

JOANNA KLIMCZYK

## ‘OUGHT’, OWNERSHIP AND AGENTIVE OUGHT: REMARKS ON THE SEMANTIC MEANING OF ‘INDEXED OUGHT’

**Abstract.** Bernard Williams in his essay *Ought and moral obligation* (OMO) takes a stand on the proper logical interpretation of ‘ought’ sentences. He claims that ought being central to ethical reflection, that is, ought issuing personal requirements to agents, is to be interpreted like any ordinary ‘ought’ – as a propositional operator that is not indexed to a person. The driving idea behind Williams’s logical point about ‘ought’ seems to be that logical interpretation of ‘ought’ sentences with moral content in terms of indexed ought lacks semantic significance. John Broome disagrees. In a series of his recent writings devoted to an analysis of the notion of normative ought, he defends the view opposite to the one fostered by Williams. According to Broome, indexation of ‘ought’ to agent matters for extra-logical reasons; it is a way of exhibiting that ought has its normative owner, which in turn is important for determining the holder of responsibility for the ought in question.

In the paper I argue that Broome may be right, but his arguments do not show that fact. In particular, I claim that he is wrong in thinking that indexation in terms of ownership is useful in the analysis of ‘ought’ sentences with agentive content, and thus nicely applies to moral ought being a paradigmatic example of such sentences. According to my diagnosis, Broome’s positive view about the semantic and ethical significance of interpreting agentive ought as indexed ought, suffers from one central problem. It alludes to an unsuccessful substantive semantics of ‘indexed ought’ that fails to give an accurate explanation of the meaning of the ought in question. I conclude the paper by offering an alternative to Broome’s substantive semantics of ‘indexed ought’, and explain why I think that it fares better in capturing the nature of the agentive ought.

**Keywords:** ‘ought’, indexed ought, owned ought, agentive ought, Broome, Williams

1. Introduction.
2. Why indexing ‘ought’ to a subject is deemed normatively informative.
3. Ownership and vagueness.
4. Why indexation in terms of ownership is semantically irrelevant overall.
5. What matters is authorship.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

John Broome believes that Bernard Williams, in his famous and influential paper *Ought and Moral Obligation* (OMO), makes a mistake of far-reaching consequences that results in blurring the correct understanding of ‘ought’ sentences. According to Broome, Williams neglects the option that oughts denoted by a propositional operator often are owned oughts. This omission, if Broome’s charge survives examination, is a serious one. Neglecting ownership of ought makes it difficult to understand who is the one that is failing in doing what she ought to do, and who, because of that failure, should be blamed for it. The problem to which Broome directs our attention is that ownership frames the correct account of personal obligation or “what you ought to do”, and this is at the centre of the agent’s rational reflection. Once ownership of ought is blurred, the whole idea of personal obligation becomes shaky.

Against Broome, and perhaps also against common intuition, I shall argue that this is not necessarily so. Of course, ownership of ought is important, since *if* relevant it shows exactly who is required to do what, and consequently it makes ascription of responsibility, and distribution of blame easy. However, not every owned ought justifies assigning responsibility to its owner, or at least justifies assigning the *relevant* responsibility to its owner, i.e., the responsibility that matters when it comes to establishing the ultimate holder of accountability for satisfying the ought in question.<sup>1</sup> But sometimes there are owned oughts whose normative status is uncertain,<sup>2</sup> and these usually appear in the deliberative context, where specificity of the circumstances requires that some agent or agents perform

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1 In what follows I often call the relevant responsibility ‘comprehensive responsibility’ and motivate my choice of the name in due course.

2 By ‘normative status’ I mean whether the person to whom ought is indexed is its genuine and relevant owner.

or do not perform a particular action; yet in lack of information about *who* is under the requirement in question, the ought becomes voluntarily 'adopted' by a person. Since this adoption is *ad hoc*, it is far from obvious that it makes the person who adopts it the normative and *relevant* owner of it. But if indexation in terms of ownership is not reliably indicative of the bearer of responsibility for the ought in question, Broome's complaint about Williams's insensitivity to semantic significance of indexing ought to an agent is exaggerated. I contend that ownership is the crucial information we want to glean, otherwise, why bother about whether agential 'ought' sentences like 'Alison ought to get a sun hat'<sup>3</sup> are more accurately interpreted in terms of indexed oughts than as unindexed oughts?

If interpreting an 'ought' sentence with agentive<sup>4</sup> content, in terms of indexed 'ought', where indexation marks a substantive relation of ownership between the person to whom the 'ought' is indexed, and the ought does not tell us anything decisive about *who* is the normative<sup>5</sup> and *relevant* agent of that ought, why care, as Broome does, about deficiency of English grammar in order to make ownership *explicit*? Crudely, why draw so much attention to the grammatical representation of owned ought, if ascribing ought to some person *itself* is devoid of substantive semantic content indicating the normative relevance of that ownership? These two questions organise my critical assessment of Broome's speculations about the substantive meaning of indexation in terms of ownership.

The paper is divided into four sections. In section 1 I present the core of Broome's criticism, targeted at William's view in OMO, that indexing ought to an agent does not matter in logical

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3 This sentence is a toy example of owned ought in J. Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning*, Chichester 2013.

4 Judging by examples introduced by Broome in his book J. Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning*, op. cit. I assume that agentive ought is the central normative ought, that is, ought characterized in terms of owned ought.

5 By 'normative agent' I mean the holder of the responsibility for the ought in question.

interpretation of the moral sense of the ‘ought’ claim. I find the criticism important, as it draws attention to a methodological issue about what makes up a successful theory of the meaning of normative ‘ought’ sentences. The issue in question is that we should expect a logical interpretation of an ‘ought’ sentence to give the most accurate account of the sentence’s meaning. If indexing ought to the agent does indeed matter in order to express agentive sense of ‘ought’, then we should propose logical and grammatical interpretation that will do justice to this significance. However much I agree with that observation, I still argue that Broome failed to show that indexation in terms of ownership really helps to bring out the relevant normative sense of the ‘ought’ claim. Section 2 builds upon establishments in section 1, and is focused on displaying the main problems that arise when we try to account for the nature of the central normative ought in terms of owned ought. The central difficulty that we face is that we do not know what exact feature of normative ought that owned ought is meant to accurately capture. I show that the positive suggestion that we are given, namely that ownership is connected with responsibility, brings more confusion than clarity, since responsibility is varied, and alluding to ownership does not make it clear what sort of responsibility matters when we try to explain the nature of agentive ought. Here, I make use of Broome’s own examples to support my core claim that indexing ‘ought’ to an agent, and interpreting it in terms of a requirement that ‘belongs’ to a person *would* be ethically informative, if ownership *could* serve as a reliable mark of the relevant responsibility. That is, I claim, owned ought would be a good explanation of the agentive ought worthy to be given its own grammatical interpretation *if* knowing the owner of ought would be equivalent to knowing the holder of the *relevant* responsibility for it. However, I argue that this expectation is too high to be satisfied, since the same ought can, at the same time, have two owners holding differing responsibility in the case of not

conforming to the ought in question.<sup>6</sup> Section 3 discusses two further worries for Broome's core claim that indexation of ought is of genuine semantic significance. The worries in question arise if owned ought is interpreted as a propositional ought. In section 4 I propose my own version of substantive semantics for 'indexed ought', and explain why I think it does better in capturing our semantic intuitions about the meaning of agentive 'ought'. I also sketchily show how this substantive interpretation is nicely accommodated by the standard semantics for 'ought', in which 'ought' is treated as propositional operator.

## 2. WHY INDEXING 'OUGHT' TO A SUBJECT IS DEEMED NORMATIVELY INFORMATIVE

In his *Ought and moral obligation*<sup>7</sup> essay, Bernard Williams articulates a thesis about the logical structure of 'ought' sentences that are of utmost significance to ethics, namely agential 'ought' sentences with truly practical content. According to this thesis, sentences expressing moral obligations like 'Peter ought to help Jim' are to be logically interpreted as *any* ordinary 'ought' sentence, say, the sentence 'Larry ought to win the lottery', or 'Joan ought to buy a newspaper'. If moral oughts are not logically special in comparison to non-moral oughts, then they are supposed to have the same logical structure, which, in the light of establishments in linguistics and modal semantics, is the structure in which 'ought' governs on a proposition. That is to say, sentences saying what an agent *morally* ought to do can always be correctly interpreted as unindexed oughts, in the same manner that non-normative 'ought' sentences are typically interpreted. For

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6 The difference in responsibility is to be construed in terms of the normative sanctions awaiting the owner if she fails to satisfy the ought in question.

