Eliot Watkins

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AOS: Ethics, Philosophy of Language
AOC: Metaphysics, Epistemology, Logic

Employment

2023-   Postdoctoral Appointment, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Education

2018-2023   Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ph.D. in Philosophy
Minor: Linguistics
Dissertation: *Within 'Reason': A Study of Normative Language*
Committee: Justin Khoo (chair), Kieran Setiya, Brad Skow, Jack Spencer

Abstract: We make claims about oughts, musts and reasons all the time. 'I ought to give more money to charity.' 'She must finish her grading by tomorrow.' 'You have no reason to avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk.' 'There's more reason to tear that bandaid off quickly than to tear it off slowly.' But what do sentences like these mean? The goal of my dissertation is to shed light on this semantic question while illuminating various problems in ethics along the way. The picture of normative talk that I develop across the thesis has a distinctive feature: the notion of *a* reason – roughly, a fact that counts in favour of something – isn't given any fundamental role to play. Instead, the meanings of 'ought', 'must' and 'is a reason for...' are all ultimately cashed out in terms of facts about *how much* reason we have to do various things. It's this gradable notion – the notion of there being some amount of reason to act – that drives our talk about the normative world.

2014-2017   University of Cambridge, Downing College, B.A. in Philosophy
First Class Honours
Thesis: *Expressivism and Minimal Truth*

Papers Under Review or In Preparation

(Under Review; R&R at AJP)   'Reasons for Non-Agents'

(Under Review)   'How to be Reasonable About the Meaning of *Ought*'

(In Preparation)   'A Critique of Pure Reasons'

Talks and Presentations

2023   'Reason and Reasonableness', St Louis Annual Conference on Reasons and Rationality *(peer reviewed)*

2023   'The Future of Fact-Checking' (with Abigail Thwaites), MIT Future of Computing Finals *(peer reviewed)*

2023   'Reasons for Non-Agents', MIT Work in Progress Series

2022   'You Ought To Do What You Have Most Reason To Do', MIT Work in Progress Series

2022   'On Moral Justification', comments on Sherri Lynn Conklin's 'On the metaphysics of moral justification', Eastern APA

2020   'What Does 'Reason' Mean?', MIT Work in Progress Series

Teaching

<u>As a Primary Instructor / Lecturer</u>

Fall 2023   *Problems of Philosophy*, MIT

Spring 2024   *Being, Thinking, Doing (Or Not)*, co-taught, MIT

Spring 2022   *Philosophy of Religion*, Spencer, MIT

Fall 2021   *Moral Problems and the Good Life*, T. Byrne, MIT

Spring 2021   *Paradox and Infinity*, Rayo, MIT

Fall 2020   *Problems of Philosophy*, A. Byrne, MIT

Spring 2020   *Foundations of Probability*, White, MIT

Fall 2019   *Moral Problems and the Good Life*, Setiya, MIT

Other Teaching

2022   'Is Morality a Matter of Opinion?' (with Kenneth Black), Course developed for MIT Splash

2022   'The Meaning of Life', Guest Lecture for *Philosophy of Religion*, MIT

2021   'David Lewis on Punishment', Guest Lecture for *Moral Problems and the Good Life*, MIT

2020   'Sense Data' (with Abi Thwaites), two video Guest Lectures for *Problems of Philosophy*, MIT

2019   'Singer on Animal Liberation', Guest Lecture for *Moral Problems and the Good Life*, MIT

Awards

2023   MIT's Envisioning the Future of Computing Prize Runner-Up (with Abigail Thwaites), Award of $5000, for 'The Future of Fact-Checking'

2018   MIT Presidential Fellowship

Awards (continued)

2017	Winifred Georgina Holgate Pollard Memorial Prize, University of Cambridge
2017	Elected to Foundation Scholar, Downing College, University of Cambridge
2015-17	Seton Cavendish Prize Winner, Downing College, University of Cambridge, for performance in Part IA, Part IB and Part II of the Philosophy Tripos.
2015	Platt Prize, Downing College, University of Cambridge

Service

2022	Referee for *Inquiry*
2022	Co-Organiser of MITing of the Minds Alumni Conference, MIT
2021	Founder of *Reasons First* (Mark Schroeder) Reading Group, MIT
2021	Founder of *The Modal Future* (Fabrizio Cariani) Reading Group, MIT
2020	Graduate Representative, MIT
2020	Co-Organiser of Prospective Visits, MIT
2018-2021	Co-Organiser of MIT's Epistemology Reading Group (ERG)
2017	Co-Organiser of the Amoral Sciences Club, University of Cambridge

Graduate Coursework

Fall 2021	*Decision Theory*, Spencer & Fitelson, audited
Fall 2020	*Conditionals*, Khoo, von Fintel & Iatridou

Graduate Coursework (continued)

Spring 2020   *Indeterminacy*, Khoo & Spencer

Spring 2020   *Advanced Semantics*, von Fintel

Fall 2019   *Introduction to Semantics*, Hackl & Schwarzschild

Fall 2019   *Modern Moral Philosophy and the History of Ethics*, Setiya & Doyle

Spring 2019   *Reasons for Action*, Setiya

Spring 2019   *Beyond Truth-Conditions*, Khoo & Yablo

Spring 2019   *Proseminar II: Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, Hare & Skow

Fall 2018   *Topics in the History of Philosophy: Hume*, Van Cleve

Fall 2018   *Deflationism about Truth and Reference*, McGee

Fall 2018   *Proseminar I: Early Analytic Philosophy*, Byrne & White

References

Justin Khoo, jkhoo@mit.edu

Kieran Setiya, ksetiya@mit.edu

Jack Spencer, jackspen@mit.edu

Brad Skow, bskow@mit.edu

Agustín Rayo (teaching reference), arayo@mit.edu

Dissertation Summary

I ought to give more money to charity. I have to grade these papers by tomorrow. I should not be late to appointments. I must not steal money from my friends. There are good reasons for me to become a vegan. There's some reason for me to be distrustful of politicians. There is no reason for me to avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk. I have more reason to tear the bandaid off quickly than to tear it off slowly.

