong according to DCT.

Similarly, her utterance that (3) will express a proposition like (4).

3. Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

4. Given DCT, Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

But we might imagine someone else who endorses some different set of norms that also forbids abortion. In such a case, her utterance of (1) will express a different proposition, where 'DCT' is replaced with the norms that she endorses.

Metaethical contextualism is a member of a family of views concerned to explain normative and evaluative language broadly construed to include utterances about taste (e.g., 'tofu is tasty') and (what is traditionally regarded as) non-moral societal norms of various kinds (e.g., 'Sam shouldn't wear his navy-blue blazer with shorts'). So, for example, Josiah might utter (5), expressing a proposition like (6).

5. Sophia should use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

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questions that are normative but not paradigmatically moral (like which fork to use when eating one's salad). I recognize, of course, that this is a controversial distinction, but nothing of substance hinges on this question for me.

6. Given the etiquette norms that prevail in the United States, Sophia should use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

Metaethical contextualists tend to treat the truth-conditions of (1) and (3) in the same way that they treat (5).

1. Abortion is always wrong.

3. Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

5. Sophia should use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

Jessica's utterances that (1) and that (3) are true just in case abortion is prohibited by DCT. Similarly, Josiah's utterance that (5) is true just in case the etiquette norms that prevail in the U.S. really do require the use of the rightmost fork when eating salads.

In general, then, contextualist accounts of normative language treat the truth-conditions of normative utterances in what we might call a 'belief-independent' manner. That is, it does not matter whether the speaker is a realist about the norms in question and believes that those norms are actually objectively true or a non-realist about those norms but nevertheless thinks that they are in some sense appropriate for the context. Belief-independent accounts of normative language assume, then, that normative utterances always take 'weak interpretations', where the truth of the salient norms are not included among the truth-conditions of those utterances. On a weak interpretation of (1), that is, Jessica's utterance is true just in case DCT forbids abortion. Or, to put it differently, Jessica's utterance that (1) determines a set of possible worlds, some of which are godless worlds, in which DCT forbids abortion.[3] Belief-independent accounts of normative language contrast with what we might call 'belief-dependent' accounts, according to

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[3] One common way of thinking about propositions is in terms of possible worlds. It is common to say that a proposition is or determines a set of possible worlds. The sentence 'the cat is on the mat' determines a set of possible worlds where the cat in question is on the mat in question. The set will not include any worlds where the cat is on the couch.

which the speaker's beliefs about the salient norms of the context influence the truth-conditions of her utterance.[4] On a belief-dependent account, moreover, normative utterances sometimes take 'strong interpretations', where the objective truth of the salient norms of the context does figure into the truth-conditions of those utterances. On a strong interpretation of (1), for example, Jessica's utterance determines a set of possible worlds in which God exists, DCT is true, and DCT forbids abortion. Her utterance is false, then, if God doesn't exist, DCT is false, or DCT doesn't always forbid abortion.

The assumption that normative utterances always take weak interpretations leaves belief-independent metaethical contextualists vulnerable to several problems. Among these problems, the 'problem of lost disagreement' is especially problematic.[5] The problem of lost disagreement occurs when two parties to a dispute disagree, but their utterances don't express 'exclusionary truth-conditional content'. That is, neither party must be wrong. Imagine that Jessica (the DCT-advocate) is engaged in a conversation about abortion with Sarah, a Utilitarian. Jessica's utterance that (1) expresses the proposition (7), while Sarah's denial of (1) expresses the proposition (8).

1. Abortion is always wrong.

7. Abortion is always wrong according to DCT.

8. Abortion is sometimes permissible according to Utilitarianism.

If normative utterances take weak interpretations, then Jessica's utterance that (1) is true just in case DCT always forbids abortion. Similarly, Sarah's denial that (1) is true just in case

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[4] To the best of my knowledge, the account that I develop here is the first belief-dependent account.

[5] See, for example, MacFarlane 2014: 8, Brogaard 2008:387, Dreier 2009: 81, and Kölbel 2002:39-40.

Utilitarianism sometimes permits abortion. Jessica and Sarah seem to disagree, but their utterances are not contradictory. They might both be right.

Metaethical contextualists have sought to recover this lost disagreement from several plausible sources. Stephen Finlay (2017) suggests that these sources of 'found' disagreement can be broadly categorized as either 'quasi-expressivist' or 'metalinguistic' in nature (191). Quasi-expressivists argue that the source of the disagreement between two disputants concerns conflicting (typically non-cognitive) *attitudes* about the action or issue in question (191). Accordingly, the above disagreement between Jessica and Sarah concerns their conflicting attitudes about abortion. While these attitudes are not expressed as part of the truth-conditional content of their utterances, they are nevertheless expressed or implicated pragmatically through the use of non-truth-apt expressions like 'no', 'I disagree', and so forth.

Proponents of the view that normative disagreement is metalinguistic in nature, conversely, argue that the source of the disagreement concerns which normative concepts, norms, or standards are salient for the purposes of the conversation at hand (Finlay 191). For example, David Plunkett & Tim Sundell (2013) advance a theory according to which normative disagreement can be explained in terms of *metalinguistic negotiation*—". . . a largely tacit negotiation over how best to use the relevant words" (3). For Plunkett & Sundell, then, the source of the disagreement between Jessica and Sarah concerns which normative theory or standard is appropriate for the context. For example, Plunkett & Sundell consider a case of disagreement between Oscar and Callie, who are cooking chili for a party that they plan to attend. After tasting the chili, Oscar says 'That chili is spicy' and Callie replies 'No, it's not spicy at all'. Plunkett & Sundell explain their disagreement in terms of a negotiation over the appropriate level of heat given the context (15).

These responses to the problem of disagreement are both plausible in contexts where neither party to the disagreement is a realist about the norms in question.[6] Consider Josiah's utterance that (5) once again.

5. Sophia should use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

Imagine that Jamal, Josiah's friend, denies (5). Jamal hails from the country Vista, where it is customary to use one's leftmost fork when eating one's salad. Unaware that different norms prevail in the U.S., Jamal rejects (5) because he thinks that Sophia will make a fool of herself if she uses her rightmost fork. It seems to me that an explanation of the disagreement between Josiah and Jamal in terms of a metalinguistic negotiation over the appropriate set of norms is plausible in cases such as these. Their disagreement is resolved through a discussion of the etiquette norms that prevail in the United States.

There are other contexts, however, where metalinguistic and quasi-expressivist accounts of disagreement appear to be incomplete. For example, I don't think that the disagreement between two staunch moral realists like Jessica and Sarah is satisfactorily explained in terms of a negotiation over which set of norms should be salient for the purposes of their conversation; it is similarly implausible to suppose that their disagreement is best explained in terms of conflicting non-cognitive attitudes about the action in question. In these contexts (henceforth 'realist contexts'), it is more plausible to suppose that the disagreement concerns which set of norms is *correct*, true, or consistent with moral reality.[7]

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[6] A realist about some body of norms thinks that those norms are actually true, in some objective, mind-independent and non-relativized sense. It's not just that they think that a certain set of norms might be useful or appropriate for the context. Rather, they're true, or correct, and appropriate for *all* contexts of a certain type. If Josiah is a realist about etiquette, for example, then he thinks that the etiquette norms that prevail in the U.S. are the *correct* ones *everywhere* and better than all of the others.

[7] To be clear, in advancing BDMC, I am not committed to the truth of moral realism. Rather, I'm merely committed to the belief that many (perhaps most) people are moral realists who accept some moral theory as objectively true.

Advocates of metalinguistic and quasi-expressivist accounts of disagreement recognize, of course, that disputants to a moral disagreement often hold incompatible moral views and that this explains *why* they find themselves engaged in a dispute (Plunkett & Sundell 18). In failing to fully take into account the speaker's beliefs about the salient norms of the context, however, they assume that moral utterances always take weak interpretations, forcing them to explain all cases of moral disagreement in terms of either metalinguistic negotiation or the conflicting non-cognitive attitudes of the disputants rather than in terms of exclusionary truth-conditional content. It seems to me, however, that one might plausibly adopt a belief-dependent contextualist account of moral utterances that rejects the assumption that moral utterances always take weak interpretations. In this paper, I do just that, sketching a form of metaethical contextualism—*Belief-Dependent Metaethical Contextualism* (BDMC)—according to which normative utterances take strong interpretations in realist contexts—where the parties to some normative disagreement are realists about the norms in question. In these realist contexts, moreover, BDMC predicts exclusionary truth-conditional content. Somebody must be wrong. In predicting occasions of disagreement where someone must be wrong and other occasions (non-realist contexts) where both parties might be right, BDMC can accommodate all of our intuitions about disagreement, thereby avoiding the problem of disagreement altogether.