7 B. Williams, *Ought and moral obligation*, in: B. Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge 1981, 114–123.

example, the sentence ‘Peter ought to help Jim’ is to be properly interpreted as ‘It ought to be (the case) that Peter will help Jim’.

On Broome’s diagnosis laid out in his 2012 essay,<sup>8</sup> Williams’s view on the logical structure of ‘ought’ sentences with moral content is *not* an innocent logical claim about ‘ought’, but a claim with substantive, yet overlooked, consequences for meta-ethical theorising in general. Granting Williams’s thesis, we assert something more than a platitudinal claim in linguistics, saying that ‘ought’ denotes a propositional operator. In particular, we subscribe ourselves (though perhaps unconsciously) to a substantive and patently false view that *all* oughts, moral oughts included, lack addressees. In Broome’s terminology these are *unowned* oughts, which are, at best, oughts of general desirability: they tell us what states of affairs are desirable in order to obtain, but not what agents should do. Now, if moral oughts are logically not special, in comparison to other sorts of ought – which implies that they are to be cashed out in terms of unindexed oughts – it follows that moral oughts belong to no one in particular. If we accept this conclusion, we must also agree that the sentence like ‘Peter ought to help Jim’ admits of *no* interpretation on which *Peter* is somehow morally responsible for helping Jim. If ‘ought to help Jim’ is an unindexed propositional operator, correctly represented by the sentence of the general form  $O(p)$ , then violating the ought in question precludes sensibility of holding the violator responsible for not conforming to the ought in question, because that ought has not been ascribed to *her* in the first place.

According to Broome, Williams’s logical point on the behaviour of ‘ought’, when generalised, has strong consequences of ethical significance, specifically that moral oughts whose proper logical interpretation makes no room for an agent argument-place, have no owners. Call the general view saying that logical interpretation

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8 J. Broome, *Williams on Ought*, in: *Luck, Value and Commitment. Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, ed. U. Heurer, G. Lang, Oxford 2012, 247–268.

of normative 'ought' in terms of indexed ought has ethical significance (*ethical sensitivity of logical structure*, or *ESLS*), and ascribe it to Broome in his 2012 essay. By 'ethical significance' I mean that the logical structure is informative about the normative<sup>9</sup> agent of the ought in question. And call the reverse thesis, that I think Williams holds in OMO, about the ethical irrelevance of interpreting moral ought in terms of indexed ought (*ethical insensitivity of logical structure*, or *EILS*). It is the central aim of the paper to demonstrate that *ESLS* might be true, but Broome's arguments do not show this.

In a nutshell, I will argue that Broome is right, that indexing 'ought' to an agent is relevant to the sentence's proper normative interpretation, but indexation interpreted in terms of ownership is not. In other words, I will argue that indexing of 'ought' to an agent is irrelevant *unless* we propose a *plausible* substantive interpretation of that relation. However, Broome's interpretation fails on that score, and its failure is two-pronged. Firstly, it fails to account for the very nature of personal requirement, which is associated with the idea of personal responsibility. In particular, I claim that Broome's unsuccessful explanation of the specificity of personal requirement, has to do with his neglecting the fact that responsibility is not a uniform concept. Some kinds of responsibility differ in terms of normative evaluation, and if ownership is to indicate that responsibility is in play, this is too little to let us infer the exact normative sense of the sentence. Call this the *philosophical* objection to Broome's proposal. Secondly, despite what it promises, Broome's account fails to give an unambiguous grammatical representation of the owned ought, that is *normatively* relevant. Call this second objection the *formal* objection. These two complaints remain in force independently of each other. Even if my philosophical objection proves unconvincing, the formal one goes through. Interestingly though, the deficiency of Broome's argument

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9 I use the expression 'normative agent' to refer to the agent who is the bearer of responsibility for the ought in question.

in favour of *ESLS* – the claim that ownership of ought matters for the purpose of knowing the normative and relevant agent of the ought in question – points to a virtue of Williams’s considerations against *ESLS*. Williams holds that for extracting the moral sense of ‘ought’, indexing ‘ought’ to an agent is not needed, *because* what is at issue is not the *personal* connection between the ought and the agent, but just the representation of what is to be done. Crudely, I take it that Williams and Broome disagree with each other on two levels. They part company with each other in their favourite *metasemantics* of ‘indexed ought’, i.e. they disagree as to what sort of *substantive* meaning indexed ‘ought’ should effectively represent, and admittedly they disagree in their preferred *semantics* of ‘indexed ‘ought’, i.e. the particular substantive meaning they assign to indexing ought to an agent, grammatically translated by sentences of the form ‘S ought to *phi*’.

Interestingly, their disagreement about what substantive relation indexation stands for – ownership of ought *vs.* motivational connection to ought – determines the scope of applicability of indexed ‘ought’, in representing the meaning of normative ‘ought’ claims. Broome’s conception of indexation in terms of ownership is meant to capture *any* agentive sense of ‘ought’, whereas Williams’s idea of indexation in terms of motivation allows for interpreting a narrow type of agentive ought – the deliberative one. If that is so, then these two philosophers’ differing views on metasemantics and semantics of indexed ‘ought’, inform the crucial difference in their views, regarding the nature of normativity assigned to the workaday concept of normative ought. For Broome, normativity accounted for in terms of owned ought, describes the agent’s normative position; it simply shows what is required of her. For Williams, on the other hand, normativity that is interpretable in terms of indexed ought, serves to expose the agent’s motivational connection with the ought in question. I take this as an explanation of why he thinks that indexing ‘ought’ to agent is logically and semantically relevant, when *deliberative* ought is at



stake, i.e. ought whose normative attraction comes from its relation to the agent's aims or concerns. If I understand their dialectics correctly, Broome and Williams differ in their views in terms of the scope of semantic significance of the agent-argument place, in logical interpretation of normative 'ought' sentences. So, properly speaking, the dispute between these two philosophers is not so much about whether *ESLS* wins over *EILS*, as I initially suggested, but about whether logically and grammatically unarticulated indexation of ought to an agent, does have significant semantic consequences. Broome holds that it does, since in his view, indexing ought to a subject is equivalent to ascribing normative responsibility to her, which in turn is the hallmark of agentive ought being in play. If that is so, then it looks like the claim held by Broome is more accurately set out by *Ethical Significance of Indexing 'Ought' to Agent Thesis (ESIOTA)*, which is meant to apply to 'ought' sentences of the relevant sort, i.e. those expressing agentive ought. Here is my interpretation of *ESIOTA*:

Indexing ought to an agent is significant for ascribing normative responsibility to the person to whom 'ought' is indexed, *because* indexed 'ought' denotes owned ought.

Obviously, *ESIOTA* implies *ESLS*, since knowing who the bearer of responsibility for the ought in question is, means knowing that the ought expressed by the sentence in question is agentive.

Williams's view, on the other hand is more accurately represented, not by *EILS*, but by a constrained version of *ESLS*, which I call *Ethical Significance of Indexing 'Ought' to Agent for Representing Deliberative 'Ought'*. Roughly, *ESIOTRD* says that logical interpretation of ought, as indexed to the agent, is relevant in representing the deliberative sense of 'ought'.

If the above presentation of the flag claims held by Broome and Williams is correct, then the bone of contention between these two philosophers is the semantic significance of indexing 'ought' to an agent, in representing the relevant kind of normative content. Roughly, Williams thinks that indexation is useful in representing

the kind of normativity typically construed as agent-relative, when, what the agent ought to do, is essentially related to that agent's aims or concerns. Broome, on the other hand, thinks that indexed ought appropriately captures the essence of personal requirement itself, the situation when an agent is confronted with what she ought to do, where the relation between that which she ought to do, and her psychological, or axiological make up, is irrelevant. In summary, I take it that Broome's introduction of the notion of owned ought, was intended to capture the nature of the normative relation that arises, when an agent is the proper addressee of some ought.

