

ON THE LINGUISTIC BASIS FOR NONCOGNITIVISM*

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Abstract We clarify and expand on the connection, suggested in [Alwood \(2010\)](#), between recent linguistic work on conventionalized illocutionary force and noncognitivism. We show one way to leverage this work in resolving a version of the embedding problem for noncognitivism. We also argue that it supplies some rather strong pressure for noncognitivists to abandon “pure” varieties of their meta-ethic for a “hybrid” variety. We close with some remarks on how to understand the relevance of imperatives to theorizing about the meaning of normative language.

1 ILLOCUTIONARY NONCOGNITIVISM

In his contribution to the *Analysis* symposium on Mark Schroeder’s *Being For* (2008a), [Alwood \(2010\)](#) suggests an illocutionary form of noncognitivism as an alternative to the attitudinal noncognitivism critiqued by Schroeder. We provisionally characterize these views as follows:

- (1) *Attitudinal noncognitivism*: a sentence’s meaning is a matter of the attitude it conventionally expresses. Normative sentences conventionally express noncognitive attitudes.
- (2) *Illocutionary noncognitivism*: a sentence’s meaning is a matter of the speech-act it is conventionally used to perform—what illocutionary force is conventionally associated with utterances of the sentence. Normative sentences have conventionalized non-assertoric force.

Alwood’s starting point is the plausible linguistic hypothesis that well-formed natural language sentences are conventionally associated (in virtue of their mood) with specific illocutionary forces (functional potentials).¹ Such sentences happily embed in larger constructions “without determining force-potential as they otherwise would” (2010: 112). Sentence (3) conventionally functions to assert that the addressee is John, (4) to demand the addressee sit down, while (5) conventionally functions to do neither.

- (3) You’re John.
- (4) Sit down!
- (5) If you’re John, sit down!

This, he notes, is an important first step in solving the Frege-Geach Problem, especially as formulated by [Searle \(1962\)](#). If the empirical claim is on target, we have speech-acts that have, via their conventional association with sentences, a plausible claim to be part of those sentences’ *meanings*, but are

*. With thanks to Jason Stanley for the idea for this title.

1. For a recent defense of the hypothesis (with references to relevant empirical work), see [Portner \(2004\)](#).

vitiabile by embedding. Normative sentences are, of course, generally in the indicative or declarative mood. But, if they are conventionally associated with non-assertoric speech-acts (commendation, ejaculation, whatever), the failure of certain utterances embedding normative sentences to perform those speech-acts may, he conjectures, ultimately be explained however the same phenomenon is explained with embedded, mood-marked sentences.

Schroeder's reply (2010) notes other dimensions of the Frege-Geach Problem (specifically, the "Negation Problem" that is the focus of Schroeder 2008b) that Alwood does not, he claims, satisfactorily address. This note pursues a somewhat different angle. While we develop some criticisms of Alwood (and give a brief response, on behalf of the noncognitivist, to Schroeder's charge), our interest here is primarily constructive. Specifically, we will focus on elaborating the meta-ethical relevance of linguistic work on conventionalized illocutionary force—a connection that Alwood is able to sketch only in outline.

2 HOW IS FORCE CONVENTIONALIZED AND NEUTRALIZED?

The central claim, to be clear, is not that grammatical or syntactic mood determines conventional force.² For, as Portner (2004) (cf. Sadock & Zwicky 1985) notes, typical interrogative clauses are grammatically indicative, but are conventionally used to ask questions, rather than make assertions.

The relevant notion from the linguistic literature is, rather, that of *clause-type*. Well-formed sentences are conventionally associated with a unique clause-type. Certain clause-types (declarative, interrogative, imperative) exist in all known human languages. In all such languages, these clause-types appear to be conventionally associated with a unique type of force (assertion, querying, and commanding, respectively) (see esp. Portner 2004).

There is disagreement about what the first association (between sentences and clause-types) involves. There are, broadly, two camps:

- Syntactic: clauses are typed in virtue of their syntax (in virtue of containing a covert, possibly modal, force-operator, or in virtue of the syntactic form of the clause³).
- Semantic: clauses are typed in virtue of their semantics (type of semantic denotation, especially⁴).