In §II, I provide a more detailed overview of contextualism, contrasting it with semantic minimalism, and comparing moderate contextualism to radical contextualism. In §III, I provide an overview of metaethical contextualism. I briefly outline several prominent belief-independent contextualist theories, including Alex Silk's (2017), Justin Khoo & Joshua Knobe's (2016), and James Dreier's (1990). In §IV, I sketch the outlines of a belief-dependent account of metaethical contextualism that purports to accommodate our intuitions about normative disagreement. In

order to show this, I distinguish, in §V, between four types of disagreement: (i) exegetical non-realist, (ii) exegetical realist, (iii) non-exegetical non-realist, and (iv) non-exegetical realist. Unlike belief-independent accounts, a belief-dependent account is able to provide satisfactory explanations of the disagreement that obtains in each of these contexts. The upshot of all of this is that BDMC enables additional traction on the problem of disagreement and allows metaethical contextualism to satisfy the desideratum that a theory of normative language ought to predict exclusionary truth-conditional content in at least some contexts. These arguments significantly strengthen metaethical contextualism and assuage any concerns that the theory fails to adequately account for normative disagreement. I consider an objection to belief-dependent metaethical contextualism in §VI before drawing conclusions in §VII.

2   OVERVIEW OF CONTEXTUALISM

Contextualism is a theory of linguistic meaning that is best understood in contrast to a form of truth-conditional semantics called 'semantic minimalism' (or 'minimalism' or 'literalism'). Minimalists limit the influence of context on the truth-conditions of sentences to 'saturation'—the semantic-rule-driven assignment of semantic values to what Herman Cappelen & Ernie Lepore (2005) call the 'basic set', or 'genuinely context-sensitive expressions'. (2). The expressions in the basic set include indexicals and contextuals. Indexicals include personal pronouns, demonstratives, adverbs such as 'here', 'now,' and 'today', and the adjectives 'actual' and 'present.' (Cappelen & Lepore, 1-2). Contextuals include relational nouns like 'foreigner', 'enemy,' and 'national.' The truth-conditional content of a sentence is fully determined once the context of utterance saturates these few expressions with values. For example, the sentence 'He is the enemy' is context-sensitive because it contains the expressions 'He' and 'enemy'. One cannot assign truth-conditions to such a sentence without information from the context of utterance that saturates the expressions 'He' and 'enemy' with a semantic value. When Phil utters the sentence and 'he' refers to Timmy, then the proposition expressed by Phil's utterance determines a set of possible worlds in which Phil and Timmy are enemies.

These rule-driven 'bottom-up' semantic processes of saturation are best understood in contrast to what Francois Recanati (2010) calls 'top-down' pragmatic processes of 'enrichment' (to be further explained below) that are triggered not by a semantic rule but, rather, by the need to understand what the speaker means and intends to communicate with her utterance (4).[8] The

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[8] It is helpful to think of 'bottom-up' processes as driven by the expressions of a sentence, combined with the rules of syntax. Consider the sentence 'It's cold here now'. To determine the truth-conditions of this sentence, we need a context where the indexicals 'here' and 'now' are saturated with semantic value. We might think of the sentence like this: 'It's cold f(here) f(now)', where f(x) is a function that is triggered in some context of use. 'Here' and 'now' don't have stable semantic values. Rather, they're functions. This is how to think of a bottom-up process. It is driven by the individual expressions of a

hallmark of minimalism, then, is its restriction of context-sensitive expressions to Cappelen & Lepore's basic set as well as its rejection of the influence of these top-down pragmatic processes on the truth-conditions of sentences.

Minimalism imposes a strict functional distinction, then, between semantics and pragmatics.[9] The result of this functional distinction is that the semantic content expressed by an utterance ('what is said', the 'minimal proposition', or 'explicature') frequently differs from what the speaker means and intends to communicate with that utterance ('speech act content' or 'what is meant'). Now, according to minimalists, the truth-conditions of an utterance are typically identified with what is said, not what is meant. This means that the minimalist is committed to the thesis that the literal truth-conditions of a speaker's utterance might be different—indeed, sometimes radically different—from what the speaker and her audience would regard as the truth-conditions of her utterance. Indeed, the contrast between what is said and what is meant is sometimes so great that the speaker is not only entirely unaware of what she is alleged by the minimalist to have said but would ". . . strongly deny having said what the minimalist claims was actually said" (Recanati 2004 11).

Among the primary reasons for this discrepancy is that minimalists are committed to the idea that the semantic values of non-indexical sentential expressions are determined by their conventional meaning. This straightforward approach allows truth-conditional semanticists to assign truth-conditions to all of the well-formed sentences of a language. However, while this

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sentence and the rules of syntax. In contrast, 'top-down' processes are not driven by the individual expressions of a sentence but by a need to understand what the speaker means. Top-down processes might be necessary even after all of the bottom-up processes are complete. That is, there might still be a gap in the actual meaning of an utterance even after the bottom-up processes are complete.

[9] Semantics is the study of formal linguistic meaning with a focus on the ways in which lexical, syntactic, and compositional rules combine to determine the meaning or truth-conditions of a sentence. Linguistic pragmatics, on the other hand, is the study of the ways in which speakers use language to convey meaning in conversation.

approach might be successful for some expressions (e.g., 'dog', 'to walk', 'television', 'bicycle', 'married', etc.), it is often unclear what the conventional meaning of other expressions might be (e.g., 'tall', 'wrong', 'rich', 'everyone', 'enough'). As we shall see, contextualists argue that sentences containing such expressions are 'semantically underdetermined': their semantic content—which is said by the minimalist to be expressed across all contexts of use—is incomplete. Hence, it is often unclear what the truth-conditions of sentences containing such expressions might be outside of a context of use.

These observations lead many philosophers to adopt some variety of contextualism. There are several forms of contextualism. Some, like moderate contextualism, remain committed to the overall minimalist agenda, where rule-driven saturation is the only pragmatic process needed to determine the truth-conditions of sentences. Others, like radical contextualism, extend the role of context, or pragmatics, to include top-down pragmatic processes like enrichment, where the meaning and truth-conditions of an utterance are influenced by the necessity of making sense of that utterance. What binds the various contextualist theories together is their rejection of the minimalist's thesis that context-sensitivity is limited to expressions in the basic set. At a minimum, contextualists believe that expressions beyond those in the basic set are context-sensitive. These expressions depend on contextual information to become fully propositional—or to have truth-conditions and be truth-evaluable. Such expressions vary in truth-conditional content from context to context.

2.1 Moderate Contextualism

Moderate contextualism (or indexical contextualism) is the most conservative form of contextualism. Indeed, moderate contextualism bears more similarity to minimalism than to radical contextualism. According to moderate contextualism, minimalism is false, but only

because the basic set is too limiting. Moderate contextualists expand the semantic expressions that require bottom-up contextual saturation to include additional overt indexicals not included in the basic set—what Cappelen & Lepore call 'surprise indexical expressions', such as 'knows' and 'wrong'—as well as covert, or hidden indexicals (Cappelen & Lepore 8).[10] A hidden indexical is an unarticulated expression that is allegedly bound to certain expressions, such as comparative adjectives ('tall', 'short' 'fast'), and domain quantifiers ('everyone', 'anybody'). Consider the sentence 'John is tall'. According to moderate contextualists about comparative adjectives, a hidden indexical is bound to the word 'tall' that is saturated with semantic value by a comparison class established by the context of utterance. So, for example, if John is a toddler, the hidden indexical is saturated with the comparison class 'toddler' and the resulting proposition will be something like (9).[11] If John is instead an NBA basketball player, the proposition expressed by the utterance that 'John is tall' will be something like (10).

9. John is tall for a toddler.

10. John is tall for an NBA basketball player.

Once these hidden indexicals are saturated, the sentence determines a complete set of truth-conditions.

