

---

# DEONTIC MODALITY TODAY: INTRODUCTION

BY

STEPHEN FINLAY AND MARK SCHROEDER

---

In the summer of 2013, we organized a workshop at the University of Southern California, dedicated to the topic of deontic modality, broadly construed. The articles in this issue represent contributions to that workshop.

Inspired by how much we personally, as metaethicists, have learned from the recent work of linguists such as Angelika Kratzer, our fundamental goal both in organizing the workshop and in assembling this special issue was to raise the level of engagement between the different communities of scholars who work on deontic modality, broadly construed, in the belief that fostering such dialogue will advance our collective understanding of our common subject. Work on deontic modality or, roughly, the concept of *ought*, has been fragmented between many different subdisciplines: at least including moral philosophy, metaethics, philosophical logic, computer science, linguistics, and developmental psychology. Generally, scholars in each of these subdisciplines have labored in partial or complete ignorance of contemporary developments in most of the others, and have assumed that they have little or nothing to teach to or learn from each other. Indeed, when we approached our invited speakers, many of them expressed doubts that they had anything to contribute to such a conversation. We are satisfied that the workshop proved otherwise: the talks and discussion yielded immediate, fruitful engagement between participants regardless of their backgrounds, with no obvious disciplinary segregation or incomprehension. We believe the articles in this issue showcase the interconnectedness of study in deontic modality, regardless of discipline.

*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 95 (2014) 421–423 DOI: 10.1111/papq.12043

© 2014 The Authors

*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* © 2014 University of Southern California and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

A foremost example of this is the contribution from the philosopher and deontic logician John Horty, which compares his ‘default semantics’ for ‘ought’, developed from a computer science background, with Angelika Kratzer’s ‘classical’ semantics that is orthodox in linguistics and increasingly in metaethics as well. Dissecting a range of features of the classical semantics that could motivate alternative logical approaches, Horty shows that some, including deontic conflicts and prioritized norms, can actually be accommodated smoothly by the classical semantics, but argues that the default semantics offers a more promising treatment of what he calls the ‘resultant’ reading of conditional ought claims, and is decisively better at modeling higher-order reasoning about priorities among norms.

Like Horty’s, the contributions of the linguist Dan Lassiter and the philosopher Fabrizio Cariani also address the fundamental issue of the correct approach to a general semantics for ‘ought’ and other deontic terms. Lassiter looks to the scalar characteristics of deontic modality to argue for an alternative to the Kratzerian theory, an alternative that encodes expected value, whereas Cariani argues against such an expected value theory from the desideratum of semantic neutrality on first-order normative questions. These articles jointly illustrate the significance of normative theory on fundamental semantic theorizing.

Another linguist, Aynat Rubinstein, focuses on an issue of common interest to linguists, moral philosophers, and logicians: the difference in logical strength between ‘ought’ and ‘must’. She ties this important lexical contrast to the issue of scalarity, arguing (again contra Lassiter) that a Kratzerian semantics can accommodate this through an ordering of worlds. Rubinstein’s article also provides this issue’s primary showcase of the philosophical value of the empirical study of language, both of a comparative linguistic approach (here comparing English and Hebrew) and of attention to grammatical syntax (neg-raising). She suggests that these empirical data point toward a correct analysis of the elusive difference between ‘ought’ and ‘must’; we encourage skeptics about the philosophical value of empirical linguistics to check out this contribution.

In her contribution, philosopher Jennifer Carr examines the interaction between deontic modals and conditionals. Standard systems of deontic logic, as well as the Kratzerian semantics, validate the schema *if p then ought p*, which seems unacceptable from the standpoint of moral philosophy. Carr argues for a Kratzerian solution, identifying an ambiguity in conditionals of this form and in the ways that deontic modals can be sensitive to information. The linguists Sven Lauer and Cleo Condoravdi investigate a different puzzle about deontic conditionals. Their focus is ‘anankastic conditionals’ (in linguists’ parlance) or ‘hypothetical imperatives’ (in philosophers’ parlance), a special class of deontic sentence that raises at once linguistic problems (seeming to resist compositional analysis), logical problems (seeming to invalidate modus ponens), and problems

for normative philosophy about the requirements of practical rationality. Lauer and Condoravdi argue for a surprisingly straightforward application of the orthodox Kratzerian semantics to these sentences by giving a reading of the use of ‘want’ in these sentences as referring to a particularly robust kind of intention, and go on to suggest that it supports satisfying solutions to the puzzles about logic and the form of rational requirements.

In moral philosophy nobody has done more influential work on the form of rational requirements than John Broome. Puzzles about means-end rationality are also a central concern of Broome’s contribution to this issue, which argues that normative beliefs or the use of deontic concepts isn’t necessary for deliberation or practical reasoning. What is needed instead, he argues, is an intention or disposition to follow a rule. Whereas the other contributions to this issue explore the nature of deontic reasoning, Broome’s thesis sets limits on its scope. Finally, the logician and moral philosopher Frank Jackson revisits his famous puzzle involving Professor Procrastinate, first introduced in two classic papers of the 1980s. Here he reconsiders and elaborates on his former views, paying special attention to temporal considerations, the ambiguity between subjective (‘expective’) and objective obligation, and sensitivity to probabilities.

It seems impossible to draw any sharp lines through the issues tackled in these various articles, demarcating any as purely of interest to linguists, or to moral philosophers, metaethicists, logicians, etc. Naively, one might try saying, for example, that the concern of moral philosophers is the truth of first-order deontic claims, that of logicians is the relations of entailment between first-order deontic claims, that of metaethicists the underlying nature of the obligations (etc.) that make such claims true, and that of linguists the meaning and grammar of the words and sentences that contingently express these claims in different languages. But as each of these subdisciplines in the study of deontic modality has matured, it has become increasingly difficult to make meaningful progress in any one without a sophisticated grasp of the others, as this issue demonstrates. Indeed, it is our firm belief that the range of work represented in this issue represents only a thin crust on the rich stew of interconnected approaches across a range of disciplines. Because of space constraints, we were forced to leave out fascinating work on a much wider range of still closely interconnected topics. Still, we hope that this special issue takes one step toward the further dissolution of these increasingly artificial divisions, and thereby to new advances in our collective understanding of deontic modality.

School of Philosophy  
University of Southern California