Now, Williams's scepticism about the logical – and thereby semantic – significance of indexing 'ought' to an agent, in the case of sentences with moral content, finds support in a well-homed view in formal linguistics and deontic logic, that any sense of 'ought' is captured by the propositional ought. If moral ought is nothing special in this respect, then the moral sense of an 'ought' claim should also be captured by the propositional ought. Williams's potential argument in favour of irrelevance of the indexation of 'ought' to the agent, for the purpose of representing the moral sense of 'ought' might run as follows:

(Premise 1) It is a trivial point about the logical behaviour of 'ought' that 'ought' denotes a propositional operator.

(Premise 2) If 'ought' denotes a propositional operator, then *moral* ought denotes a propositional operator too, since any 'ought' does.

(Conclusion ) Since the paradigmatic logical interpretation of 'ought' is the one on which 'ought' is an unindexed propositional operator, and if moral ought is not logically special in this respect, then the paradigmatic interpretation of 'ought' also applies to it, meaning that moral 'ought' is an unindexed propositional operator.

The above-argument, as it stands, alludes to the logical properties of the word 'ought' construed as a modal verb, but it builds upon

two substantive convictions, one regarding the nature of normativity expressed by moral claims, and the other regarding the most apt grammatical representation of normativity associated with moral ought. In brief, these claims are: (i) the crux of moral normativity is primarily about what the state of affairs is to obtain, and not about *who* is required to do some action, and (ii) the moral content of 'ought' characterised in (i) should be adequately represented by sentences of the general form  $O(p)$ .

I think that Broome's reaction to the imagined argument that I ascribe to Williams, would be to accept its correctness on formal grounds, but to object to the assumption on which it is based, namely that logical behaviour of 'ought' is a good guide to the semantics of moral 'ought'. Specifically, I am inclined to think that Broome would question the view, that focusing on the logical behaviour of the word 'ought', treated as an ordinary modal operator attached to a proposition, is the proper way of identifying the interpretation of an 'ought' claim, when construed as expressing the concept of moral ought. I think that Broome might object to the argument in question by finding it 'gappy'. In particular, he might observe that the considered argument is problematic, because it divorces the logical interpretation of 'ought' from its semantics, i.e. the semantic meaning we are intent on representing by evoking a particular logical interpretation. However, that approach is methodologically misguided, since we do not interpret moral ought as a propositional ought *because* of what the dogmatic view in linguistics and modal logic teaches us, but because we believe that interpretation in terms of propositional ought allows us to understand the sentence's moral meaning.

Broome's complaint, upon my supposition, might continue by observing that interpreting 'ought' in terms of unindexed ought, fails badly in exposing the intuitive hallmark of moral ought, namely its agentive character. Moral oughts, upon commonsensical interpretation, are prescriptive, and targeted at contextually relevant

agents. Now, if unindexed ought fails to represent the practical sense of 'ought', then we are justified in having doubts that it captures the moral sense of 'ought' well, given that moral oughts are typically about what *agents* ought to do, and not about what ought to be done. When I hear the sentence 'Jim ought to help Kate' I do not understand it as being about what the state of affairs ought to be, but about what the agent named 'Jim' ought to do. Moreover, if we allude to another dogma in formal linguistics, namely that the logical form of a sentence is the bearer of the sentence's meaning, our main focus should be not on the logically admissible grammatical interpretation of ought, but on proposing the logical form, that most *adequately* reflects our understanding of the sentence's meaning. In other words, I think that Broome would be willing to reject my putative argument on Williams's part, not because what it says is false but because it conflicts with the methodological assumption underlying the proper metasemantics of normative 'ought' sentences, according to which logical interpretation of 'ought' should be in service of the content of the 'ought' claim we want to represent, and not the other way round, when representable content is constrained by the rules of a logical representation of a certain expression, in this case, 'ought'.

For that reason, I imagine, Broome might offer the following counterargument to the one presented above. To make it clear, the argument to come is not the one that Broome himself proposes but the one I offer as revealing where, on my understanding of his view, Williams's went wrong. Here is what it says:

Premise 1: The logical form of a sentence is the bearer of the sentence's meaning.

Premise 2: If the LF is the bearer of the sentence's meaning, it is justified to expect that the LF reflects the sentence's meaning most accurately.

Premise 3: The LF of an 'ought' sentence in which 'ought' is unindexed, does not express the meaning of an 'ought' sentence

with agentive content, because it does not identify the agent to be held responsible for conforming to the ought in question.

Conclusion: Unindexed ought is a bad interpretation of agentive ought.

At first blush, the above argument is convincing. If moral oughts are about what *agents* ought to do, then a logical interpretation that does not show the agentive nature of the ought in question is seriously defective. But from the fact that unindexed ought does not adequately represent the moral sense of 'ought', it does not yet follow that indexed ought automatically does. If, to simplify matters, indexing ought to an agent is a logical way of representing a normative relation that holds between the agent and some action, the preferred interpretation of the nature of that relation needs to be vindicated. Broome is of the opinion that the most apt interpretation of the nature of that relation is to be cashed out in terms of ownership. He explains his understanding of the notion of ownership's explanatory input by providing an analysis of a particular 'ought' sentence. He invites us to contrast the sentence 'Alison ought to get a sun hat' with the sentence 'Alex ought to get a severe punishment':

As I put it, the first (the sentence about Alison) ascribes ownership of an ought to Alison, whereas the second does not ascribe ownership of an ought to Alex. I cannot accurately describe the sort of ownership I am referring to. I could use other words. I could say that Alison is responsible for her getting a sun hat, or that she is at fault if she does not get a sun hat, but the words 'responsible' and 'fault' have various connotations that might lead you to misunderstand me. I could say that getting a sun hat is required *of* Alison; this is perhaps the most accurate way of conveying the idea of ownership.<sup>10</sup>

A few lines ahead he tries to clarify the sense of 'ownership' he has in mind. He alludes to the tradition of deontic logic where, as

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10 J. Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning*, op. cit., 13.

he writes, “owned oughts are commonly referred to as ‘personal obligations’”.

However, the clarification, instead of demystifying the sense of the word ‘ownership’, makes it more mysterious, because, I contend, the first quoted passage, as I understand it, suggests carefulness with respect to the connotations with ‘responsibility’ that the word ‘ownership’ might evoke. In contrast, the second quote contains a suggestion that owned ought can be happily translated in terms of personal obligation. Be that as it may, a snag lurks here. The difficulty is that the notion of personal obligation used in deontic logic and logic of agency, is commonly linked with the idea of responsibility simpliciter. I would characterise the responsibility in question as ‘rational responsibility’, that is, the sort of responsibility that it is rational to expect from an agent to bear, if it is true that she is required to do, or undo a particular action, or act. To cut a long story short, in the literature to which Broome refers, owned oughts would be explicitly construed as oughts that evoke connotations with responsibility and blame, that are not necessarily of moral character but rational: if *A* is required of *phi*-ing, then in case of intentional not-*phi*-ing, *A* is to be found guilty of not doing what she ought to have done. So, when in the first quote Broome shows some reservation about quickly connecting the notion of ownership that he uses, with the notion of responsibility, it is not clear what exactly he does not like about the straightforward association of owned ought with responsibility. I draw the reader’s attention to Broome’s somewhat obscure presentation of owned ought, because unless we have clarity about exactly what normative connotations that owned ought is supposed to elicit, we cannot responsibly say whether owned ought accurately accommodates our central intuitions, about what makes up the agentive ought.

### 3. OWNERSHIP AND VAGUENESS

Despite my lack of clarity regarding the very meaning of 'owned ought' that Broome works with, I assume that, ultimately, he links the notion of owned ought with the notion of responsibility. I also assume that the notion of responsibility is essentially connected with the notion of agentive ought, to the effect that, if it is true of the agent *A* that she ought to *phi*, then she is to be deemed responsible (at least to some extent) if she fails to *phi*. If these considerations are not faulty, then we are to embrace the conclusion that responsibility (a sort of) is a hallmark of personal obligation, and consequently the hallmark of owned ought (given these two expressions 'personal obligation' and 'owned ought' are to be used interchangeably).