Similarly, Zoltan Szabo (2006) thinks that domain quantifiers such as 'everyone' in the sentence 'Everyone passed the exam' are context-sensitive (Szabo 32). Szabo argues that 'Everyone passed the exam' expresses different propositions, and has different truth-conditions, across contexts of use. Szabo presents a 'context-shifting argument' in support of his view,

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[10] Importantly, though, one might be a moderate contextualist about one domain but not another. One might think, for example, that gradable adjectives are context-sensitive but that epistemic expressions are not, and vice versa.

[11] So, the sentence 'John is tall' is really 'John is tall(fx)', where x takes a comparison class and f(x) yields 'for an x', resulting in the proposition 'John is tall for a toddler'.

considering two classes where this sentence is uttered: Ms. Maple's and Mr. Oak's. Everyone passed the exam in Ms. Maple's class but only half of the students passed the exam in Mr. Oak's class. The intuition, of course, is that Ms. Maple speaks truly when she utters the sentence 'Everyone passed the exam' even though some people failed the exam, i.e, those in Mr. Oak's class.

Though not herself a contextualist, Angelika Kratzer's work on modal expressions has nevertheless significantly influenced recent work on moderate contextualism, including, but not limited to, metaethical contextualism.[12] According to Kratzer, sentences that contain modal expressions contain hidden but implicit argument places that can be made explicit by assigning an adverbial phrase such as 'in view of' or 'given that' to the missing argument place (2012 6-7). For example, on Kratzer's theory, the deontic modal (11) expresses a proposition like (12) and the epistemic modal (13) expresses the proposition (14).

11. All Maori children must learn the names of their ancestors.

12. In view of what their tribal duties are, all Maori children must learn the names of their ancestors.

13. The ancestors of the Maoris must have arrived from Tahiti.

14. In view of what is known, the ancestors of the Maoris must have arrived from Tahiti.

<div align="right">Kratzer (5-6).</div>

Kratzer treats deontic modals that are paradigmatically moral in nature in a similar way that she treats deontic modals like (11) that may be seen as less paradigmatically moral. On Kratzer's view, for example, (3) expresses a proposition like (15).

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[12] A modal is an expression such as 'must', 'should', 'ought', or 'may'. See Finlay (2016), Silk (2017), and Bronfman and Dowell (2016) for examples of how Kratzer's work is brought to bear on metaethical contextualism.

3. Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

15. Given the moral laws, Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

According to Kratzer's theory, deontic modals determine a set of *ideal* possible worlds. For example, (3) determines a set of ideal possible worlds in which Felicia obeys the moral laws. (3) is true if Felicia does not have an abortion in any of those worlds.

2.2 Radical Contextualism

Unlike moderate contextualists, who propose a relatively modest expansion to the list of paradigmatic context-sensitive expressions, radical contextualists argue that *most* expressions are context-sensitive and no sentence expresses a full proposition without the instantiation of certain top-down pragmatic processes. (Recanati 2004 90). Recanati distinguishes between two pragmatic processes: primary and secondary (23). Primary pragmatic processes are the bottom-up processes discussed above, where certain expressions are saturated with semantic value due to their interaction with the context and triggered by the rules of syntax. Secondary pragmatic processes are top down and driven out of a concern that 'what one says' is 'what one meant' to say (23). Consider, for example, the secondary pragmatic process that Recanati calls enrichment, which is a pragmatic process that results from a need to minimize the distance between the alleged literal truth-conditions expressed by some utterance and the intuitive truth-conditions of that utterance. So, for example, Recanati considers the sentence 'Mary took out her key and opened the door' (23). The alleged literal truth-conditions of this sentence are compatible with Mary taking out her key but then just holding them in one hand while she opens the unlocked door with the other. Enrichment works to bridge the gap between the intuitive truth-conditions and the alleged literal truth-conditions so that the sentence is true just in case she took out the

key and then *used* the key to unlock the door. Notice, though, that there is nothing in the syntax of that sentence that would trigger this pragmatic process. The sentence is perfectly well-formed and none of the expressions on their own give any hint that the 'literal' truth-conditions might depart from the actual truth-conditions. According to radical contextualists, enrichment is required in order to ensure that the literal truth-conditions are the actual truth-conditions, which will normally require that one use the key to unlock the door.

Radical contextualism maintains that what is said is not separable from what is meant. Indeed, as Recanati puts it, radical contextualism posits that ". . . the contrast between what the speaker means and what she literally says is illusory, and the notion of 'what the sentence says' incoherent. What is said (the truth-conditional content of the utterance) is nothing but an aspect of speaker's meaning" (2004 4). According to radical contextualism, what is said—the actual truth-conditions of an utterance—is not completely determined by the semantic rules and the conventional meaning of expressions. Rather, the truth-conditions of an utterance are discovered by considering the 'intuitive truth-conditions'—what the participants of the conversation would regard as the truth-conditions of the utterance (90). According to radical contextualism, moreover, the intuitive truth-conditions are frequently quite different from the truth-conditions that would follow from a minimalist interpretation.

Unlike the 'minimalist criterion' posited by the minimalist, according to which the truth-conditions of utterances are determined by semantic rules plus rule-driven saturation, radical contextualists posit what Recanati calls the 'availability criterion'. According to this criterion, ". . . what is said by uttering a sentence depends upon, and can hardly be severed from, the speaker's publicly recognizable intentions [and] . . . must be analyzed in conformity to the intuitions shared

by those who fully understand the utterance — typically the speaker and the hearer, in a normal conversational setting" (2004 14).

Despite their apparent differences, advocates of minimalism, moderate contextualism, and radical contextualism have more in common than what one might initially think. Moreover, 'radical' contextualists aren't, in the end, radical at all. Indeed, Cappelen & Lepore posit that moderate contextualists are merely "unimaginative radical contextualists" (40). At issue, at the end of the day, is the role of the 'minimal proposition' that results from the bottom-up saturation of a sentence with semantic value. Even in those cases where the minimal proposition clearly departs from what a speaker might mean by uttering it, minimalists think that the minimal proposition is nevertheless useful. As Emma Borg (2010) notes, "it is simply a mistake to require *semantic* theory to be answerable to intuitions about *speech act* content, for semantic content is one kind of thing (a repeatable, codifiable, rule-governed kind of thing) while speech act content is another kind of thing altogether (a potentially unrepeatable, nebulous, context-governed kind of thing" (56). Minimalists are concerned, then, to save semantic theory from the burden of answering to our intuitions about pragmatic theory. This is, of course, a sensible point. At the same time, what, the metaethical contextualist would like to know, does semantic theory tell us about the semantic value of 'wrong'?

3   BELIEF-INDEPENDENT METAETHICAL CONTEXTUALISM

Metaethical contextualists are (typically) moderate contextualists who think that normative expressions behave like gradable adjectives and domain quantifiers. Sentences containing gradable adjectives are semantically incomplete and require a comparison class established by the context at the time of utterance in order to express a complete proposition. Similarly, sentences containing normative expressions are semantically incomplete and require the establishment of some standard, principle, theory or norm in order to express a complete proposition. Just as the context of utterance determines a comparison class that determines the truth-conditions of sentences containing gradable adjectives, the context of utterances establishes a normative theory, principle, or set of principles that determines the truth-conditions of sentences containing normative expressions.

All metaethical contextualists accept that normative sentences are context-sensitive. In order to ascribe truth-conditions to normative sentences, one must know which normative theory, standard, norm, or principle is salient in the context in which the sentence is uttered. But metaethical contextualists offer competing contextualist accounts. For example, Alex Silk (2017) advances a form of metaethical contextualism that he calls Discourse Contextualism, according to which the context in which normative discourse takes place contains a discourse-level variable that accepts as a value a body of norms of some kind and which is supplied by the participants of the conversation. For example, Silk imagines a conversation between Alex and Bert, where Alice says (g).

   g. Sally must give 10% of her income to the poor.

Silk says the following about Alice's utterance:

The appropriateness of Alice's linguistic act of uttering [g] requires that the discourse-level moral norms imply [g]. Since it's mutually presupposed that Alice is obeying the conversational maxims, . . . in uttering [g], Alice implicitly proposes that it become taken for granted that such norms be endorsed in the conversation . . . So, since it's common knowledge that Alice can expect Bert to undergo an abductive reasoning process [according to which Alice proposes the endorsement of a set of norms that require that [g]], it's also common knowledge that he will object if he has different moral views, given their common goal of settling on what moral norms to accept. So if Bert doesn't object, this will confirm that the context is as the appropriateness of Alice's act requires, and the discourse-level moral norms parameter can be set to a value that implies [g] (222).

