Philosophia (2019) 47:131–139
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-017-9944-7

Against Some Recent Arguments for 'Ought' Implies 'Can': Reasons, Deliberation, Trying, and Furniture

Paul Henne[1] · **Jennifer Semler**[2] · **Vladimir Chituc**[2] · **Felipe De Brigard**[1] · **Walter Sinnott-Armstrong**[1]

Received: 20 October 2017 / Revised: 13 December 2017 / Accepted: 28 December 2017 / Published online: 8 January 2018

Abstract Many philosophers claim that 'ought' implies 'can'. In light of recent empirical evidence, however, some skeptics conclude that philosophers should stop assuming the principle unconditionally. Streumer, however, does not simply assume the principle's truth; he provides arguments for it. In this article, we argue that his arguments fail to support the claim that 'ought' implies 'can'.

Keywords Ought implies can · Obligation · Ought · Blame · Ability

The principle that 'ought' implies 'can' holds that:

(OIC) For any agent, A, and act, C, if A ought to C, then A can C.

Paul Henne and Jennifer Semler are co-first authors.

✉ Paul Henne
Paul.Henne@Duke.edu

✉ Jennifer Semler
jennifer.semler@duke.edu

Vladimir Chituc
Vladchituc@gmail.com

Felipe De Brigard
felipe.debrigard@duke.edu

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong
walter.sinnott-armstrong@duke.edu

[1] Department of Philosophy, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

[2] Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

Many philosophers—including Kant and Smith (1933), Sidgwick (1884), Moore (1922), Parfit (1984), Zimmerman (1996), and Vranas (2007)—accept OIC. Several of these philosophers simply assume that this principle is true or hold that it is an analytic or conceptual entailment.

Despite its popularity, some skeptics reject OIC (e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong 1984, 1985). These skeptics frequently deny the truth of OIC by making judgments about thought experiments that they present as counterexamples. Recent experimental work supports the skeptical view of the principle by providing evidence that individuals tend to judge that an agent ought to perform an action that the agent physically cannot perform (Mizrahi 2015a; Buckwalter and Turri 2015; Chituc et al. 2016; Henne et al. 2016; Phillips and Cushman 2017; Turri 2017). Even if these experiments do not prove that OIC is false (See Cohen 2017; Hannon 2017; Kurthy et al. 2017; Kissinger-Knox et al. 2017), they shift the burden of proof to defenders of OIC (Henne et al. 2016). Consequently, philosophers should not simply assume OIC without any argument.

Much to his credit, Streumer (2007) does not simply assume OIC. He instead provides several supporting arguments. Some philosophers have criticized Streumer's arguments by distinguishing reasons to do from reasons to try (Heuer 2010) and by claiming that people have reasons to attempt to realize unachievable ideals (Brownlee 2010), and Streumer has responded to these specific criticisms (Streumer 2010). Here, we discuss further inadequacies in his arguments that escape his earlier responses. This current rebuttal, thus, supports the skeptical denial of OIC.

1 Streumer's Arguments and Their Flaws

In this section, we review four of Streumer's arguments, and we identify how they fail to support OIC.

1.1 Crazy Reasons

Philosophers sometimes argue for OIC by *reductio ad absurdum*. Using this method, Streumer considers the following case:

> Suppose that Jane is a person living in the twenty-first century. Given how bad… slavery [was], there are reasons for Jane to prevent [it], even though, to do this, she would have to travel back in time and single-handedly change the course of history. (Streumer 2007: 358-59)

From this case and from others, Streumer develops the Argument From Crazy Reasons, which we present in a simplified form:

(1) Jane has a reason to perform an act if doing that act would prevent great harm and if nothing overrides or undermines her reason to do it.
(2) Jane's act of preventing slavery would prevent great harms.
(3) Nothing overrides Jane's reason to prevent slavery.
(4) Nothing undermines Jane's reason to prevent slavery unless 'ought' implies 'can'.
(5) Therefore, Jane has a reason to prevent slavery unless 'ought' implies 'can'.

(6) Jane does not have a reason to prevent slavery.
(7) Therefore, 'ought' implies 'can'.

Premise (1) gives a sufficient (though not a necessary) condition for a reason to act. Premise (2) is supported by the claim that slavery created great harms.[1] Premise (3) is plausible because no cost to Jane could override the great harms of slavery. Premise (4) says that nothing other than Jane's inability to prevent slavery in America in the mid-1800's weakens or cancels a reason to prevent this slavery. (5) follows from (1)–(4). Premise (6) is an appeal to common sense (the mentioned reason is supposed to be *crazy*).[2] (7) follows from (5)–(6).

