

Book Review

The Meaning of ‘Ought’: Beyond Descriptivism and Expressivism in Metaethics

By Matthew Chrisman

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A Review By
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In this present book, Matthew Chrisman offers his arguments to support the thesis that ‘ought’ should be explained in the light of metasemantics. His project of explaining the word ‘ought’ is conceived as a conceptual framework with the use of many philosophically contemplative terms such as “metanormative theorizing” (p. 2), “a broadly truth-conditionalist approach to compositional semantics” (p. 3), “metasemantics” (p. 13), “possible worlds semantics” (pp. 61-63), and so on. It is for him to launch a new paradigm for a serious thinking about the meaning of ‘ought’ beyond the old two camps in this area, ‘descriptivism’ and ‘expressivism’, as already told in the title of his book. He finally opts for ‘inferentialist’ view as a defense of his thesis on what should be the meaning of ‘ought’ (p. xii).

First of all, a question from readers may arise; why do we have to read a serious complex metaethicist explanation just only for the understanding of the word ‘ought’ which is rather simple to understand? In other words, do we really need a metaethicist to tell us what ‘ought’ means? However, from the preface we readers must be conscious of the philosophical knowledge Chrisman gives us. There are at least two camps of metanormative theory in the contemporary field of metaethics about ought-claims; (a) *descriptivism*- normative claims are about goodness that is real and described in the predicate of a true proposition, and (b) *expressivism*- normative claims express a positive attitude towards what the speaker prefers without making any connotations of the truth or falsity of the claims.

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Chrisman points out that these two working frameworks have driven the thoughts of normativity (pp. xii-xiii). It can be considered that the issue is instead not as simple as what we first thought. In what circumstances should 'ought' be understood in people's ordinary usage of the term?

When the meaning of 'ought' is at issue, Chrisman finds out that the usage of the word is basically normative in nature (pp. 2-3). Moreover, it is not tied up only in a territory of ethical theory or in moral statements. Chrisman characterizes "a variety of flavors" in the use of the word in five ways;

- (a) *Moral*: We ought not to kill innocent people.
- (b) *Prudential*: Jody ought to stop eating fresh meat.
- (c) *Teleological*: The alarm-clock ought to be set at five o'clock for me to be on time at nine o'clock for the interview.
- (d) *Evaluative*: The 2004 Tsunami ought not to have happened.
- (e) *Epistemic*: The wildfire ought to arrive here in two hours.

(pp. 26-27; pp. 32-33, the examples given here are mine).

The examples clearly show that the grammar of the usage pattern of the word 'ought' depicts a diversity of interpretations of the word. Nevertheless, Chrisman believes that they must be on the same line of meaning for the ordinary understanding of the word when people use it because it reflects "the semantic rule implicit in such competence" (p. 61). With the use of Kratzerian theory about possible worlds and the logic of modality, Chrisman argues that the final answer to this problem is that we have to use 'possible worlds semantics' to systematize the diverse interpretations of 'ought' by treating 'ought' as a necessity modal such as in "it ought to be the case that p" (pp. 62-63).

To render it into a simpler understanding, in my opinion, is that we may imagine that there may be another possible world such that everything in that world is the same with this actual world, except only one thing that the book you are reading in that possible world is covered by a plastic dust-jacket, while it is not in this actual world. When you in this actual world say that the book of yours ought to be covered by a plastic dust-jacket to protect it from drops of water, it means that you are talking about the same situation that is the case in the possible world, while it ought to be the case in this actual world. We can see that the case of 'ought' in this actual world is plausibly true, while the other 'you' in that possible world considers that it is being the case.

Chrisman argues that his developed possible worlds semantics is the advantageous method to deal with any claims about what ought to be the case (p. 87). To some extent, it is true that when we talk about what should be the case, it is mostly about the possibility of some other thing that should have happened instead of what did happen. However, it can be considered that 'ought' in this systematicity

can get along with the talk of ‘ought’ in non-ideal contexts of moral ought-claims (p. 78). Imagine that Jody is drowned in a river, some might say that “Mark ought to rescue Jody, who has been drowned, from the river” which is plausibly true. An ideal context for this situation might be “If Jody were not drowned in the river, Mark ought not to have a moral duty of helping her” which is plausibly true as well. Hence, we can see that the interpretation of ought-claims in the possible worlds semantics here is advantageous in keeping a sense of moral claims along with the sense of truth claims.

There was another book on the issue of normativity by Ralph Wedgwood. His *The Nature of Normativity* (2007) pointed out that there was a difference between “the practical ‘ought’” and “the ‘ought’ of general desirability.” Wedgwood’s analysis is that the practical ‘ought’ was indexed to an agent and a time, while the general use was not (Wedgwood, 2007: 93). Some other philosopher said something in the same vein. In his book *Impassioned Belief* (2014), Michael Ridge agreed that some relevant words in normative claims were “context-sensitive” to a norm of a given culture (Ridge, 2014: 17-18).

It can be considered that those two philosophers are talking about some context that can be indexed into an agent or a time when an ‘ought’ claim is made. In the present book of Chrisman, he calls them ‘agentive’ and ‘nonagentive’ ought’s. Wedgwood’s and Ridge’s thesis here can be considered a threat to Chrisman’s. This is because there is some claim of ‘ought’ that really includes a specific agent in doing otherwise according to a possible capacity of that very agent in that specific context. Chrisman realizes this problem that “makes the claims importantly personal rather than apersonal” (p. 98). For example, the statement ‘Mark gives Mary some flowers’ is different from ‘Mark ought to give Mary some flowers’. The latter is an ought-claim that includes the agent ‘Mark’ in the statement. However, if it is interpreted as ‘It ought to be the case that Mark gives Mary some flowers’, we can see that it is still in the possible worlds semantics with the clause ‘It ought to be the case that’ operated as an antecedent of the statement without including the agent ‘Mark’ specifically. This is what Chrisman considers as some new refinement that is more advantageous when the various flavors of ‘ought’ are defined in this metasemantic account with the explanatory model in modality (p. 122).

In chapter 5, Chrisman develops compositional semantics especially in his rule for ‘ought’ ‘R10’ which is advantageous that it can be used in both possible worlds semantics and two kinds of prejacent contents that are propositions and practices (pp. 148-149, p. 156). Chapter 6 is devoted to a new debate after his realized semantics. He interprets metanormative descriptivism in the light of representationalist view, and expressivism in the light of ideationalist view. However, he argues that those two metasemantic interpretations of truth conditions are problematic. Finally he defends

the third interpretation that is call 'the inferentialist view' (p. 160). There is one thing that Chrisman considers the inferentialist view better than those two. It is just that, in a normal practice of discourse, inferentialism can help us interpret the truth conditions of all sentences with some implications about ought-claims (p. 200).

Chrisman's interesting point of view in this present book is presented with a full-fledged philosophical systematicity. Of course, some might say that it is unnecessarily difficult for the simple task of finding the meaning of the word 'ought'. In my opinion, however, it might be the case that the meaning of that simple word is, in the first place, rather complex in itself. Chrisman's book is instead very good in delivering the idea to us.

References

Ridge, Michael. (2014). **Impassioned Belief**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wedgwood, Ralph. (2007). **The Nature of Normativity**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.