Silk offers a weak interpretation of the truth-conditions of normative utterances (232). Alice's utterance is true as long as the norms that she endorses require Sally to give 10% of her income to the poor. Assume for a moment that Alice is a Utilitarian. Her utterance that (g) is true as long as Utilitarianism requires that Sally give 10% of her income to the poor. Disagreement, for Silk, concerns which norms are "operative in the context" (221-222). If Bert accepts different moral norms, he will disagree with Alice, thereby rejecting Alice's suggestion that the discourse-level variable should be set to 'Utilitarianism'. For Silk, however, since the truth of the norms in question does not figure as part of the truth-conditions of their respective utterances, the source of the disagreement between Alice and Bert is not which set of norms is true but, rather, which moral norms are operative in the context (222). Silk's account of the disagreement between Alice and Bert, then, is both metalinguistic and quasi-expressivist. Alice and Bert are engaged in a metalinguistic negotiation of some sort over which norms to accept for the purposes of their conversation. In addition, however, Silk notes that the disagreement between Bert and Alice is quasi-expressivist, concerning "what moral attitudes to take up regarding Sally's giving to the poor" (224).

Justin Khoo and Joshua Knobe (2016) offer a similar account to Silk's. Their theory is based on Robert Stalnaker's concept of 'common ground' (or 'context set'), i.e. the set of

propositions assumed by the participants of the context to be true (Stalnaker 2014 25). According to Stalnaker, assertions in contexts of conversation are proposals to update the common ground (51). When one's proposal is accepted and the common ground is updated, possible worlds that are incompatible with the update are removed from the context set. The possible worlds that are removed are worlds that both parties reject.

Like Silk, then, Khoo & Knobe (2016) think that normative contexts contain a discourse-level variable of some kind that is saturated with a value by the participants to the conversation. When a speaker makes a normative assertion, she proposes a value (e.g., N) for that variable. Her interlocutor can either accept or reject N as appropriate for the context. If she accepts the proposal that N should be the value of the discourse-level variable, then all of the possible worlds in the common ground that are incompatible with N are banished and conversation proceeds with the assumption that subsequent normative utterances will be consistent with N. Khoo & Knobe differ from Silk in their construal of the truth-conditions of normative utterances. They posit that the truth-conditions of a speaker's utterance depends on the subsequent moves of her interlocutors. According to Khoo & Knobe, for example, when Jessica utters (1) about abortion, she proposes that DCT be accepted as the salient norms of the context. Furthermore, at the time of her utterance, the truth-value of her utterance that (1) is indeterminate: it is neither true or false. It depends on Sarah's reaction. If Sarah accepts (1) by uttering 'Yes, I agree', then the salient norms of the context will be DCT, and her utterance is true just in case abortion is forbidden by DCT. If Sarah rejects (1), on the other hand, and implicitly proposes some other set of norms as salient for the context, then both Jessica and Sarah's utterances will be indeterminate. They are neither true nor false. Their utterances don't express complete truth-conditions or have a determinate truth-value. In order for their utterances to determine a complete set of truth-

conditions, a set of norms must be established. In failing to establish a set of norms, their utterances lack a truth value.

Khoo & Knobe's theory can be classified as a version of 'speaker's group relativism' that was originally developed by Gilbert Harman (1975). According to speaker's group relativism, the normative theory that is shared by the speaker and her audience fixes the truth-conditions and truth-value of her utterance. Max Kölbel (2004) articulates speaker's group relativism as the claim that ". . . any sentence of the form 'A ought to do x' is propositionally equivalent to the corresponding sentence of the form 'The moral code shared by you (the audience), me (the speaker) and A requires A to do x'" (301). For Khoo & Knobe, if one's interlocutor doesn't think that the proposed norms are appropriate for the context, then one's utterance is semantically incomplete and doesn't have a truth-value.

In contrast to speaker's group relativism, James Dreier's (1990) advocates a form of 'speaker relativism'. According to Dreier, normative expressions are genuine indexicals (like those in Cappelen & Lepore's basic set) (8-9). Moreover, the content, or proposition expressed by a normative utterance, for Dreier, " . . . is a function of the affective attitudes of the speaker in the context. Thus, '*x* is good' means '*x* is highly evaluated by standards of system M,' where M is filled in by looking at the affective or motivational states of the speaker and constructing from them a practical system" (9).[13] On Dreier's view, then, the *speaker's* normative theory, not the normative theory of her audience or the culture of which she is a part ('the speaker's group') determines the truth-conditions of her utterance (1990 22).

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[13] Dreier's characterization of a moral system here is illuminating, for one might plausibly suppose that lots of people don't actually endorse a particular moral system. Dreier offers a way in which a metaethical contextualist might account for such cases. One might not have a definite set of norms in mind, but one's utterance will, nevertheless, be entailed by or follow from some (perhaps very small) set of propositions that combine to form a norm or moral system.

Despite the various differences between these theorists, they all posit that normative utterances take weak interpretations. They are, therefore, vulnerable to the problem of disagreement. Silk's explanation of normative disagreement emphasizes a negotiation over the norms that are appropriate for the context. In accepting or rejecting one's interlocutor's proposal, one also expresses one's non-cognitive attitude toward those norms. Khoo & Knobe offer a metalinguistic account that I consider in greater detail below. In both cases, however, they fall short of satisfactorily explaining disagreement in realist contexts.[14]

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[14] While Dreier has written on disagreement, he has not, to my knowledge, offered an account of how his theory deals with disagreement.

4   BELIEF-DEPENDENT METAETHICAL CONTEXTUALISM (BDMC)

One way to begin our discussion of BDMC is to see how belief-dependence works in Kratzer's treatment of epistemic modals. Consider (16), for example, where Roger is rumored to be elected chief.

16. Roger was reportedly elected to be chief.

Kratzer notes that (16) might be interpreted in one of two ways. Depending on the speaker's beliefs about the rumor, (16) might take a weak or strong interpretation, expressing (17) or (18) respectively:

17. Given the rumor, Roger must have been elected chief.

18. According to the rumor, Roger was reportedly elected chief.

According to Kratzer, because the speaker of (17) is committed to the truth of the rumor, (17) is false if the rumor is false and Roger is not elected chief. Unlike the speaker of (17), however, the speaker of (18) is not committed to the veracity of the rumor, so (18) is true as long as Roger was in fact rumored to be elected chief. In order for (18) to be false, the speaker would have to have misunderstood the rumor.

What this amounts to, then, is that one's belief about the rumor that Roger was elected chief influences the truth-conditions of one's utterance that (16). Kratzer's treats (16) in a belief-dependent manner. It will have different interpretations, and different truth-conditions, depending on the beliefs of the speaker. While Kratzer limits the distinction between weak and strong interpretations to epistemic modals, and while there are certainly important differences between epistemic modals and deontic modals, as I will now argue, one of the insights of BDMC is that something like Kratzer's distinction is also applicable to deontic modals and other moral expressions as well.

BDMC is just the view that the truth-conditions of one's utterance of some normative or moral sentence φ will depend on one's beliefs about the norms assumed by one's utterance that φ. In positing that the salient norms will be the speaker's, and not the speaker's group, BDMC is a variant of speaker-relativism. One might take one of two attitudes toward some body of norms. One might think that they are appropriate *for that context* but not appropriate for other contexts where the norms in question are of the same type (e.g., etiquette norms). Alternatively, one might think that they are appropriate *for all contexts of that same type.* Josiah's attitude toward etiquette norms is an example of the first case. We might imagine that Josiah thinks that etiquette norms are actually quite ridiculous. In some cases, he will gladly accept that non-U.S. etiquette norms are appropriate, such as when he is in another country where they are not applicable. Jessica's attitude toward DCT is an example of the second case. Unlike Josiah, she does not think that DCT is just appropriate for *some* moral contexts but inappropriate for other moral contexts. DCT is appropriate for *all* moral contexts. As long as she believes DCT, there will never be a time when she accepts some other set of moral norms as appropriate when (non-facetiously) uttering some moral sentence.