We challenge the soundness of this argument by denying premise 6: Jane has a reason to prevent slavery. By its nature, slavery in the United States caused extraordinary harm and violated human rights, and these are good reasons to prevent it. People alive during slavery, we can assume, had reasons to prevent it. Consider now that Jane somehow became able to prevent slavery and did prevent it—for instance, by traveling back in time. Given this hypothetical, it would be wrong to claim that she acted without reason, for she has the same reasons to prevent slavery as everyone else. So, one could think that Jane's reasons to prevent slavery only comes about when she suddenly becomes able to perform the action by traveling through time. But there is no basis for denying that Jane has a reason to prevent slavery before she becomes able other than to defend 'ought' implies 'can'—or, more clearly here, the contrapositive of OIC, namely that 'cannot' implies 'not ought'. This assumption, however, begs the question in this context.

Some critics may respond to this denial of premise (6) by claiming that it is absurd; we cannot be obligated to do things that we will necessarily fail to do. Brown tries to explain the absurdity when he writes, "Does ought imply can? Surely it does. For we do not hold a person to blame for not doing something he was unable to do" (Brown 1977: 206; Parfit 1984: 36; and Copp 1997: 445). However, this line of argument conflates blame and obligation (Henne et al. 2016). If Jane has an obligation or reason to prevent slavery and acts on this reason, devoting her life to preventing slavery, she will not succeed (unless Jane is a physicist who is close to perfecting her time-travel machine). Her inability might be contingent or necessary, but either way she cannot currently prevent slavery. Of course, Jane is not to blame for her failure to act on her reason to prevent slavery because she cannot prevent it. That admission about blame, however, does not change what Jane has a reason to do or what she ought to do. After all, if she could and did go back in time and prevent slavery, then she would have a reason to do so. In fact, the only way to conclude 'one has no reason' or 'it is not the case that one ought' from 'one is not blameworthy' is to conflate 'ought' with blame. It might be conversationally unacceptable to tell Jane that she has a reason to prevent slavery, since that assertion is useless as advice or as blame, but useless assertions can still be true (Sinnott-Armstrong 1984).

[1] For this example, and for the rest of this paper, we take 'slavery' to refer to *past legal chattel slavery in the United States*—given that slavery unfortunately remains a moral problem today. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this clarification.

[2] Streumer defines 'ought' as having the 'most reason' to perform an act. Philosophers diverge greatly on how to understand oughts and obligations. Some consider oughts to be all-things-considered duties (Ross 2002) or obligations (Vranas 2007), while Streumer cashes out oughts in the OIC debate with what moral agents have the most reason to do (for discussion, see Mizrahi 2015b; Mizrahi 2012).

These critics, however, may not be conflating blame and obligation.[3] Rather, Brown's (1977; see also Mizrahi 2009: 30–1) argument may be constructed as:

(1) If OIC is false, then we would blame some agents for failing to do what they cannot do.
(2) We don't blame any agents for failing to do what they cannot do.
(3) Therefore, OIC must be true.

But even this argument does not seem satisfactory, and versions of it have been extensively challenged (Mizrahi 2009). Among other challenges, it seems reasonable to deny the truth of premise (2) (Mizrahi 2009: 31 & 33). If an agent's actions violate his obligation to perform an action when he cannot perform the act, he still may be blameworthy for this failure (Mizrahi 2009: 31). Suppose, for example, Jack fails to help his friend because he doesn't want to help him out when he ought to (because he made a promise to help him). Jack makes himself unable to help his friend by constantly making himself busy when he knows his friend will need his help. In this case, Jack is blameworthy for failing to do what he cannot do because he is blameworthy for making himself unable to help his friend. Supporting this point, empirical work shows that people attribute blame for these kinds of cases (Buckwalter and Turri 2015; Chituc et al. 2016). These considerations justify rejection of premise (2) or similar principles.

Lastly, critics may also respond that the words 'reason' or 'ought' have different meanings when they cannot be used as advice or as blame because the agent cannot do what she ought or has a reason to do (Sinnott-Armstrong 1984, 1985). This reply, however, conflates speech acts with meaning or semantic content. Bart can say, "There's a bear," in order to warn a hiker, guide a hunter, instruct a zoo visitor, or thrill an owner looking for his lost pet bear, but the words 'there's' and 'bear' do not change meaning when they are used for these different speech acts. Thus, the fact that 'reason' and 'ought' are not used for speech acts of advice or blame when the agent cannot do what she ought or has a reason to do also does not show that those words change meaning between contexts. And if they have the same meanings, then they should also share the same analytic and conceptual entailments. Notice also that Streumer defines 'ought' as having the 'most reason' to perform an act. This definition by itself does not tell us whether one can have a reason to do what one cannot do, so our refutation is consistent with his definition.