We'll bypass the disagreement here. Whether clause-type is a syntactic or semantic phenomenon, it's generally agreed, for instance, that declarative clauses have conventionalized assertoric force. Specifically, on this view, if ϕ is declarative, then an utterance of ϕ conventionally asserts that ϕ (which, following Stalnaker 1978's classic account of assertion, involves a proposal

2. I thank Alwood (pc) for making it clear to me that he does not endorse this view.

3. Some exemplary references: Han (1998) develops the former sort of view for imperatives (see von Stechow & Iatridou 2009 for an excellent, critical discussion). Ginzburg & Sag (2000) develop the latter sort of view for interrogatives.

4. Portner (2004) develops this sort of view for subject-less imperatives. Such clauses, he claims, denote *properties*, and it is possible to infer their conventional force from this fact.

to add the proposition that ϕ to the Common Ground). But, of course, this force is vitiating, as illustrated by (5).

How does embedding a declarative in the antecedent of a conditional with a non-declarative consequent vitiate its conventional force? Here is one plausible account. Schwager (2006), citing syntactic work by Bhatt & Pancheva (2006), notes that “the clause-type of hypothetical conditionals is determined by the clause-type of the matrix clause [i.e., the consequent].” A conditional imperative like (5) is, in other words, typed *as an imperative*. Its conventional force is, very roughly, to issue a demand whose scope is restricted to situations where the antecedent is true.⁵ “Explaining” why (5) lacks the force of its constituent clauses requires only making explicit the plausible assumption that sentence-tokens forming the top-most projection of their syntactic tree are the input to whatever grammatical module \mathcal{M} computes their conventional force: \mathcal{M} is undefined for syntactic structures tokened within larger syntactic structures (the “proper parts” of utterances). It’s a mistake to claim, of a declarative tokened in an ‘if’-clause, that *it* has force at all. Force is a property of complete utterances—computable, in the case of (5), compositionally from *its* clause-type (imperative) and syntactic structure (conditional subordinate-matrix-clause). The notion that declarative clauses (qua type) have conventionalized assertoric force means, perhaps, just that \mathcal{M} computes assertoric force for such clauses, when they occur as the top-most projection of a syntactic tree. (We say much more on the computation of force in Sect. 3.)

Indeed, as Alwood suggests, it’s not implausible to think this explanation could be extended, by the illocutionary noncognitivist, to normative declaratives embedded in conditional antecedents: such occurrences lack their expected non-assertoric force, just because *they* lack force altogether. Conversely, conditionals, like (6), whose matrix clause is a normative declarative, may, on analogy with conditional imperatives, carry some sort of non-assertoric force.

(6) If cows are sentient, it’s wrong to eat them.

Specifically, as conditional imperatives involve the performance of a restricted command act, conditionals like (6) may perform a restricted, non-assertoric speech-act—disapprobation of the adverted action, restricted to antecedent-situations. If that is right—a matter for empirical research—it suggests a useful generalization of Schwager’s claim: the conventional force of a conditional (and subordinate-matrix-clause structures—hereafter *smc*s—generally) is of the same type as that of the matrix clause.

3 A PROBLEM WITH ‘OR’

So far, empirical work seems to provide some comfort for the illocutionary noncognitivist. Here, though, is a worry: not all embeddings of normative

5. See [redacted] (forthcoming) for an exploration of conditional imperative force and an apparatus for modeling the force of restricted speech-acts.

declaratives fit into the above paradigm. Consider:

- (7) Grass is green, and it's wrong to eat meat.
 (8) Grass is green, or it's wrong to eat meat.

Here we have syntactic *coordination*, rather than subordination. That, by itself, is not mysterious: coordinability is expected between two sentences of the same clause-type, regardless of their forces. More mysterious is how \mathcal{M} should work on sentences coordinating clauses with different types of conventional force.