Jessica's moral beliefs are stable and context-independent in a way that is not true of Josiah's beliefs about etiquette. Her moral beliefs are *non-negotiable*, which is why accounts of disagreement that emphasize metalinguistic negotiation fail to satisfy us in realist contexts. It is easy to imagine Josiah and Jamal negotiating over which norms are appropriate in their context. Jamal readily acquiesces once he recognizes that the appropriate norms *really are* those that prevail in the U.S. It is decidedly difficult to imagine a similar scenario where Jessica readily

acquiesces to Sarah's assumption that Utilitarian-inspired norms are appropriate for the context. Jessica is a moral realist. Josiah, on the other hand, is not an etiquette realist.[15]

Now, if one is a realist about some normative domain, there are intuitive connections between one's *belief* that φ and one's *utterance* that φ, where φ is some moral sentence. In general, one's utterance that φ will express one's belief that φ. In general, moreover, the truth-conditions of one's utterance that φ will generally be the same as the truth-conditions of one's belief that φ. This is not so for non-realists about that normative domain, since they lack fixed and stable beliefs about the norms in question that extend across all contexts. We might express these ideas using the following principles:

A. In general, one's normative utterance that φ expresses one's normative belief that φ.

B. The truth-conditions of one's normative utterance that φ with the intent to express one's belief that φ are the same as the truth-conditions of one's normative belief that φ.

If (A) and (B) are true, then we might gain insight into the truth-conditions of one's utterance that φ by considering the truth-conditions of one's normative belief that φ, which is intuitively expressed by one's utterance that φ. Clarity around the truth-conditions of one's normative belief that φ might also offer insight into the nature of the disagreements in which one might find oneself when one utters φ in order to express one's belief that φ. More specifically, attending to the truth-conditions of Jessica's belief that (1) might plausibly shed light on the truth-conditions of her utterance that (1) when she is engaged in a disagreement with Sarah, which might then enable insight into the nature of their disagreement.

Consider, then, what must be true in the world in order for Jessica's belief that (1) to be true. She's a moral realist who believes that God exists and determines the moral facts. If you

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[15] While etiquette realism is a conceptual possibility, few people, I think, would consider themselves etiquette realists.

were to ask Jessica what conditions must obtain in order for her belief that 'abortion is always wrong' to be true, what do you suppose she'd say? To be sure, I am speculating here, but my hunch is that, after struggling a bit, Jessica would ultimately have to say something to the effect that her belief that (1) is true on the condition that God forbids abortion, or something along those lines. It's not clear what else she might say. One possibility, of course, is that she might say that it's true just in case abortion *really is wrong*, but, as we've seen, that's not very illuminating, and I don't think she'd say that. She ought, I think, to be able to describe the truth-conditions of her belief without just restating the sentence. Any replies to the effect that 'abortion is wrong just in case it's *really wrong*' are not illuminating, precisely because 'wrong' is context-sensitive. What Jessica *means* by 'wrong' is precisely the question being asked of her. At this point, then, it seems to me that she'd have to say something to the effect that her belief is true just in case God forbids abortion. If this is right, though, and if (A) and (B) are true, then her utterance that (1) is false if God doesn't exist, or if DCT is false. We can say with some degree of certainty, I think, that she would reject a weak interpretation of her belief that (1). She would *not* regard her belief that 'φ is always wrong' as true as long as DCT forbids abortion and *even if* some other theory is correct. She doesn't think that other moral norms are on a par with DCT, and that other people's moral beliefs are just as true as hers. She thinks that DCT is *the* correct moral theory.

What about Sarah? For simplicity, assume that Sarah is an atheist in addition to a Utilitarian. What must the world be like in order for her belief that 'abortion is sometimes morally permitted' to be true? It is, admittedly, less clear what exactly must be true for Sarah's belief to be true (again, a point in favor of metaethical contextualism). But it does seem to me that her belief would be false in worlds in which God exists and determines the moral facts. In my view, we should regard her belief that 'abortion is sometimes morally permissible' as false if

it were to turn out that God exists, that God determines the moral facts, and that God forbids abortion in every single case.

The upshot of BDMC, then, is that the truth-conditions of the utterances of realists about some domain will be different than the truth-conditions of the utterances of non-realists about that or some other domain. Jessica's belief that (1) determines a set of possible worlds in which God exists, DCT is true, and DCT forbids abortion. Sarah's rejection of (1) determines a set of possible worlds in which Utilitarianism is true and sometimes permits it. Their utterances take strong interpretations. When they disagree, at least one of them is wrong. But these observations are not true of Josiah and Jamal. Josiah and Jamal aren't realists about etiquette. They think that some norms are appropriate in some cases and that others are appropriate in others. While they might have in mind a set of etiquette norms in their dispute about Sophia's fork usage, we needn't suppose that they believe that those norms are objectively true and appropriate for all contexts. Their utterances take weak interpretations, and their utterances might both be true. Unlike the disagreement between Jessica and Sarah, which cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of a negotiation over the right set of norms *for the context*, the disagreement between Josiah and Jamal *is* satisfactorily explained in terms of a metalinguistic negotiation of some kind.

Before moving on to see how this account fares in different contexts of disagreement, it is worth considering a contextualist-inspired modification to Kratzer's account of deontic modals. Recall from above that Kratzer says that (3) expresses a proposition like (15).

3. Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

15. Given the moral laws, Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

Now, *which* moral laws are Jessica and Sarah talking about here? Do they refer to the *same* moral laws, or might they have different moral laws in mind? The *source* of moral law is, in my

view, the matter about which Jessica and Sarah disagree. Given that Jessica is a Divine Command Theorist and Sarah is a Utilitarian, it seems (and we have been supposing) that their utterances refer to different (alleged) moral laws. If we (falsely) assume that they are referring to the *same* moral laws, then their disagreement is merely exegetical in nature. That is, they agree on the referent of the expression 'the moral laws' but disagree about what those laws say. On this construal, their disagreement is like the disagreement between two Divine Command Theorists who agree that the Bible is the source of moral law but disagree over whether the Bible forbids abortion.

While this is plausible with respect to disagreements between two people who accept the same moral laws, as with Jessica and Sarah, this is often not the case. Part of the disagreement between Jessica and Sarah concerns the referent of the expression 'the moral laws'. Does 'the moral laws' refer to the content of DCT or Utilitarianism? Their disagreement concerns whether DCT or Utilitarianism is the source of the moral laws.

In light of this, we might modify Kratzer's construal along contextualist lines so that deontic modals are context-sensitive. Accordingly, when Jessica utters (3), she expresses a proposition like (19) rather than (15).

3. Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

15. Given the moral laws, Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

19. Given DCT, Felicia mustn't have an abortion.

Similarly, when Sarah utters (20), she would express a proposition like (21).

20. No, Felicia may have an abortion.

21. Given Utilitarianism, Felicia may have an abortion.

Now, the final step is to reintroduce Kratzer's distinction between weak and strong interpretations. Do (3) and (20) take weak or strong interpretations? Are Jessica and Sarah committed to the truth of the norms to which their utterances are sensitive such that the truth of these norms is among the truth-conditions of their utterances? According to belief-independent construals, the truth of the norms in question does not figure in the truth-conditions of their respective utterances. According to BDMC, however, (3) and (20) take strong interpretations. (3) determines a set of possible worlds in which DCT is true and DCT forbids abortion. Similarly, (20) determines a set of possible worlds in which Utilitarianism is true and Utilitarianism permits abortion in cases like Felicia's.

5   THE PROBLEM OF DISAGREEMENT

I suggested above that the problem of disagreement emerges for belief-independent accounts of metaethical contextualism like Silk's and Khoo & Knobe's. There are, I think, two primary problems. First, there is the familiar problem of explaining the disagreement between two disputants whose utterances don't express exclusionary truth-conditional content. If belief-independent metaethical contextualists (excluding Khoo & Knobe) are right about Jessica and Sarah, for example, then their utterances might both be true. So how can we explain their apparent disagreement? Metalinguistic and quasi-expressivist accounts seem plausible in some contexts (like the non-realist context in which Josiah and Jamal find themselves) but less plausible in others (like the realist context in which Jessica and Sarah find themselves). A second, related problem concerns the fact that belief-independent contextualist views treat all cases of normative disagreement the same way, whether the disagreement concerns what someone ought to wear to a party or whether preemptive nuclear strikes are morally permissible. In both cases, the disagreement is said to concern one's non-cognitive attitudes toward the issue at hand or a negotiation over which norms are appropriate for a context.

It seems that we should be able to do better than this. Ideally, a theory of normative language ought to predict exclusionary truth-conditional content in some contexts (nuclear strikes) but not others (attire). In some contexts, but not others, somebody is wrong. As a consequence, a theory of normative language ought to enable different explanations of the disagreement between realists about some normative domain and non-realists about that or some other normative domain. BDMC does just that.