1.2 Deliberation

Another argument from Streumer claims that if OIC is false, then:

> whenever a person engages in rational deliberation about what to do, this person will not only have to judge which reasons there are to perform actions that…she can perform, but will also have to judge which reasons there are to perform actions that…she cannot perform. Given the enormous amount of suffering that was caused by…slavery…this person will then almost always have to conclude that there is most reason for…her to travel back in time and prevent [it]. And this person will then have to try to travel back in time to prevent [it] even though it is pointless for this person to try to do this. (Streumer 2007: 365)

[3] We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this reading of Brown.

This passage suggests several distinct arguments for OIC. One concerns deliberation (cf. Hare 1963: 51–61):

(1) Anyone who deliberates about whether to do a certain act must consider all reasons for that act and for alternatives to that act.
(2) Preventing slavery in the past is an alternative to every act that anyone might do in the present.
(3) Therefore, if one has reasons to prevent past slavery, one must consider those reasons whenever deliberating about what to do.
(4) No reason for any act that one can do will outweigh reasons to prevent slavery.
(5) Therefore, anyone who deliberates about what to do must conclude that they have most reason to prevent slavery.
(6) Nobody at present can prevent slavery.
(7) Therefore, anyone who deliberates about what to do must conclude that they have most reason to perform an act that they cannot perform.

In short, Streumer claims that if OIC is false, rational deliberation requires rational agents to consider acts that they cannot perform and even to perform acts that they cannot perform. The denial of OIC suggests that deliberation is never rational—or at least never complete.

A challenge to this argument is to reject premise (1). Rationality does not require deliberators to consider every reason for every alternative. If this were the case, deliberators would often have to consider infinite possibilities and would, therefore, never be able to reach a decision. Considering some non-infinite set of reasons can still, in some cases, be contrary to rational deliberation. Suppose for instance that Bart has many reasons for doing A, and he acts perfectly rationally. He also knows that reason R to do A—if it is present—is the best reason to perform A, and it is better and more important than all other reasons. Bart is rational if he considers R, and if it is there, he does not have to consider the set of all of the remaining reasons. This example suggests that premise (1) is false because Bart can make a rational decision without considering any reasons for some alternative acts. Moreover, deliberation can be limited to acts that we can do, even if what we ought to do sometimes extends beyond what we can do. To assume otherwise is to conflate what needs to be considered in rational deliberation with what agents have reason to do and ought to do.

Some philosophers might suggest, however, that this reading of Streumer's argument is uncharitable. An alternative reading of his argument is this[4]:

(1) If OIC is false, then deliberation cannot ever be rational.
(2) Some deliberation is rational.
(3) Therefore, OIC is true.

On this argument for OIC, it is assumed that deliberation is sometimes rational (2), but the falsity of OIC entails that deliberation is never rational (1).

[4] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

One way to attack the argument is to claim that premise (1) is false. While the concepts of ought and ability are needed in rational deliberation, this requirement does not mean that 'ought' implies 'can'. Rational deliberation, because it has a goal of directing action, can be restricted to ability in a way that moral obligation is not. Suppose Matt makes a promise to pick up Ashley from the train station. But Matt oversleeps because he did not set his alarm, and, by the time he wakes up, he cannot make it to the train station on time. In deliberating about what to do, the fact that Matt cannot keep his promise to Ashley is an important consideration for his deciding how to act. However, the fact that Matt ought to pick up Ashley is also an important consideration—and both his consideration of what he can do and what he ought to do results in Matt's decision to ask his friend who lives by the train station to pick up Ashley and to apologize to Ashley. In light of these considerations, his deliberation is rational even though it is not the case that OIC (Matt ought to pick up Ashley although he cannot). Moreover, the fact that OIC is false is actually necessary for Matt to make a rational decision, for if OIC were true, then Matt wouldn't be obligated to keep his promise, thus he would not feel any need to ask for his friend's help and to apologize to Ashley. While 'ought' and 'can' are important to and useful for rational deliberation, the fact that they aid rational deliberation does not mean that 'ought' implies 'can'. Thus, even under this alternative reading of Streumer's argument, we do not find his arguments for OIC convincing.

1.3 Trying

The last sentence in the above quotation from Streumer suggests another argument regarding what we ought to try to do:

(1) It is pointless for Jane to try to perform an act that she cannot perform.
(2) It is never true that Jane should do what is pointless.
(3) Therefore, it is never true that Jane should try to perform an act that she cannot perform.
(4) If Jane has most reason (ought) to perform an act that she cannot perform, then Jane should try to perform that act.
(5) Therefore, it is never true that Jane has most reason (ought) to perform an act that she cannot perform.

This argument has several flaws. First, premise (1) is questionable because it is not always pointless to try to do what one cannot do, even if one knows one cannot do it. Trying to keep a promise, for instance, can show how much you care even if you know that you cannot fully succeed. For example, promising and trying to stay sober may show one's family that one cares deeply for them even when one will inevitably fail to keep the promise (for a related argument, see King 2014: 326).[5] Additionally, people try and make some progress in their efforts to achieve ideals—such as fairness, equality, and perfection—despite their inability to fully realize these standards (Brownlee 2010).