We turn to normative claims like these when we deliberate, advise, praise and chastise. Within philosophy, we appeal to reasons and oughts to state our theses and build our theories. But what do such claims *mean*? The primary goal of my dissertation is to shed light on that semantic question.

The three chapters of my thesis are unified by their focus on the ways in which we talk about what there's reason to do. But the picture of normative talk that I develop there has a distinctive feature: the notion of *a* reason – roughly, a fact that counts in favour of something – isn't given any fundamental role to play. Instead, this project's central idea is that the meanings of 'ought', 'must' and 'is a reason for…' should all be cashed out in terms of facts about how *much* reason we have to do various things. It's this gradable notion – the notion of there being some amount of reason to act – that drives our talk about the normative world.

There are upshots for both philosophy of language and ethics. For semanticists and philosophers of language, the dissertation includes a novel argument against the standard semantics for deontic modals, and a new analysis of the meaning of 'ought' and 'must' in terms of reason-to-act. For ethicists, the central upshots of the project include a case against the enduringly popular idea that reasons are normatively fundamental, as well as an argument to the conclusion that there are normative reasons for animals, plants and artefacts to behave in some ways and not others. This latter idea has especially important metaethical consequences: the possibility of reasons for non-agents shows that we ought not analyse normative reasons in terms of distinctively agential capacities, like the standards of good practical reasoning.

Chapter One: How to be Reasonable About the Meaning of 'Ought'

Take a look at the following two popular and plausible principles. *First principle*: facts about what you ought to do are tightly bound-up with facts about what you have reason to do. For example, if you ought to watch *Oppenheimer*, then there must be more reason for you to watch *Oppenheimer* than for you not to watch it. *Second principle*: ought is 'upwards monotonic' – if it's true that you ought to Φ in some specific way, then you ought to Φ. If you ought to wear red socks today, then you ought to wear socks today. This second principle is not only plausible on its face, but also follows from the widely-endorsed, standard quantificational semantics for 'ought'.

I argue that these two independently plausible principles are, in fact, incompatible. Respecting the connections between reasons and ought requires giving up monotonicity, and so requires giving up the standard semantics for deontic modals. We need something new. I develop a non-monotonic semantics for 'ought' which builds the ought/reason connections right into the semantics itself, but

also explains why monotonicity looked so attractive in the first place. (The trick: 'have to' is monotonic, but 'ought' and 'should' are not).

Chapter Two: A Critique of Pure Reasons

Sometimes we use 'reason' as a count noun, to pick out facts in the world. For example: "the fact that you like Greta Gerwig is a reason for you to watch *Barbie*". Other times, we use 'reason' as a mass noun, to pick out something we can have more or less of. For example: "there is not much reason for you to watch *Oppenheimer*" or "there is more reason for you to watch *Barbie* than *Oppenheimer*".

It's natural to think that the count sense of 'reason' *comes first* – to think that the meaning of a comparative like 'there's more reason to watch *Barbie* than *Oppenheimer*' is comparing the weightiness of the particular reasons to watch one movie with the weightiness of the particular reasons to watch the other. I argue that this 'count fundamentalist' semantics is untenable – when we talk about what there's reason to do, we're not talking about the reasons there are.

I use this result to motivate a semantics for mass and count 'reason' which inverts the standard priority of reasons over reason. The central notion on this semantics isn't *there being a reason for S to Φ*, it's *there being some amount of reason for S to Φ*. I use this semantics to build an argument against the Reasons First programme (the enduringly popular idea that count noun reasons are normatively fundamental).

Chapter Three: Reasons for Non-Agents

According to a standard picture, normative reasons do not extend beyond the boundaries of agency. If something isn't an agent – if it can't do rudimentary practical reasoning, at the very least – then there can't be normative reasons for it to do one thing rather than another.

I reject the standard picture. In this chapter, I argue that there are reasons for non-agents to be certain ways and do certain things. There's good reason for the fence around my chicken coop to be tall, because if it were short my chickens would escape. If my kitchen is full of smoke, then there's a reason for my smoke detector to ring.

This has important consequences for theories of normative reasons. For one thing, we should not analyse what it is to be a reason by appealing to distinctively agential properties or capacities, like the standards of good practical reasoning. Instead, I suggest, all one needs to get reason-ascriptions going is some kind of teleology. There's a reason for my smoke alarm to go off in the presence of fire because that's what smoke alarms do when they're functioning well.

The conclusion looming, perhaps, is that we human beings also have normative reasons in virtue of our natural function(s) — in virtue of facts about the kind of creatures we are. We seem to have been presented with a new argument for the kind of teleology-driven, Aristotelean theory of practical reason that Philippa Foot develops in *Natural Goodness*.