Now, if owned ought is to be a fortunate interpretation of agentive ought, i.e. the sort of ought illustrated by Broome's sentence about Alison, we must make sure that the notion of ownership accommodates all crucial semantic properties associated with the notion of personal requirement – alias personal obligation. In particular, it is to be expected that the word 'ownership' captures the very connotations with responsibility that the expression 'personal requirement' captures. However, there is good reason to be sceptical about the success of that translational enterprise. To my mind, while the concept of 'personal requirement' makes it clear just on conceptual grounds, the individual who is accountable for not fulfilling the requirement in question, knowing the normatively relevant owner of ought is not straightforward. In other words, my first complaint about the idea of accounting for personal requirement, in terms of owned ought, is that given we establish that some ought is someone's personal requirement, we automatically know to whom the responsibility for conforming to that ought belongs. But in case of owned ought, things are not so easy. Assuming that Alison is the owner of 'ought to get a sun hat', we can still sensibly ask: 'But is she the proper addressee of the responsibility if she does not conform to that ought?'

Is it not possible that the true owner of the ought in question is, say, Alison's mother, who ought to see to it that her daughter's scalp is protected from the sun? Note that an analogous question addressed to Alison, of whom we know from elsewhere that she is under the personal obligation to get a sun hat, is not a fortunate one. Further questioning about the identity of the holder of responsibility is linguistically blocked, when ought is construed under the name of 'personal requirement' or 'personal obligation', but it is open when the same ought is interpreted in the fashion favoured by Broome, namely as owned ought. If this 'home-baked' version of the open question argument is defensible, as I think it is, it points to a worry that owned ought is not a good translation of agentive ought, i.e. the ought most accurately construed in terms of personal requirement. The 'further questioning' test, as we may also name it, shows when we take into account that the expression 'ownership of ought' has vague normative intension, whereas 'addressee of the requirement' does not. But if owned ought is not an accurate translation of agentive ought simpliciter, a natural question to raise is this: what exactly aspect of the normative ought the owned ought is supposed to successfully account for? As it will remain to be shown, Broome's elucidations do not offer a clear answer to that fundamental question, which I find to be the most serious flaw in his proposal.

To appreciate the worry regarding lack of clarity about the feature of the normative ought that is taken to be "our workaday concept", which owned ought is to effectively capture, compare the 'Alison' sentence with another sentence borrowed from Broome 'The deck-hand ought to close the hatch'.<sup>11</sup>

Following Broome, let us assume that both sentences ascribe ownership. The first ascribes ownership of ought to Alison, and it seems that the second also ascribes ownership, but to the deck-hand. What supports the articulated intuition in the case of the deck-hand

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.



sentence, is the observation that the considered ought is an example of an agentive ought. Just as the sentence about Alison tells us what Alison ought to do, likewise the sentence about the deck-hand says what the deck-hand ought to do. However, despite the fact that the deck-hand-sentence says what the *deck-hand ought to do*, it does not ascribe ownership of ought to him, but to an agent not mentioned in the sentence – the captain. This conclusion is made according to Broome, because on most natural readings, the captain is the person who ought to see to it that the deck-hand closes the hatch. Expressed in my own terminology, we will say that the captain is the normatively relevant owner of that ought. But acceptance of that conclusion presses a couple of important questions to immediate answer, the most natural one being that of why the two evidently agentive ‘ought’ sentences differ essentially, with respect to whom ownership of ought is assigned. This latter question is of particular importance, if we assume that both sentences under consideration are correctly interpreted as assigning responsibility to the person occupying the place of the grammatical subject of the respective sentence. Just as it is true that *Alison* is responsible for getting a sun hat (given that the sentence is true), it is true that *the deck-hand* is responsible for closing the hatch, since closing the hatch, on a sensible assumption has been commissioned to her. However, Broome seems to think that the difference in the sort of responsibility accrued to Alison and the deck-hand respectively, makes it so that ‘ought to get a sun hat’ is owned by Alison, but ‘ought to close the hatch’ does not truly ‘belong’ to the deck-hand. Be that as it may, we need an explanation why this is so, and more importantly, we need to be told how to know when ‘genuine’<sup>12</sup> ownership is at stake. In particular, we are justified to expect answers to four basic questions: (1) Why is the type of responsibility relevant when establishing ownership of ought in the case of the Alison-sentence

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12 By ‘genuine ownership’ I mean the ownership that is relevant for assessing the responsibility in cases where ought is not fulfilled.

and the deck-hand sentence, but this relevance is not marked in Broome's explanation of what 'ownership' means? (2) Does the strictness of normative consequences for not fulfilling the ought in question determine the type of responsibility indicative of ownership involved? (3) Is there any general rule governing whether an 'ought' sentence ascribes relevant ownership to some person, or not? (4) Finally, in light of responsibility-relevance thesis (RRT), as I name the claim articulated in question (1), about the putative dependence of ownership on responsibility of the relevant sort: Is the operative method of determining whether an 'ought' sentence really assigns ownership of ought to an agent or not, to *contrast* the considered sentence with some other 'ought' sentence with agentive content which clearly does assign ownership to an agent, and then to make a lucky guess upon comparison of the normative sense expressed by the two sentences in question? In other words, the idea presented in (4) is that if you do not know whether an 'ought' sentence assigns ownership of ought to an agent, you are advised to compare it with a sentence that clearly does, and another that clearly does not, and next, upon rough calibration, decide whether the normative sense of 'ought' in the analysed sentence is closer to the sense of the sentence expressing owned ought, than to the sentence expressing unowned ought.

Textual evidence suggests that such a method has been adopted by Broome in his 2013 book, and is deemed satisfactory by him. The reason to think so is that nowhere does he state, explicitly and positively, how ownership is to be understood. Instead, he either mentions how it should not be construed (for instance, it should not be reduced to agency p. 21), or places credence in the informative role of examples (for example, when he suggests that we tend to intuitively recognise whether an 'ought' sentence ascribes ownership to an agent<sup>13</sup> or not), when he contrasts the Alison-sentence with Alex-sentence

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<sup>13</sup> Typically the agent is denoted by the person who occupies the place of the grammatical subject of the sentence, but there are exceptions to this rule, as illustrated by the 'ought'

(‘Alex ought to get a severe punishment’). The central flaw of this contrastivist strategy, beside the fact that it is not a *method*, since we are provided with no criterion that could tell us when actually ownership is the case and when it is not, is that it roughly works when one of the compared sentences clearly ascribes ownership, and the other clearly does not. Unfortunately, the strategy badly fails when we juxtapose sentences expressing agentive oughts, like the Alison-sentence and the deck-hand sentence. The problem appears, as I have shown, because if ownership is associated with responsibility simpliciter, then both sentences ascribe responsibilities to the subject of ‘ought’, and if, as Broome thinks, only one of them ascribes ownership to its subject, we do not know why this happens. Even worse, we are to remain in the dark on that point since Broome’s conception is not sufficiently fine-grained to answer to that worry. Here, one proviso is in order. When I claim that Broome leaves us with no explanation of how Alison might be taken as the owner of ‘ought to get a sun hat’ yet treating the deck-hand as the owner of ‘ought to close the hatch’ would be a mistake it is that his *conception as it stands* does not address this worry, and *not* that his dialectics leaves no suggestion about his preferred answer. I will first tell what the answer seems to me to be, and next explain why I find it unsatisfactory.

Returning to the deck-hand sentence, what makes the sort of oughts like ‘ought to close the hatch’ incontestable owned oughts, though tricky ones, is their evident status of personal obligations, associated with certain professional, or social roles. How can we learn that some oughts, like the one considered, are owned, not by the person indicated by the sentence, but by some other? Well, this requires, upon my conjecture of Broome’s possible answer, some knowledge about the world, as such, and about the normative

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sentence: ‘The deck-hand ought to close the hatch’ which, on Broome’s interpretation, ascribes ownership to the captain.

structures within it. In order to know that the captain is the owner of 'ought to close the hatch' we must assume prior knowledge about the hierarchical and strictly regulated nature of actions onboard a ship. If we have a rough orientation about the division of tasks on the ship, we can deduce that whoever is responsible for some failure in her job, she is rarely guilty alone. Typically, responsibility for the failure is shared between her, and her supervisor. I think that this sort of answer strikes as intuitively accurate and satisfactory. But its success, I contend, is limited.