To see how, it is helpful to consider four paradigm types of disagreement—(i) exegetical realist, (ii) exegetical non-realist, (iii) non-exegetical non-realist, and (iv) non-exegetical realist.

Exegetical realist normative disagreement obtains between two moral realists who agree on the norm, standard, or principle that is salient in the context. Moreover, as realists, they believe that this norm or standard demarcates right from wrong and determines what one ought to do across all contexts. Despite agreeing on the salient norm or standard, however, they disagree on its interpretation. We might imagine two Divine Command Theorists, one of whom (Bill) thinks that DCT permits some abortions, and the other of whom (Veronica) thinks that DCT forbids all abortions. Both Bill and Veronica accept that DCT is true and that it alone determines what one ought morally to do. Their disagreement is exegetical since it concerns the correct interpretation of DCT. Their disagreement might (or might not) be resolved by an evening spent discussing passages from the Bible.

Like exegetical realist disagreement, exegetical non-realist disagreement occurs when the disputants agree on the norm or standard that is salient in the conversational context but disagree about the interpretation. Unlike exegetical realist disagreement, however, the disputants to an exegetical non-realist disagreement aren't committed to the belief that the salient norms are objectively true and appropriate for all contexts where norms of that type (e.g., greeting norms) are salient. Flushing out the vignette above wherein Josiah and Jamal disagree about which fork Sophia should use when eating her salad, imagine that Sophia is about to be married and that she is meeting her in-laws for the first time at a dinner party at her in-law's house. Accompanying her will be her parents, Josiah and Marie, and Josiah's friend Jamal. Josiah, Marie, Jamal, and Sophia are travelling together in a car to the dinner party. Josiah and Marie each accept that the norms of etiquette that prevail in the U.S. are salient, but they disagree over the content of those norms. Josia utters (22) and Marie utters (23).

22. Sophia, sweetie, you should use your rightmost fork when eating your salad.

23. No, Sophia, you shouldn't use your rightmost fork when eating your salad.

Like Bill and Veronica, Josiah and Marie agree that the etiquette norms that prevail in the U.S. are salient but they disagree about what those norms require. Unlike Bill and Veronica, Josiah and Marie are not realists about normative domain in question. They don't think that there is an objective fact of the matter about which etiquette norms are correct. Their utterances express the following propositions:

24. In view of the norms that prevail in the U.S., Sophia should use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

25. In view of the norms that prevail in the U.S., Sophia shouldn't use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

The disagreement between Josiah and Marie is exegetical non-realist. Josiah and Marie agree on the salient norms. One of them is just mistaken about the contents of those norms. Their disagreement might be resolved by quick consultation of Emily Post's *Etiquette: Manners for a New World*.

The third type of normative disagreement is non-exegetical non-realist. Rather than imagining a dispute between Josiah and Marie, imagine once again the dispute between Josiah and Jamal, who, recall, hails from Vista, where it is customary to use one's leftmost fork when eating one's salad. What is more, Jamal mistakenly assumes that all cultures are the same as Vista in this regard. As before, Josiah utters (22).

22. Sophia, sweetie, you should use your rightmost fork when eating your salad.

Puzzled by Josiah's utterance of (22), Jamal quickly replies with (23):

23. No, Sophia, you shouldn't use your rightmost fork when eating your salad.

Assume a contextualist analysis of (22) and (23). When Josiah utters (22), he has in mind a set of norms (the norms that prevail in the U.S.) that he thinks is salient. Likewise, when Jamal rejects (22), uttering (23), he thinks that the norms that prevail in Vista, which he just assumes are universal, are salient. Adopting Kratzer's construal of (22) and (23), (22) once again expresses a proposition like (24) and (23) expresses a proposition like (26).

24. In view of the norms that prevail in the U.S., Sophia should use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

26. In view of the norms that prevail in Vista, Sophia shouldn't use her rightmost fork when eating her salad.

In this case, it seems most plausible to say that Josiah's utterance that (22) is true just in case people who behave in accordance with the norms that prevail in the U.S. use their rightmost forks when eating their salads. Likewise, Jamal's utterance that (23) is true just in case people who behave in accordance with Vistan norms do not use their rightmost forks when eating their salads.

What should we make of their disagreement? Is it metalinguistic? Quasi-expressivist? Both, or perhaps something else? It seems to me that their dispute is metalinguistic in nature. Josiah thinks that the norms that prevail in the U.S., according to which people use their rightmost fork when eating their salads, are salient. Jamal, unaware that people do things differently in the U.S., thinks that the norms according to which people use their leftmost fork are salient. Worrying that Sophia might make a fool of herself, he is quick to correct Josiah. But once it is made clear to him that it is customary in the U.S. to use the rightmost fork when eating salads, he will quickly agree with Josiah, reassuring Sophia that she should use her rightmost fork. The disagreement here is metalinguistic, concerning which norms are salient for the

purposes of the context and, it seems, nothing else. Note, moreover, that, in this case, we needn't suppose that either party is wrong. Josiah and Jamal both speak truthfully when they utter (22) and (23) respectively, and their disagreement doesn't result in exclusionary truth-conditional content. Like utterances in contexts where exegetical non-realist disagreement obtains, utterances in contexts where non-exegetical non-realist disagreement obtains take weak interpretations. belief-independent accounts of metaethical contextualism adequately handle the disagreement that obtains in cases like these.

These first three types of disagreement all contrast with the disagreement between Jessica and Sarah. Their utterances take strong interpretations and their disagreement is an example of non-exegetical realist normative disagreement. Their disagreement is not exegetical since they do not accept the same norm or standard. However, their disagreement isn't *just* metalinguistic either since, given BDMC, Jessica and Sarah express exclusionary truth-conditional content. Their utterances express their beliefs and their beliefs are truth-conditionally incompatible. Jessica's belief that (1) is true just in case God exists, DCT is true, and DCT always forbids abortion, whereas Sarah's belief is true just in case Utilitarianism is true and sometimes permits abortion. Since their utterances express their beliefs, and their beliefs are incompatible, somebody is wrong.

If the above considerations are apt, then it follows that the assumption that normative utterances always take weak interpretations is false. This assumption fails to consider differences in the truth-conditions of normative utterances that stem from differences in the beliefs that speakers have about the norms in question. In realist contexts, it fails to do justice to the normative realist's metaphysical commitments. While standard contextualist construals are successful in non-realist contexts, a belief-dependent contextualist theory is required in order to

account for the moral realist's belief that their moral theory is true and determines the moral

facts.

6   OBJECTIONS TO BDMC

Recall from above that I posited principles (A) and (B) in order to try to get a sense of the truth-conditions of the moral beliefs of moral realists like Jessica and Sarah with the hypothesis that it might allow a more satisfying explanation of their disagreement than metalinguistic negotiation and quasi-expressivism.

A. In general, one's normative utterance that φ expresses one's normative belief that φ.

B. The truth-conditions of one's normative utterance that φ with the intent to express one's belief that φ are the same as the truth-conditions of one's normative belief that φ.

I think that the most forceful objections to my account focus on doubts about (B). One might be inclined to reject (B) primarily due to a concern that the acceptance of (B) leads to some variety of semantic holism (explained below). Setting aside one's reasons for rejecting (B) for a moment, it is illuminating to consider a contextualist account of normative language that does reject (B).

Khoo & Knobe offer a contextualist response to the problem of disagreement that rejects (B). In their experiments, they set out to see whether people think that normative disagreement always requires that somebody is wrong, i.e., whether two people might disagree without exclusionary truth-conditional content. If people accept that two people can disagree on some normative matter and yet neither party is wrong, then this would provide some evidence in favor of a contextualist account of normative language and disagreement. In their study, they found that participants did accept this possibility, especially if the disputants were from two very different cultures (Khoo & Knobe 2). Khoo & Knobe offer an explanation of these results that rejects (B).[16] As we've seen, their explanation is based on Stalnaker's idea of common ground.

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[16] Khoo & Knobe offer this theory as one of several ways in which one might explain their data (22). They are aware of various possible objections to their proposal (29). Still, their proposal is useful, since it rejects (B).