Sentence (7) is perhaps less puzzling than (8): its force is plausibly equivalent to the force of *sequenced utterances* of 'grass is green' and 'it's wrong to eat meat'. Note that this introduces a new way of computing sentential force. With syntactic subordination, there is no operation mapping two "basic" forces into a "complex" force constructed out of them both; the force of the matrix clause is restrictable, and the subordinate clause restricts it (cf. Kratzer 1991). Coordination—at least via 'and'—seems, however, to require such an operation. That, in itself, is no problem, provided such an operation is definable. And, in the case of 'and', one is: it is simply a sequencing operation. But what sort of operation might 'or' designate *for the illocutionary noncognitivist*?

Some formalism helps clarify the question, map some possible strategies, and bring out the special difficulty that defining such an operation introduces (although the argument is independent of the chosen formalism). Let us model the force of sentences in a manner familiar from Dynamic Semantics: with functions from input contexts into output contexts (i.e., context-change potentials, ccrps). The force of a sentence is, on this picture, modeled as an instruction for updating the context. Contexts are, for now, sets of worlds (the worlds compatible with the Common Ground), and we write $\sigma[\phi]$ for the result of updating σ with ϕ . The definition of $[\cdot]$ —an interpretation function, mapping sentence-tokens into ccrps—goes as in (9).

- (9) $\sigma[p] = \sigma \cap \{w : p \in w\}$
 $\sigma[\phi \wedge \psi] = \sigma[\phi][\psi]$
 $\sigma[\neg\phi] = \sigma - \sigma[\phi]$

On this model, the operation associated with 'and' is just *function composition*. The ccrp for $\phi \vee \psi$, typically defined in terms of \neg and \wedge , is given by (10).

- (10) $\sigma[\phi \vee \psi] := \sigma[\neg(\neg\phi \wedge \neg\psi)]$

A state σ is said to accept ϕ (notation: $\sigma \vDash \phi$) iff updating σ with ϕ is redundant.

- (11) $\sigma \vDash \phi$ iff $\sigma[\phi] = \sigma$

This setup accommodates only one kind of force—assertoric force, i.e., that consisting of reducing uncertainty in the Common Ground. Let us now relax the setup, as the illocutionary noncognitivist suggests, by recognizing

two types of atomic sentences: normative and non-normative declaratives, each conventionally associated with a different type of ccr.

Now, however this is formally implemented, the illocutionary noncognitivist can retain the definition for $[\phi \wedge \psi]$ in terms of function composition: an operation sequencing speech-acts is exactly what is wanted. She may likewise retain the definition of $[\phi \vee \psi]$ in terms of basic operations for \neg and \wedge , *provided* she modifies the negation-clause to accommodate the presence of two types of force in the language.

Ultimately, then, we'll be interested in the value given to $[\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)]$, in cases where ψ is a non-normative declarative and χ is a normative declarative. Denying that such sentences are mixed-force (as the cognitivist does) would allow us to say that the conventional force of $\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)$ is to assert that $\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)$: more formally, $[\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)]$ removes $\psi \wedge \chi$ -worlds from the context-set. How the illocutionary noncognitivist should treat such sentences is not immediately clear.

The illocutionary noncognitivist does have some leverage here: updating σ with $\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)$ should make it the case that σ accepts $\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)$. Once she has an idea of what it is for a state to accept such a sentence, it will be easy to reverse-engineer the ccr. But—and here is the key point—what might it *mean*, for her, for a state to accept such a sentence? Here are some options, each problematic.

- $\sigma \vDash \neg(\psi \wedge \chi)$ iff $\sigma \vDash \neg\psi$ or $\sigma \vDash \neg\chi$.

So, $[\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)] = [\neg\psi] \cup [\neg\chi]$.

Problem: a ccr obtained by taking the union of two other ccrs will not generally be a function, but an n -ary *relation* between an input context and $n \geq 1$ output contexts. But this means speakers will not generally know how such utterances will update the context. Worse, it is clear that the force uttering $\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)$ is not to induce acceptance of one or the other of $\neg\psi$ or $\neg\chi$.

- $\sigma \vDash \neg(\psi \wedge \chi)$ iff $\exists \tau : \sigma = \{\tau[\neg\psi], \tau[\neg\chi]\}$.