It works when 'ought' sentences under consideration deal with familiar normative landscapes, but what about the sentence 'The third-assistant of the jaw surgeon ought to check that all chirurgical instruments are ready'? How are we to know to whom the sentence in question assigns ownership? Linguistic material suggests that ought is owned by the third-assistant of the jaw surgeon, but we cannot trust the grammar, as it is heavily deceptive on that point (think again about the deck-hand sentence). In the sentence in question, it is spurious to refer to some operative knowledge about the organisation of health institutions, since whatever we know about the work of surgeons, we have no idea about the number of assistants that surgeons are supposed to have during operation. Does it vary across medical specialisations, type of surgery, or the prestige of a surgeon? Or, perhaps it is dependent upon all the mentioned factors, yet is not subject to internal regulations being more a matter of convention, or decision of the head of the medical department? It is sensible to assume that most of us have hardly any idea whether the considered sentence is true or false. However, not knowing whether the sentence under consideration states a falsehood or a truth, is a serious obstacle in establishing whether the sentence assigns ownership to anyone, or not. Interestingly, this obstacle is something new. Note that not knowing whether the sentence 'Alison ought to get a sun hat' expresses truth or not, does not affect the sensibility of assigning ownership to Alison. But it seems that a lack of relevant information

about the normative regulations that determine the duties of a deck-hand, captain, jaw bone surgeon and jaw bone surgeon's assistant does undermine sensibility of evaluating the sentences' normative meanings in terms of admitted ownership. How can we responsibly say whether in the third-assistant – sentence ought is owned, and if yes, to whom, if we are in the dark about how the jaw surgeon's workplace is organised? In particular, we do not have information about the number of jaw bone surgeon assistants and their list of duties. If these remarks are sensible, then they point to another weakness in Broome's idea of accounting for the central normative ought in terms of owned ought, it turns out that we cannot discern ownership from the sentence's meaning<sup>14</sup> alone which, as I take it, was intended to be feasible. Recall again his contrasting Alison- and Alex-sentences. The comparison was supposed to illustrate how easy recognising ownership is. Moreover, and more importantly, we have every reason to expect gleaning ownership from the deciphered content to be possible, because it is part of our understanding of the meaning of agentive ought, that we are able to ascribe responsibility for it to some person, only on the basis of the linguistic material *without* having evidence that she is the relevant bearer of responsibility. But in the case of 'ought' sentences that are about demands about which we only have a very hazy idea of, knowing their truth conditions may turn to be indispensable for a reliable assignment of ownership of ought. Assume that there is no such position as a jaw surgeon's third assistant at all. How would that information affect our interpretation of ought that the sentence expresses in terms of owned ought? Should we say that the ought is owned (because this is what our intuition suggest: ultimately, is not it true that *someone* must be in control of all medical instruments to be used during the surgery?), but we do not know by

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14 Here, by meaning, I refer to the information the sentence conveys, or something that is the object of propositional attitudes.

whom? Or, rather, should we say that it is unowned because what it says is not true?

I think that this question has no clear answer; more importantly, it is unanswerable with Broome's resources. If we choose the 'owned' option, because this is what our intuition tells us, then we prioritise owned interpretation over unowned, in the situation of significant ignorance. More precisely, we operate on a hunch, basing our verdict upon the information conveyed by the sentence, and upon the sentence's surface grammar. On the other hand, if we choose the 'unowned' option, which is a more sophisticated one, we proceed 'illegally', so to speak, because we have not settled the crucial issue in the metaphysics of propositional content, i.e. does a false sentence assign ownership to anyone?

#### 4. WHY INDEXATION IN TERMS OF OWNERSHIP IS SEMANTICALLY IRRELEVANT OVERALL

In previous sections I juxtaposed two opposite claims: indexing ought to an agent is of significant semantic consequence; or in opposition, it is not (or more precisely put, that it is not, in the case of sentences of the relevant sort, i.e. moral 'ought' sentences widely held as a paradigmatic example of agentive ought). The former view I ascribed to Broome, and the latter to Williams in *OMO*. I have also voiced the opinion that indexing ought to an agent, as such, is a semantically neutral relation, that is, no substantive conclusion can be drawn from stipulating that ought is indexed to some agent. This section consists of two parts. In the first part I present an argument showing that interpreting the meaning of an 'ought' sentence, in terms of ought indexed to an agent, is semantically neutral on grammatical grounds. And *if* that neutrality becomes problematic, since some sort of content – agentive content – is badly transmitted by a particular syntax, we need a counterproposal that fixes the defect. That is, we need a grammatical interpretation of the 'misrepresented' normative

content, that is free from the weaknesses of the interpretation in which ought is unindexed. Crudely put, if we want to make it as clear as possible that a sentence like 'Alison ought to get a sun hat' is to be most accurately interpreted as being about what *Alison ought to do*, and not about what state of affairs should obtain, we need a proper grammatical interpretation of the logical form in which 'ought' is indexed to the agent. The grammatical interpretation that we look for is expected to give us agentive, or owned content straight away. In the second part of this section I will argue that Broome's interpretation suffers from the very same defect that it was meant to avoid, specifically, it does not provide an unambiguous representation of owned ought. If owned ought is all about personal responsibility for satisfying the ought in question, Broome's refurbished grammar fails to deliver an unambiguous answer to the question of who the bearer of responsibility for the ought in question is.

The argument against the relevance of indexing ought to a subject is inspired by Broome's stipulation set out in his book<sup>15</sup> that, on my understanding, says: *for the relevant type of 'ought' sentences expressing agentive ought*<sup>16</sup>, typically represented by sentences of the form 'S ought to *phi*', S denotes the owner of ought. Before I propose the argument I labelled *indexation irrelevance thesis*, some clarification may be of help. Indexing ought to a subject is a technical expression of semanticists, used to convey the information that ought is ascribed to that subject, which in turn is further logically interpreted as indexing 'ought' to a subject, and grammatically translated by the sentence with a marked argument place for the subject of 'ought', to the general effect 'S ought to *phi*'. These terminological issues are important, because they help us to see that the relation of indexation (in non-technical

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15 J. Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning*, op. cit., 14.

16 This constraint is important, since we want, somehow, to discriminate Alison-like 'ought' sentences from deck-hand-like 'ought' sentences. Both have all the appearances of being owned, but on Broome's assumption only the Alison-sentence warrants a direct assignment of ownership of ought.

language: ascription of ought to a person), as well as logical and grammatical representations of the relation of indexation, are two differing notions that should not be blended together. Grammatical structure may make agent-argument place salient, but the salience in question needs interpretation. Natural language sentences do not have standing logical forms. Rather, logical forms are ways of making sentences' meanings exact, and possibly the least ambiguous.<sup>17</sup>

To recap the main points of the above remarks: Indexed 'ought' is not a guarantee of indexed ought. And indexed ought is not necessarily an owned ought, since *ownership* is a substantive interpretation of 'indexed ought'. A quick illustration: The sentence 'Alison ought to get a sun hat' may be interpreted as having the logical structure in which 'ought' is indexed to Alison  $AO(p)$  but that is not necessarily an interpretation that gives an accurate picture of the sentence's reality, since *Alison* stands in the normative relation to the proposition *that she will get a sun hat*. As Broome himself stresses, it is quite a common phenomenon that surface logical form leads us astray, suggesting a meaning which is opposite to the one that sentence really has. So nothing stands in the way of the Alison-sentence having, in reality, non-agentive sense, most properly expressed by the sentence  $O(p)$ . Finally, and crucially for my discussion in this paper, assigning ought to Alison on agentive reading of the Alison-sentence is semantically neutral. In other words, assigning ought to an agent is not equivalent to ascribing ownership of the ought in question to her, as long as we are not delivered a separate argument in favour of such equivalence. Normally, we expect of an argument of the considered sort to have some explanatory value. And we expect

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17 See W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge 1960; W. V. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, *The Journal of Philosophy* 65(1968)7, 185–212. For the historical discussion of the idea of logical form see M. Sainsbury, *Logical Forms: An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*, Oxford 1991. Scepticism about natural language sentences having logical forms at all is issued in Z.G. Szabó *Against Logical Form*, in: *Donald Davidson on Truth, Meaning and the Mental*, ed. G. Preyer, Oxford 2012, 108.



of a good argument of the considered sort that it will have substantial explanatory value. If my considerations in previous sections are not mistaken, then interpreting indexed ought as owned ought, when analysing 'ought' sentences of the relevant sort, is not explanatory effective to the extent that we are justified to expect. In particular, if owned ought was meant to capture the essence of the agentive ought that resides in the agent's relevant responsibility<sup>18</sup>, then the enterprise has collapsed, since the word 'ownership', when associated with the word 'ought' used in its normative sense, is proven to have vague intension.