Khoo & Knobe argue that normative disagreement obtains without exclusionary content (people disagree and neither party is wrong) whenever the disputants' proposals to update the common ground would result in an empty context set (15). Disagreement without exclusion occurs, that is, when the disputants accept different norms. They conclude that ". . . the picture is that people disagree whenever there is a conflict between the proposals they are making. Thus, if two speakers can make conflicting proposals even while making non-exclusionary claims, we would have a case of disagreement without exclusion" (15). Disagreement without exclusion is possible, on their view, when one speaker utters some normative sentence, proposing a set of norms that are appropriate for the context, but then a second speaker rejects those norms by uttering some contradictory sentence. When this occurs, the truth-values of their respective utterances are indeterminate—they are neither true nor false—since the speakers have not agreed upon a norm that is salient for the context (23-4). Since neither of their utterances are false, it's not the case that at least one party is wrong (29).

To recap their view as it relates to Jessica and Sarah, when Jessica utters that (1), she proposes that DCT be accepted as the salient norm of the context. Furthermore, at the time of her utterance that (1), the truth-value is indeterminate. In rejecting (1), Sarah rejects Jessica's proposal that DCT should be the salient normative theory of the context and proposes that Utilitarianism be the salient norm. Since each of their proposals are blocked, the truth-values of their respective utterances are indeterminate. Thus, they disagree, and neither party is wrong. Khoo & Knobe articulate a form of metaethical contextualism, then, according to which ". . . moral sentences are only true or false relative to a parameter that is fixed by the context in which they are uttered" and they attempt to explain cases of disagreement without exclusionary content by suggesting that this occurs whenever this parameter is indeterminate (22).

While there is much to like about Khoo & Knobe's account, it strikes me as untenable precisely because it rejects (B)—according to which the truth-conditions of one's sincere normative utterance that φ intended to express one's belief that φ are the same as the truth-conditions of one's belief that φ. Imagine, for example, that Jessica believes some proposition, such as (1), at t_1 when she is alone in her living room considering the moral permissibility of abortion. Insofar as (1) is truth-apt, Jessica's belief that (1) at t_1 has truth-conditions and a truth-value. Imagine, now, that Jessica attends a party in the evening where she encounters Sarah, who, as it happens, has also spent the afternoon considering the moral permissibility of abortion and comes to believe that it is sometimes permissible. At t_2, now, while on the porch enjoying the evening air, Jessica and Sarah begin discussing abortion, at which point Jessica utters (1)— 'abortion is always wrong'—and Sarah denies (1), uttering 'abortion is not always wrong'. Assume that they each intend to express their beliefs about abortion. If (B) is true, then the truth-conditions and truth-value of Jessica's utterance of (1) at t_2 are the same as the truth-conditions and truth-value of her belief that (1) at t_1. The same observations are true of Sarah. As we have seen, when coupled with BDMC, the acceptance of (A) and (B) has the consequence that Jessica and Sarah express exclusionary truth-conditional content triggered by their belief in incompatible norms. On Khoo & Knobe's construal, however, Jessica's utterance that (1) at t_2 has *different* truth-conditions and a *different* truth-value (indeterminate) than her belief that (1) at t_1.

While this construal explains their data, it strikes me as implausible. Imagine, for example, that Jessica's belief is true. Imagine that God does exist and that DCT is true and that abortion is wrong according to DCT. Her belief that (1) would be true at t_1. Moreover, were she to utter (1) aloud in her living room alone at t_1, she would have presumably uttered a true statement. On Khoo & Knobe's construal, however, while Jessica's utterance of (1) at t_1 is indeed

true, her utterance of (1) at t_2 is indeterminate, since the truth-value of her utterance is dependent upon whether she and Sarah are able to agree upon a salient set of norms to govern their context. In failing to do so, the truth-values of their utterances are both indeterminate, and, therefore, neither true nor false. I find these consequences difficult to accept.

Consider, second, that it is plausible to suppose that disputants might disagree in their beliefs or judgements without even speaking. For example, Jessica and Sarah disagree *in their judgements* about whether abortion is wrong.[17] We ought, therefore, to be able to explain their disagreement without requiring that they gather together in the same room to express their beliefs through speech. If their judgments have determinate truth-conditions and truth-values, and we can explain their disagreement merely by attending to the incompatible truth-conditions of their judgments, why suppose that their respective utterances are indeterminate and that the source of their disagreement is something besides incompatible truth-conditional content?

Given that the rejection of (B) *can* lead to some bizarre consequences, why reject it? One reason that one might reject (B) is because it seems intuitive that one can sometimes truthfully utter some sentence S even if one doesn't believe S and even if one's belief that S is false. Consider (27), for example.

27. There's a cat on that mat.

A child speaks truthfully when she points to a nearby cat and utters (27) even though she can't yet distinguish cats from small dogs. We're inclined to say that her utterance is true even though

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[17] Finlay echoes this point when he remarks that ". . . people can apparently be in fundamental normative or moral disagreement *in judgment*, without speaking at all" (195). Finlay contrasts *state disagreement* with *activity disagreement*. State disagreement is characterized by difference of attitude or judgment about some action whereas activity disagreement occurs in a context wherein a verbal dispute has obtained (195). According to Finlay, ". . . the traditional metaethical Problem of Lost Disagreement . . . extends to interconversational and judgment disagreement, and so is more plausibly interpreted as a judgment about state disagreements" (195-6).

she doesn't meet the necessary criteria for *believing* that (27). She might not have any beliefs about cats and she might have a bunch of false beliefs about cats but still truthfully utter (27). Indeed, we might say that a parrot speaks truthfully when she repeats a caretaker's utterance even though we'd be disinclined to say that the parrot *believes* the content of that utterance.

There are many circumstances, then, in which the truth-conditions of some sentence S are completely isolated from the truth-conditions of one's *belief* that S. In general, moreover, this is a good thing given the plausibility of 'belief holism' and the undesirability of 'semantic holism'. Belief holism is the view that many beliefs are rationally related to one another such that it is impossible to have one without the other (Pagin 215). To use an example inspired by Jane Heal (1994), it would seem that in order to believe that (27), one must also believe (28) and (29).

27. There's a cat on that mat.

28. There is an animal on that mat.

29. There is a biological organism on that mat.

If one claims to believe that (27) but not (28) or (29), then their belief that (27) doesn't have the same meaning, content, or truth-conditions as mine. Yet it seems that we both *say* the same thing and that we both speak truthfully when we *utter* (27).

There are, then, good reasons for supposing that the truth-conditions of sentences and utterances are isolated and independent from the truth-conditions of beliefs about those sentences. There are good reasons, that is, for supposing that belief holism is true but that semantic holism is false. Semantic holism is essentially the view that the meanings of expressions are interconnected in much the same way that the meanings of beliefs are interconnected.[18] Moreover, the truth-conditions of sentences are derived in large part from the

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[18] Semantic holism is notoriously difficult to define. Moreover, definitions are fraught with controversy. The most influential (and most controversial) definition is given by Fodor & Lepore (1992),

truth-conditions of one's beliefs, so that the truth-conditions of one's belief that φ will be the same as the truth-conditions of one's utterance that φ.

But semantic holism leads to a number of undesirable consequences because people have different belief systems. If the meanings of my utterances are determined by my belief system and the meanings of your utterances are determined by your belief system, then it is difficult to see how we can successfully communicate. It seems to follow that English speakers don't really speak the same language unless they have the same beliefs, that one can't learn a language without already knowing the language, and that one can't actually ever change one's mind about some proposition, since, in doing so, that proposition has different meaning. As Jerry Fodor & Ernest Lepore (1992) observe, semantic holism would seem to jeopardize the attractive picture that ". . . linguistic and theoretical commitments of speaker and hearer can overlap partially to any degree you like: you can believe some of what I believe without believing all of it; you can understand part of my language without having learned the rest of it, and so forth" (10).

Now, since semantic holism is undesirable and the plausibility of BDMC rests on (B), which seems to lead to semantic holism, it would seem that BDMC is in some trouble unless one is willing to bite the bullet on semantic holism. If the truth-conditions of a speaker's belief that φ are allowed to influence the truth-conditions of her utterance that φ, then we might be headed toward an untenable form of semantic holism. How might we defend against this charge?