So, $[\neg(\psi \wedge \chi)]$ maps a context σ into $\{\sigma[\neg\psi], \sigma[\neg\chi]\}$ (a set of *alternative contexts*).⁶

Problem: it's unclear what sort of context such a set of alternative contexts is supposed to represent. Presumably, it is one characterized, not by specific commitment to either $\neg\psi$ or $\neg\chi$, rather by commitment to their disjunction. But that we knew already. We want to know what such a commitment could possibly involve, for the noncognitivist.

Maybe this could be helped by the following suggestion (inspired by Gibbard 2003: Ch. 4): the set $\{\sigma[\neg\psi], \sigma[\neg\chi]\}$ represents the state of ruling out (being against) acceptance of both ψ and χ . Schroeder (2010), building on van Roojen (1996), develops a strong objection to "higher-order attitude" theories that understand commitments

6. Krifka (2004) entertains this sort of option for cases of so-called "disjoined speech-acts."

to disjunctions in this sort of way. (Unfortunately, I cannot rehearse it here.)

Does this exhaust the menu of formal options? Not quite. There is, we'll see in Sect. 4, a way around this problem for the illocutionary noncognitivist. It will, however, be unpalatable to many who might otherwise be drawn to the view.

An objection: *pseudo-imperatives* like (12,13) also seem to involve coordination, rather than subordination, between two clauses with *uncontroversially distinct* kinds of conventional force. So, it is unclear either what sort of clause-type or force they should receive, especially in the case of the apparent disjunction (13).

(12) Study hard and you'll pass.

(13) Stop or I'll shoot.

The problem of mixed-force disjunctions is not particular to the illocutionary noncognitivist, the objection goes, since pseudo-imperatives are a problem for everyone.

In reply: von Stechow & Iatridou (2009), building on Culicover & Jackendoff (1997), argue such constructions are, at *some* level of representation, *smcss*, roughly indicated with the following paraphrases:

(14) If you study hard, you'll pass.

(15) If you don't stop, I'll shoot.

If they are right, the clause-type (force) of pseudo-imperatives is plausibly declarative (assertoric), with the left clauses functioning, in some sense, as restrictors. There is, then, a way of computing the force of (13) that is not available to the illocutionary noncognitivist attempting to handle (8).

4 LINGUISTIC PRESSURE FOR HYBRID NONCOGNITIVISM

While Alwood (2010) himself endorses a form of hybrid noncognitivism, he adduces no concrete linguistic evidence for it over non-hybrid forms of noncognitivism. In this section, I present three considerations that, I suggest, push the illocutionary noncognitivist to a specific kind of hybrid noncognitivism. The first of these turns on the problem with 'or' detailed above.

First, a terminological note. *Hybrid illocutionary noncognitivism*, as I understand it, endorses the following, in addition to illocutionary noncog-

nitivism:⁷

- (16) *Factualism*: normative sentences have, as a matter of their compositional semantics, a non-normative, propositional content. (For example, a sentence attributing a normative predicate F to an act-type α expresses the proposition that α meets the non-normative application-conditions for F .)
- (17) *Assertivism*: that content is apt for assertion. Normative sentences have both conventionalized assertoric and non-assertoric force. If F is a normative predicate and α an act-type, then an utterance of $\ulcorner F(\alpha) \urcorner$ conventionally asserts that α meets F 's application-conditions, in addition to the performance of some non-assertoric (e.g., expressive) speech-act.

4.1 Mixed-force disjunctions

The problem with 'or' presents a choice for illocutionary noncognitivists: either define a non-standard operation for 'or' to express in computing the force of sentences like (8) (the difficulties of which we've seen), or have a mixed-force disjunction $\psi \vee \chi$ (where ψ is non-normative and χ normative) express only an assertion whose content is that the disjunction is true.

Though the latter option might have seemed, for various reasons, off-limits to illocutionary noncognitivists, it is not—provided they go hybrid. For mixed-force disjunctions, we seem to require a single force "scoping" (loosely speaking) over a content. *Assertion* is the natural candidate, given the clause-type of the mixed-force disjunction (declarative). The assertion's *content* is simply the proposition that results from disjoining ψ 's content with χ 's factual content. Such contents are, of course, available to the hybrid illocutionary noncognitivist. The conventionalized non-assertoric force of χ is, we may suppose, neutralized in $\psi \vee \chi$ in the same way that the conventionalized assertoric force of each disjunct is neutralized in $\psi \vee \chi$.