Leaving aside my criticism regarding fruitfulness of exploring the nature of the central normative ought, through exercising connotations associated with the word 'ownership', why do I devote space to the terminological subtleties of various senses of the term 'indexation'? 'Indexation' has various interpretations. Sometimes it is used to indicate that a relation between an agent and ought obtains (think here of 'indexation' as a placeholder for the general description that ought is related to the agent). At other times, 'indexation' refers to the grammatical, or logical interpretation of a connection between a person and an ought. But if 'indexation' is used as both a *de re* and a *de dicto* term, then in order to understand and evaluate Broome's suggestion that indexation in terms of ownership reveals the true nature of the agentive ought, we must have clarity about whether he uses 'indexed' as a *de re* term or as *de dicto* term. I admit that I am not sure which use fits Broome's intention best. Does he want to say that the relation of indexing ought to a subject *is* to be understood in terms of a relation ascribing ownership of ought to the subject? Or does he want to say that we should interpret logical representation of indexing ought to an agent in terms of the relation assigning ownership of ought to that subject? The difference in the interpretation

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18 By 'relevant responsibility' I mean the responsibility that settles that ought is owned, in Broome's terminology.

is crucial, since, either we construe ownership of ought as a worldly matter, telling us how things really are, in which case ‘indexation in terms of ownership’ has a status of a metaphysical<sup>19</sup> thesis, or ‘indexation in terms of ownership’ is a proposal about the *semantics* of indexed ‘ought’. Let us make clear the difference. Considered as a metaphysical thesis it claims that ‘indexation’, being a name for the relation of responsibility (of the relevant sort), is held between some person and some ought. And when considered as a proposal within a theory about the meaning of agentive ought, it is a suggestion of how to understand the logical interpretation of the subject’s relation to ‘ought’. Interestingly, both interpretations are substantive, but in a somewhat different sense. The metaphysical one is, so to speak, straightforwardly substantive, as it qualifies the relation between an agent and a normative ought *in the relevant type of cases*, as representing that agent’s status of the *owner* of ought. On the other hand, construed as a thesis about the proper semantics of indexed ‘ought’, it is substantive, because a substantive interpretation of the relation of the grammatically exposed connection between ‘ought’ and the subject is given. Judging by the wording of his ideas on the issue at stake in his 2013 book, I am inclined to think that Broome makes use of both substantive interpretations of indexation, with no eye to the difference. Here’s some textual evidence from page 12, in which he explains the idea of owned ought by contrasting the Alison-sentence with the Alex-sentence: “Intuitively, these sentences differ in their *logical structure*” (emphasis mine). Saying that these two sentences differ in logical structure, is implying that they have differing *standing* logical forms, which in turn suggests that owned ought, or unowned, is not a matter of *interpretation* of the sentence’s meaning, but something *given*, or *fixed*—the meaning as such. In other words, the quoted sentence suggests that owned or unowned interpretation

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19 Here metaphysics is broadly and loosely construed as an inquiry, aimed at discovering the nature of reality.

is encoded in the logical structure of the respective sentences, and the role of the interpreter is simply to recover the relevant sense from what is already given. However, it seems to me that a more accurate description of the situation at hand would be to say that these two sentences differ in their normative meanings, *because* they have been assigned distinct logical structures.

These clarifications aside, let me present what the thesis about irrelevance of indexation of ought to a subject says. Since the thesis in question denies semantic significance of the mere grammatical representation of the relation between the grammatical subject of 'ought' and 'ought', it is construed as referring to the *de dicto* sense of the word 'indexation'.

*Irrelevance of indexation thesis (IIT)*: indexing 'ought' to a subject of 'ought' is generally irrelevant for the purpose of determining ownership of ought.

The argument<sup>20</sup> for *IIT* runs as follows:

(Assumption 1) Indexing 'ought' to a subject is a logical way of representing the idea that ought is owned.

(Assumption 2) (Truism in standard modal analysis). A paradigmatic interpretation of any 'ought' sentence is the interpretation in which 'ought' is expressed in terms of propositional ought.

(Premise 1) If the paradigmatic interpretation of any 'ought' sentence is given in terms of propositional ought, then any interpretation of 'ought' that falls within the paradigmatic interpretation of an 'ought' sentence is admissible.

(Premise 2) In the light of (P1), it is an arbitrary interpretation of 'ought', inasmuch as it expresses the propositional ought, that is allowed.

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<sup>20</sup> I proposed this argument in J. Klimczyk, *Normativity that matters. On the meaning of practical 'ought' sentences*, book manuscript.

(Premise 3) Taken together (A2), (P1) and (P2), warrant the conclusion that two *rival* interpretations, expressed in terms of the propositional ought, are correct, which in turn implies that, depending on the variation of the propositionalist interpretation of 'ought' in the sentence 'A ought to *phi*', 'ought' is either indexed to a subject of 'ought', or is not indexed to a subject.<sup>21</sup>

(Conclusion) On the assumption that the premises from (P1) to (P3) are true, indexing 'ought' to a subject is irrelevant in reliably deciding whether ought is owned or not.

What the argument says is quite trivially true. If indexation is construed as a formal relation connecting two relata, we cannot learn any particular substantive information about either of the two relata from it. If that is so, then it seems that, in order to make the view plausible – according to which, indexing 'ought' to a subject of 'ought', at least *sometimes* significantly matters – for understanding the sentence's genuine meaning, we need to show one of two things: (i) that some content simply cannot be satisfactorily transmitted by a sentence in which 'ought' is unindexed to a person, or (ii) that the proposed interpretation of the semantic meaning of 'indexed ought', is of genuine help in disambiguating the normative sense of 'ought'. Adopting the strategy envisaged in (i) is a lost enterprise, given that *IIT* is true, since it requires the vindication of the unreliable claim that grammar of 'ought' is a genuine constraint on the sort of normative content to be transmitted by the normative 'ought' sentence. The strategy mentioned under (ii) is easier to execute, and I take it that this is the one that Broome pursues, when he proposes to make the relevant normative sense of 'ought' sentence

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21 These two interpretations are: (i) 'It ought to be the case that A *phi*-s' and (ii) 'A ought that A *phi*-s'. Whereas the interpretation given in (i) roughly says that some state of affairs ought to obtain, the interpretation given in (ii) says that it is A's obligation to make it the case that the state of affairs including A's *phi*-ing, obtains.

readable from the grammar. In a nutshell, the novelty of his proposal relies on the assumption that adjusting grammar to our semantic needs suffices to secure the intended normative interpretation of the sentence. As I have tried to show, this assumption is a bad one, since the real problem is not that correct English grammar sets limits on the representable normative content, but that the notion we use to account for the nature of normativity we are after, *together* with the suggested refurbished grammatical translation of the notion in question, are generally misfits even when glued together. The first sort of misfit is explained by the fact that the word 'ownership', when associated with the normative sense of 'ought', does not carry any clear information. The second sort of misfit consists in unhappy, to my mind, grammatical interpretation of the stipulated sense of 'owned ought'. In previous sections I have discussed the conceptual misfit. Now, I want to focus on the misfit between the content to be represented, and the one being represented by Broome's enhanced grammar.

Recall that the well-known problem with the proper interpretation of the meaning of normative 'ought' sentences, is that they can be read two ways: as attributing ought to an agent (on the predicative interpretation of 'ought', when ought is construed as a property of the agent), and as an unindexed propositional operator. That problem, call it the *ambiguity problem*, as Broome seems to think, is caused by the fact that we have not proposed a grammatical interpretation that would make explicit the sense of 'ought' that we want to get. Since he believes that agentive ought is owned ought, the remaining task is to exhibit ownership in grammar. To that end, he proposes to interpret sentences expressing owned ought, as having *two* agent-argument places, one for the owner of ought, and one for the agent (who need not be the owner of the ought: recall the analysis of the deck-hand sentence) of the demanded action. The grammatical demarcation that he advocates is very illuminating, as it allows us to spot a significant difference in the sentence's meaning, when

the person stipulated to be the owner of ought (whoever is denoted by argument-place for the subject of the sentence), is a person other than the one denoted by argument-place for the subject of the embedded sentence.