We defend against it by noting the differences between normative expressions and expressions that are straightforwardly empirical in nature, such as natural kind terms. Erich Rast's (2017) recent research is helpful here. He develops what he calls a 'dual aspect' theory of

who define semantic holism as the view that "[o]nly whole languages or whole theories or whole belief systems *really* have meanings, so that the meanings of smaller units—words, sentences, hypotheses, predictions, discourses, dialogues, texts, thoughts, and the like—are merely derivative" (x).

normative language. He distinguishes between what he calls the 'core meaning' and the 'noumenal meaning' of an expression. The core meaning of an expression is that "smallest common denominator" that competent speakers of a language must agree upon in order to successfully communicate with one another (412). Core meaning is "incomplete and loose," and "evolves primarily out of a need to communicate and coordinate behavior" (412). We might think, for example, that the core meaning of a moral predicate like 'wrong' evolves out of paradigm cases that virtually everyone agrees are wrong (or that everyone's norms forbid). From these paradigm cases, competent speakers of a language understand the core meaning of moral expressions. Indeed, speakers of a language must agree upon a core meaning of an expression in order to successfully use that expression and to enable communication.

The noumenal meaning of an expression, on the other hand, is an expansion of the core meaning that refers to what Rast calls the 'noumenon', which is some aspect of reality (412). The noumenal meaning is "a refined meaning with which informed speakers come up when they are intending to narrow down and state more precisely a purported aspect of reality that is suggested by a . . . core meaning and sometimes, though not always, also perceived or measured from observing nature" (417). About noumenal meaning, Rast says:

> Noumenal meaning generally evolves out of core meaning when people start asking questions that aim at reality. For example, two speakers can talk about a lightning during a thunderstorm and agree that it needs to be avoided and that it is likely that fire can be found where the lightning has struck [i.e., core meaning]. But they may also start asking themselves what . . . lightning really is. Is it a sign from the gods, some special form of fire, an electromagnetic phenomenon? These questions concern the noumenal meaning (412).

In developing his view, Rast draws on Hilary Putnam's work on semantic externalism. According to Putnam, the meaning of certain expressions depends on natural facts that competent language users needn't understand. One can successfully use the expression 'water'

without knowing that water refers to H$_2$O. Using Rast's language, the core meaning of 'water' is something like 'the clear, life-sustaining, drinkable liquid that fills rivers' whereas the noumenal meaning is something like 'H$_2$O'. For many expressions, especially natural kind terms like 'water', 'gold', etc., the noumenal meaning is determined by experts. A competent language user might know the core meaning of 'lightning', for example, and use the term to make true statements, without knowing the noumenal meaning, which is determined by experts. So, even if someone believed that the noumenal meaning of water on earth is XYZ, they still truthfully utter, when pointing to a river and mistakenly thinking that the river is full of XYZ, 'that's a lot of water!'. Their belief that 'that's a lot of water' might be false but their *utterance* is true.

But this linguistic 'division of labor', where experts determine the noumenal meaning of an expression, is only possible when there *are actual experts*. This is completely plausible for expressions whose referents can be observed and measured, such as when they refer to empirical reality. However, these criteria do not hold for normative terms. In cases like these, where there is no settled noumenal meaning of an expression, people develop competing accounts of the noumenal meaning that are "principally contestable and often [hinge] on complicated background theories which might turn out to be false" (413).

So, while semantic externalism is plausible for expressions that describe empirical reality, where experts are able to determine their correct extension, it is not plausible for normative expressions, since there aren't any experts, or the experts disagree. On Rast's view, moral realists who endorse some body of norms are best regarded as *theorists* about what it means for an action to be *really wrong* in the same way that scientists were at one time mere theorists about what water or gold or lightning *really is*. Moreover, moral realists each posit competing moral theories, or noumenal meanings of moral expressions, that they think are

correct. One might say, then, that experts, constrained by empirical facts, contribute to the determination of the truth-conditions of utterances about natural kinds. But, if there are no moral experts, or if the moral experts fundamentally disagree about which moral theory is correct, then there *is no noumenal meaning* of moral expressions. So, the truth-conditions of sentences containing moral expressions are dependent upon the norms or theories endorsed by speakers in a way that does not hold for sentences containing natural kind terms.

So, we might accept, then, that a child speaks truthfully when she utters (27) even though she might have few if any beliefs about cats and those beliefs might be false.

27. There's a cat on that mat.

But there does not seem to be an analogue in the moral case. Does the child (or a parrot) of a Divine Command Theorist speak truthfully when she utters 'abortion is always wrong' if we assume that she doesn't know what abortion is or what Divine Command Theory is? More to the point, given the ways in which normative expressions differ from natural kind terms and other straightforward empirical expressions, is it not plausible to suppose that one's background beliefs influence the truth-conditions of one's moral utterances in realist contexts even though one's background beliefs about natural kind terms don't influence the truth-conditions of one's empirical utterances? If this is plausible, then we might say that semantic holism is true of the moral utterances of moral realists but deny that semantic holism is generally true. It seems plausible to me that Jessica and Sarah can still mean then the same thing and still speak truthfully when they utter (27) even if we suppose that their moral beliefs affect the truth-conditions of their moral utterances.

At this point, it is important to bear in mind the concerns that motivate contextualism in general and BDMC in particular in order to see whether one is willing to simply bite the bullet

on the form of *moral* semantic holism that is permitted by BDMC. The original worry is that moral expressions don't seem to have invariant, stable, conventional meanings. While they do of course have a core meaning of some kind that constrains their appropriate use, core meaning is too loose to determine a set of truth-conditions. So, what are the truth-conditions of our moral utterances that 'φ is wrong?' We can follow the minimalist and say that 'φ is wrong' is true just in case 'φ is wrong'. But this doesn't really answer our questions. We still might wonder what 'wrong' means. We can follow the belief-independent metaethical contextualist and say that the utterance 'φ is wrong' expresses the proposition 'φ is wrong according to N' where N is some principle or theory. This construal gets us closer to a satisfying account of the truth-conditions of normative utterances, but it doesn't cohere with our intuitions in realist contexts. We don't want to say that Jessica's utterance that (1) about abortion is true just in case DCT forbids it. That's not what she *believes* when she believes that (1) and it's not what she *tries to express* via her utterance, or at least so it seems to me.[19] We could embrace some variety of moral relativism. Moral relativism is outside of the scope of this paper, but the moral relativist is motivated by many of the same concerns as the contextualist. But she also faces many of the problems of the belief-independent contextualist, namely, that moral realists can never really express their beliefs that, say, 'abortion is wrong *simpliciter*' or that 'DCT is the right moral theory *simpliciter*'. In light of these concerns, BDMC strikes me as an attractive alternative.

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[19] Indeed, on belief-independent construals of moral language, there would be no way for Jessica to express her belief that 'abortion is always wrong'. She can only express her belief that it's wrong according to DCT. There's no way to distinguish her utterance that abortion is always wrong' from someone else's utterance that 'abortion is always wrong according to DCT'.

7   CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued for a form of metaethical contextualism that enables additional traction on the problem of disagreement. Among the motivations for a contextualist theory of some kind is to bridge the alleged gap between 'what is said' and 'what is meant', i.e., to bridge the gap between the 'literal' truth-conditions of one's utterance and the intuitive truth-conditions of one's utterance. When a semantic theory predicts that the literal truth-conditions of one's utterance that φ stand in stark contrast to what conversational participants would reasonably regard as the truth-conditions of one's utterance that φ, then a contextualist theory can bridge this gap. So, it is disappointing that belief-independent accounts of metaethical contextualism have failed to bridge that gap.

In failing to successfully account for the intuitive truth-conditions of normative and moral utterances, moreover, belief-independent accounts of metaethical contextualism have also left themselves vulnerable to several related problems, the most pressing of which is the problem of lost disagreement. In this paper, I've sketched the outlines of a novel belief-dependent account of metaethical contextualism that I think more successfully bridges the gap between the actual truth-conditions of normative utterances and the intuitive truth-conditions of those utterances. The strength of this view is its flexibility. Most people who use moral language are moral realists who think that the moral norms that they endorse are universally true and applicable to all contexts. A theory of moral language ought to give such people a chance to express their beliefs in a straightforward manner. The account that I argued for above allows them to do just that. At the same time, we're not realists about all normative matters, and some of us are not realists about any normative matters. A theory of normative language ought to cohere with the intuitive truth-conditions of the anti-realist's normative utterances just as well as it coheres with the truth-

conditions of the realist's normative utterances. Finally, a theory of normative language ought to predict exclusionary truth-conditional content in at least some contexts of moral disagreement. Sometimes, surely, somebody is wrong. I've argued that BDMC can accommodate all of these desiderata.

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