Upshot: the hybrid illocutionary noncognitivist can agree with the cognitivist about the conventional force of mixed-force disjunctions, while nevertheless disagreeing about the conventional force of normative sentences *as such*.

4.2 Restrictor role

A second consideration is the ability of normative sentences to embed in restrictor position in certain smcss—indicative conditionals, conditional imperatives, etc.

- (18) If murder is wrong, it might be forbidden.
- (19) If murder is wrong, don't do it.

7. See esp. Copp (2001); Boisvert (2008). It's unclear whether Alwood endorse Assertivism, given (i) how seriously he takes the similarity between normative sentences and imperatives (both appear, for Alwood, to have factual content, in roughly the same sense), and (ii) the implausibility of assertivism for imperatives.

On the orthodox (and quite successful) semantics for indicatives like (18), ‘might’ expresses a binary generalized quantifier \exists over worlds, taking a restriction argument R and scope argument S , such that $\lceil \exists(R)(S) \rceil$ is true iff some accessible R -worlds satisfy S (see Kratzer 1981, 1991).

Using this semantics on (18) seems to require ‘murder is wrong’ to semantically characterize a possible-worlds proposition. The hybrid illocutionary non-cognitivist easily meets this requirement: ‘murder is wrong’ semantically characterizes the set of worlds where murder meets the non-normative application-conditions for ‘is wrong.’ Noncognitivists who reject factualism do not.⁸ Presumably such propositional contents will be apt for assertion, in which case it will appear plausible that normative sentences have conventionalized assertoric force (something the next consideration will bolster), so, also, that assertivism is correct. Similar remarks hold for (19), assuming it expresses a restricted demand (cf. Sect. 2).

4.3 Clause-type

Whether clause-type is syntactic or semantic, it’s universally agreed that it does not depend on whether that clause contains normative predicates, normative modal auxiliaries, etc. Sentences like (20,21) are typed as declaratives.

(20) Murder is wrong.

(21) You shouldn’t murder.

As declaratives, they would seem to bear conventionalized assertoric force. If that’s right, we should like to know *what* they conventionally function to assert. The cognitivist has a ready answer: (20) asserts that murder is wrong, (21) that you shouldn’t murder. As does the hybrid noncognitivist: they assert their non-normative factual contents. Since the pure illocutionary noncognitivist denies factualism, it would seem she must also deny that unembedded tokens of these sentences bear conventionalized assertoric force. She thus owes us an explanation of why linguistic work on the conventionalized clause-type / force association is off the mark.

There is one other possibility for the pure illocutionary noncognitivist: unembedded tokens of normative sentences may conventionally express *multiple speech-acts*, one assertoric, another non-assertoric. To borrow the terminology of Boisvert (2008), they may be conventionally “dual-use,” although, on a given occasion of use, they have only one such use—the non-assertoric use. Here a comparison might be drawn with *directive questions*

8. Pure non-cognitivists tend, not surprisingly, to focus their attention on material conditionals (and ‘truth-functional’ constructions more generally) (see, e.g., Gibbard 2003: Ch. 4). I know of no attempts by pure non-cognitivists to give a semantics for *indicative* conditionals embedding normative sentences in restrictor position. Although Gibbard’s plan-laden possible-worlds semantics (on which the content of any sentence, normative or not, is a set of Hyperplan-world pairs) is, perhaps, formally adequate to this task, there is a serious question (see Dreier 1999) about whether such a conception of content collapses a non-hybrid non-cognitivist semantics into a kind of indexical realist or hybrid noncognitivist semantics.

like (22).

(22) Can you pass the salt?

Asher & Lascarides (2001) argue that this sort of construction (i) conventionally expresses both a question (\approx are you able to pass the salt?) and request (\approx please pass the salt), but (ii) may, nevertheless, on a given occasion of use, be used in only one of these ways. Why? Their proposed explanation is that these uses are *incompatible*: requesting you pass the salt presupposes you *are* able to pass the salt, in which case a question interpretation of (22) is infelicitous (as one of its answers is presupposed). This suffices to vitiate the interrogative force of (22).