The significance of this idea can be illustrated as follows. Suppose we want to say that Alison is the very person who is responsible (in my language, we will say that Alison is the relevant owner of the ought in question) for satisfying the ought in question. Traditional grammatical structure used to express that content does not secure the intended meaning, but *pretends* to do so. The pretence in question consists in the default assumption that the grammatical subject of the sentence is the very same person who is the subject of the lexical verb that follows 'ought'. The pretence dictated by the grammar of auxiliary verbs usually does no harm, because usually, when we produce 'ought' claims of the considered sort, we mean that the subject of the sentence is also the agent of the required action. However, the well-elaborated grammar of 'ought' imposes an important restriction on the sort of normative content to be borne by the agential 'ought' sentence with agentive sense. The restriction is that we cannot capture the sense in which Alison is to be the doer of the action in question, but the true owner of that ought is someone else, say, Alison's supervisor. Official grammar, then, is heavily limiting, since it allows us either to express the proposition that Alison is the owner of ought, or to propose that no one is the owner of that ought. This is hugely disappointing, because real life is more complicated than these two options allow us to express. Ownership and agency often come apart.

However much I am appreciative of the theoretical value of distinguishing the owner of ought (regardless of what actual sense we associate with the word 'owner'), from the agent of the demanded action when we do semantics of normative 'ought', nevertheless, I am sceptical about the overall success of Broome's proposal. As I announced in the beginning of this section, my reservation revolves around the fact that the artificial grammar invented by Broome fails

to deliver its promise, in offering a clear representation of ownership. Elsewhere, I called the argument putting into question the explicitness of owned sense of 'ought' being transmitted by Broome's deviant grammar the *further ambiguity problem* (FAP for short).<sup>22</sup> Let me briefly present what it says. FAP begins from two assumptions. One is that we want a grammatical interpretation of owned ought that is as clear as possible, i.e. the ought whose central feature is responsibility (or, if my interpretation of Broome is accurate – relevant responsibility: the responsibility attributable to an agent on the most accurate interpretation of the sentence's normative meaning). Another point is that owned ought is to be treated as a propositional operator. The central question that FAP is organised around, is whether we are capable of offering an unambiguous representation of ownership, *given* that 'ought' is considered as operating on propositions. The answer pointed by FAP is that we cannot. Here is why this is so. Consider again the version of the Alison-sentence, in which it is deemed to have explicitly owned sense – 'Alison ought that Alison will get a sun hat'. Bear in mind what this 'owned' sense is to be – that Alison is the relevant holder of responsibility in the case where she fails to conform to that ought. Next, ask whether the reformed sentence gives that very sense. Quick analysis of the sentence's novel grammar suggests that it does not. Why? The novelty builds upon something non-reformable – the grammatical interpretation of the propositional content. My point is that, as long as we stay loyal to the interpretation of agentive ought, in terms of vaguely informative concept of owned ought to be translated as a propositional ought, we will not achieve the desired end, due to the intrinsic ambiguity inscribed into the grammatical translation of the propositional ought.

Contrary to Broome's declaration, the sentence 'Alison ought that Alison will get a sun hat' does not uncontestedly have the owned

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22 Cf. J. Klimczyk, *Normativity that matters. On the meaning of 'ought' sentences*, op. cit.

sense<sup>23</sup>, since that very sentence admits of two further interpretations: (1\*) 'Alison ought that Alison *herself* will get a sun hat' and (1\*\*) 'Alison ought that Alison's mother will bring it about that Alison will get a sun hat'. But if the interpretation in (1\*\*) is correct, it invites another two interpretations: (2\*\*\*) 'Alison ought that Alison's mother *herself* will bring it about that Alison will get a sun hat, and (2\*\*\*\*) 'Alison ought that Alison's mother will bring it about that Alison's best friend will get Alison a sun hat'. But if the interpretation set out in (2\*\*\*\*) is admissible, then it invites another interpretation, and again another, in which case highlighting ambiguity in the exact normative sense of the sentence. The ambiguity becomes the problem, because the more remote connection between the putative owner of ought, and the executor of that ought is, the more doubtful the owner's responsibility for that ought appears, since controllability of other agents' actions is usually an important factor in determining one's responsibility for the ought in question.

Now, Broome might try to block the objection by noticing that this argument, at best, indicates the problem in identifying *the agent* of the demanded action, but not the owner. But that remark has only appearances of being successful, since FAP demonstrates that weakness of personal control over agency, puts the sensibility of ascribing ownership to the grammatical subject of the whole sentence into question. If execution of the ought that belongs to you is mediated by a large number of persons, whose individual contribution to the final conformance to that ought varies in degrees, yet overall is bigger than yours (since normally your contribution extends to having influence on just one, or at best on a few agents), does not that put into question the sensibility of thinking of you as the only owner (or the crucial owner) of the ought in question? I think it does, but if it does not, it would be good to be given an explanation why it does not.

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23 At least not as uncontroversially owned sense as it is suggested to have.



## 5. WHAT MATTERS IS AUTHORSHIP

It is my conjecture that the intuition standing behind Broome's appeal to the notion of ownership in its role of the hallmark of agentive ought, is that the idea of owned ought elicits evident normative connotations, when applied to moral oughts. If I ought to help an elderly man to stand up, or you ought not to cheat on your final exam, then there is an expectation associated with the proper understanding of the nature of the oughts in question, that the production of the demanded actions is on the shoulders of the addressees of these oughts: me and you respectively in the considered examples. So, if we assume that the specificity of moral oughts *qua* practical oughts resides in their having an inbuilt constraint, that the addressee of the ought is to be, insomuch as possible, the author of the required action, and given that moral ought is a paradigmatic example of personal obligation, then certainly the central feature of obligation is not ownership simpliciter, but ownership issuing a special demand on the owner, specifically that she be, if possible, the sole producer of the required action. Elsewhere, I labelled this sort of ownership authorship<sup>24</sup>, and the ought owned in the relevant manner was labelled 'authored ought'. However, some people voiced their worries about the fortunateness of the name. John Broome was one of them. In one of his comments to an earlier version of this paper he pointed to me that "a person cannot create an ought". I admit that my nomenclature was confusing and misleading, as to the kind of intended content. By 'authored character' of ought, I meant not authoring the ought, but rather a special form of authorisation of it, recognisable by the fact of one's sole involvement in the production of the required action.

On my account, authorisation of ought is what happens when some ought becomes recognised by the addressee of it as ought *for her*, where the addressed character of that ought is further taken to imply

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24 Cf. J. Klimczyk, *Normativity that matters. On the meaning of 'ought' sentences*, op. cit.

a particular commitment on the addressee of that ought, that she be (if possible), the sole producer of the demanded action. I hoped that the proper sense of that expression would be readable from the context of my considerations, but failed to make it sufficiently clear. In this paper I keep the labels ‘authorship and ‘authored ought’, but take the opportunity to spell out my central idea clear. When I claim that authorship is the central feature of the agentive ought that makes up our central normative notion, I combine three connotations that the word ‘author’ evokes.

One obvious connotation concerns the creator: the one who brings something into life, or invents something. But that is not the connotation I had in mind. I used ‘authorship’, not as a name for the act of creating, but as a name for the way in which creating normally takes place – one’s sole engagement into bringing about something new. An analogy of writing a paper, or a book, strikes me as self-imposing. By inventing the complex expression ‘authored ought’, I wanted to mark a kind of resemblance between exigencies of the act of writing (or, broadly speaking creating), and exigencies of the activity consisting in satisfying an agentive ought. The stipulated resemblance was that both forms of activities are normally pursued by one and the same person. If you are about to write a poem, a natural expectation is that you *yourself* will be its creator every step of the way, from the first draft verses to the completed piece. I assumed that a similar expectation underlies our understanding of ‘ought’ sentences with agentive content. When we hear the sentence ‘Alison ought to get a sun hat’, and construe it as saying what *Alison* ought to do, we automatically construe it in my sense of the term ‘authored’, that is, as involving the specification regarding *who* is bound to execute the demanded action. I thought that the word ‘authorship’ fits well the aim of accounting for the nature of agentive ought, also because of two other connotations.