Clearly, though, an analogy with directive questions is problematic for the pure illocutionary noncognitivist. For asserting that, e.g., the application-conditions of the normative predicate ‘is wrong’ are met by murder is obviously *compatible with* disapprobation of murder. There is no clear explanation for why normative sentences, if conventionally dual-use, should, on a given occasion of use, have only a non-assertoric use.

5 ON THE RELEVANCE OF IMPERATIVES

So far, imperatives, as such, have been of no special use to the illocutionary noncognitivist. What’s useful is, rather, a broader body of work on the connection between clause-type and conventional force. This is somewhat surprising, given the rhetorical emphasis Alwood’s review places on imperatives.

The only special relevance Alwood identifies for imperatives relates to solving Schroeder’s negation problem for expressivism. Expressivists, Schroeder (2008a,b) claims, are committed to explaining semantic properties of normative sentences (e.g., the pairwise inconsistency of ‘stealing is wrong’ and ‘stealing isn’t wrong’) in terms of properties of their attitudes (e.g., the disagreement between disapproving and tolerating stealing). That commitment is problematic: the expressivist lacks an explanation for why such attitudes disagree.

Alwood’s reply, on behalf of the hybrid illocutionary noncognitivist, is that “[d]eclarative sentences of any kind are inconsistent when their propositional contents are” (2010: 115). Similarly, one (though far from the only) historically popular account of the semantic inconsistency of an imperative $!\phi$ (read: ‘see to it that ϕ ’) and a contrary imperative $!\neg\phi$ appeals to the ordinary inconsistency of what Hare (1952) called their “phrastics”—the states of affairs whose realization they enjoin (ϕ and $\neg\phi$, respectively). Imperatives illustrate a way for noncognitivists to explain the relevant semantic properties without explaining them in terms of properties of either attitudes or speech-acts.

Schroeder’s rejoinder: even if this solves the semantic problem, it leaves the problem of explaining “what it is to think that stealing is not wrong as some function of what it is to think that stealing is wrong” in a way that also explains “why it is rationally inconsistent to have both thoughts at the same time” (2010: 132–3).

Imperatives *also*, I believe, suggest a way around this problem. While an agent cannot *think* $!\phi$, she may *issue* $!\phi$, and her addressee may *accept* $!\phi$. And it is rationally inconsistent either:

- For her to issue both $!\phi$ and $!\neg\phi$, or
- For her addressee to accept both $!\phi$ and $!\neg\phi$.⁹

A natural explanation for this is that this inconsistency (as a property of speech-acts and reactions) is *inherited from the semantic inconsistency* of $!\phi$ and $!\neg\phi$. This is a natural model for the noncognitivist to use in explaining Schroeder’s “rational inconsistency”. To block the analogy, I believe Schroeder must show that noncognitivists have no independent handle on the semantics of normative sentences—that noncognitivist notions of semantic inconsistency are somehow theoretically ill-founded.¹⁰ But they need not be. Hybrid illocutionary noncognitivists, e.g., seem to have an independent handle on the semantics of normative sentences.

As the example of imperatives shows, moreover, rational inconsistencies, of various sorts, may trace to semantic inconsistency between two sentences (namely, two imperatives), without those sentences expressing propositions or having truth-conditions, in any ordinary sense of those notions. Imperatives thus provide a model for resolving Schroeder’s negation problem for noncognitivism that is *neutral* between hybrid and pure forms of noncognitivism. That is ultimately, I argue elsewhere, the main source of their relevance to meta-ethics.

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9. Similarly, to make the normative-imperative parallel even more direct, if \mathbb{I} is a permission-granting operator (so that an utterance of $\mathbb{I}\phi$ functions to grant a permission for ϕ), it is inconsistent both (i) for an agent to issue both $!\phi$ and $\mathbb{I}\neg\phi$, and (ii) for her addressee to accept both $!\phi$ and $\mathbb{I}\neg\phi$.

10. Here, I have in mind his response to Gibbard’s plan-laden semantics at Schroeder (2008b: 585).

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