The second connotation I have played with is that of ‘authorisation’. My use of it was connected with my substantive view about the source

of ordinary agentive oughts being what we personally care about or value. I took it for granted that when it is true that Alison herself is required to get a sun hat, normally this is explained in terms of some connection between her getting a sun hat and something she deems important. According to my view, roughly, considering something to be important implicates authorising whatever happens to be necessary to promote or sustain what one cares about. However at other places, I did not draw much attention to that connotation, since I did not want to get into details, and defend a particular ends-related, or values-related conception of normativity. The third connotation I considered very important for my proposal was that 'authorship', in contrast to 'ownership', is an intrinsically and unambiguously normative notion. When you are the author of anything, there is no controversy regarding how much and to what extent you are held responsible for your product. Crudely, as the author you are *the one* who is fully responsible for what you have done, and responsible in the relevant way. Who else besides the author can be sensibly held accountable for what the author herself did? So when I fused together the word 'authored' with the word 'ought', I wanted to get a 'conceptual combo', rich in the relevant connotations, that would capture my central intuitions about what the nature of agentive ought truly amounts to.

Upon my proposal it amounts to being, inasmuch as possible, the sole executer of the demand. And this is the view I still find correct. When I consider the essence of moral ought, construed in terms of a personal requirement, and not in terms of a regulative norm, I think of it as of default requirement that the addressee of that requirement be its sole producer. Interestingly, stipulating that authorship, and not ownership, as the central feature of truly practical ought (agentive ought), reveals the genuine significance of Broome's suggestion that indexing ought to a subject, is rich in semantic implications. My claim is that indexing ought to a subject

in a discussed ‘ought’ sentence does semantically matter, *if* it is interpreted as a way of exhibiting authorship and not ownership.

But one advantage does not constitute a victory. Even if indexation in terms of authorship offers a better account of the nature of agentive ought, it suffers from the same defect that Broome’s proposal suffers. Since authorship is to be exhibited by sentences with ‘ought’ treated as a propositional ought, *IIT* hurts my proposal, in the same way that it hurts Broome’s, because the sentence taken to express authored ought – e.g. ‘Roy ought to exercise daily’ – can be interpreted in two ways:

- A) ‘It ought to be that: Roy exercises daily’
- B) ‘Roy ought that: Roy exercises daily’

So even if I have managed to show that authorship, more accurately than ownership, represents the key feature of agentive ought, the victory is not so bewildering, since we lack what we have sought from the beginning, specifically, an unambiguous, logical and grammatical interpretation of that very feature.

In the remainder of this section I propose an interpretation that, to my mind, has two crucial virtues: (i) it does justice to the intuition that authorship is a property of the agent and not a proposition, and (ii) it makes authorship readable from the logical form of the sentence. The interpretation I offer is of *hybrid* nature, i.e. it conjoins the crucial element of the propositionalist account, in which authored ought is treated as a propositional operator, yet also retains the central intuition inspiring the rival account of authored ought, on which ought is treated as a sort of property of agents.<sup>25</sup> Because of the twofold nature of my interpretation, I name it a *propositionalist-cum-predicative (PCP for short)* interpretation of truly practical ‘ought’.<sup>26</sup>

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25 Cf. M. Schroeder, ‘Ought’, *Agents and Action*, *The Philosophical Review* 120(2011)1, 1–41.

26 I introduce and discuss at length my proposal in my manuscript J. Klimczyk, *Normativity that matters. On the meaning of ‘ought’ sentences*, op. cit.

Roughly, if authorship is a property of an agent, then the propositionalist interpretation is incapable of exhibiting that fact in an unambiguous way. Therefore I propose the propositionalist-cum-predicative interpretation of the general form  $AO(A: [A F])$  reads as follows:  $A$  ought that  $A$  is such that  $A$  *phi*-s. I take it that the interpretation in question does justice to the intuitive interpretation of sentences expressing authored ought, because it clarifies two points: first, that 'ought' is related to the agent and, two, that the agent to whom ought is indexed, is at the same time the bearer of the action-property. The latter exposition is indeed crucial, because it secures that the agent to whom 'ought' is indexed, is also the very person who is to be the producer of the ought in question. And since producership is a normative notion – as authorship is – being the producer/author makes it obvious who is the agent to be blamed, in case of not satisfying the ought she owns.

To appreciate the attractiveness of the proposal, contrast it with the one offered by Broome. According to Broome, 'ought' sentences with clearly agentive content (i.e. 'authored content' in my terminology) are given the general interpretation:  $A$  ought that  $A$  *phi*-s'. But this proposal faces two concerns. One has been revealed by *IIT*: if the proper interpretation of 'ought' is the propositionalist one, then agential  $AO(p)$  and non-agential  $O(p)$  interpretation of a grammatically agential 'ought' sentence is admissible. The other worry is that positing an extra argument-place for the owner of ought is not enough, if the grammatical interpretation of action-proposition ' $S$  *phi*-s' is intrinsically ambiguous between the reading, in which  $S$  alone is the producer of *phi*-ing, and the reading in which there is no constraint on the number of agents that, together with  $S$ , produce *phi*.<sup>27</sup>

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27 John Broome's generous remarks made me aware that this need not be a weakness of his proposal, if owned ought is not intended to account for the nature of agentive oughts, or practical oughts (oughts that I proposed to account for in terms of oughts of authored character). But that remark, on my understanding, gives rise to many puzzles. Central among them is the notion that if owned ought was intended to capture also the nature

Finally, if Broome's motivation for departing from English grammar was to make the bearer of the relevant responsibility for satisfying the ought in question as explicit as possible in the sentence's logical structure, then my proposal also does better than his on that score. The interpretation, according to *PCP*, has successfully eliminated *all* problematic ambiguities. Notice that if we ascribe property, instead of a proposition, to the agent occupying the second agent-argument place in the sentence, then we assert that the agent of the property in question is *this* very person, to whom that property belongs as properties are personal. If property is construed as a sort of action belonging to agent, and once we have secured that the agent who owns the action-property is the very same person to whom 'ought' is indexed, we have ruled out the ambiguity concerning whether the owner of ought is also the bearer of responsibility. If the owner of ought is also the owner of action-property, there is no issue about who is required of what, and who is to be held accountable, if she fails to satisfy that ought.

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of non-practical oughts, like the ought expressed by the sentence 'A ought to believe that p' (Broome's example), then what exact feature of ownership is it meant to capture? Responsibility? That is dubious, if ascription of ownership of ought was to be generalized in order to apply to epistemic oughts as such. Do I bear responsibility for the belief that I ought to breathe in a second, if at this very second I breathe? This sentence is a good testing example, because breathing (to some extent) is up to me: surely it is possible that I can stop breathing for a few seconds. Nevertheless, it strikes me as odd to think that I can be held responsible for holding the belief in question. This worry applies to another example suggested to me by Broome: 'A ought to hope for x'. If ownership denotes responsibility of the relevant sort, I find it hard to see in what way ownership can capture the sense of 'ought to hope'. Evidently, we are not responsible for our hopes (or are we?). So, what feature of ownership is to represent when used to account for the sense of the sentence 'A ought to hope for x'? I have no idea. Perhaps what Broome thinks is that ownership is primarily about exhibiting connection between ought and a person. But if the connection in question is not to be interpreted in terms of that person's responsibility for ought, what sense is there in using it instead of simply speaking about the connection between ought and the agent?

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The paper is funded by the National Science Centre from the grant OPUS 12 for the project 'Substantive semantics for normative language (on the basis of the analysis of 'ought' sentences)', decision No. DEC-2016/23/B/HS1/02921. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer and especially to John Broome for their extensive and helpful comments.

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JOANNA KLIMCZYK

jklimczyk@ifispan.waw.pl

Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology  
Nowy Świat 72, 00–330 Warsaw, Poland

DOI:10.21697/spch.2018.54.1.12