[5] Moreover, people often ought to perform complex actions which require a corresponding mental state, such as giving a genuine apology, but they are unable to have that corresponding mental state when it is beyond what they can will intentionally (King 2014).

For instance, perfect racial equality may be impossible in the United States during the lifetimes of any of the authors of this article, but that does not mean that the authors do not or should not make some effort to try to achieve this goal. Second, premise (4) is false because the fact that one has most reason to do something does not imply that one has most (or any) reason to try to do it. After all, even though Jane's preventing slavery would prevent great harm, her trying to prevent slavery would not prevent any harm at all, because her attempt would fail (she cannot unfortunately travel back in time), as she knows. In other words, the inference from 'reason to do' to 'reason to try' fails in just those cases where trying is pointless.

1.4 Furniture

Streumer suggests one more argument:

> There cannot be a reason for a table or a chair to perform an action, because it is impossible for a table or a chair to perform an action. When it is impossible for a person to perform an action this person is in the same position with regard to this action that a table or a chair is in with regard to all actions. Therefore, just as there cannot be a reason for a table or a chair to perform an action, there cannot be a reason for this person to perform this action. (Streumer 2007: 362)

Most notably, Streumer's argument is circular, it assumes what it is attempting to prove. The first sentence of the preceding passage assumes that 'ought' implies 'can' to assert that the reason for a table's lack of reason is the inability to act. However, there are other—more convincing—reasons why tables do not have reasons to perform acts. Tables, for instance, cannot move, thus they lack the ability to perform acts regardless of reasons. We do not need OIC to explain this phenomenon.

The argument also suffers from a false analogy between humans and furniture. Tables are not moral agents because they lack intentions, rationality and many more features that explain why tables do not have any reasons to do anything. Humans, on the other hand, have reasons to do things—even if they cannot do them. Critics may respond by altering the analogy to one that does not compare humans to furniture. Consider, for example, the case of a deceased person. Ought Julius Caesar run for Congress in 2018? Supporters of the furniture argument would claim that, because of the truth of OIC, a dead person has no reason to perform acts because he is unable to perform them. But there are two responses to this altered argument—which differ depending on the status conferred upon the deceased. If Caesar is still granted the status of personhood, then he is comparable to a living human. If this Caesar somehow arose from the dead and ran for Congress, we would not claim that he is acting without reason. So, Caesar does have a reason to run for Congress in 2018: at least if he could improve life now. On the other hand, Caesar may instead be considered as lacking personhood. In this case, he is no longer a moral agent because of his death, and is, therefore, in the same position as a table or chair. In both of these alternatives, it is not the case that OIC.

2 Conclusion

Recently, experimental philosophers (Buckwalter and Turri 2015; Chituc et al. 2016; Henne et al. 2016) have put the burden of proof on defenders of OIC (but see Kissinger-Knox et al. 2017). The defenders' arguments, which rely on analytic or conceptual entailment or on raw intuition, are now being questioned. If these defenders want to retain OIC, they need some better way to avoid or to carry this burden. Some philosophers, like Streumer, could avoid this problem by offering up their arguments that support OIC but do not rely on the tools and arguments experimental philosophers have recently challenged (Streumer 2007). Above, we gave reasons to think that Streumer's arguments, however, also fail. These counterarguments provide more support for skeptics of OIC.

Defenders of OIC might develop alternative principles to OIC. Portmore (2011), for example, argues for an even stronger form of OIC than the one that is traditionally accepted: 'ought' implies not just 'can' but also scrupulously securable. However, if OIC is false, then its stronger variations are also false. Southwood (2016), on the other hand, argues for an alternative yet related principle—the thing to do implies 'can'—and others suggest that a tensed version of OIC is appropriate (cf. Streumer 2003: 222–24; and Sinnott-Armstrong 1984). We do not attack these alternative principles, and the skeptics' arguments do not confront these. These new principles will have to be addressed in their own light.

If there is no adequate argument in favor of OIC as it is traditionally and generally understood and if defenders of OIC have the burden of proof as the experiments suggest, then philosophers should stop assuming OIC. And without OIC, many philosophers need to reconsider their positions that appeal to OIC (see Driver 1983; Sinnott-Armstrong 1984).

Acknowledgments We are thankful to the members of MAD Lab and the IMC Lab at Duke University. We are also thankful for the comments of an anonymous reviewer at *Philosophia*.

References

Brown, J. (1977). Moral Theory and the Ought–Can Principle. *Mind, 86*(342), 206–223.

Brownlee, K. (2010). Reasons and ideals. *Philosophical Studies, 151*(3), 433–444.

Buckwalter, W., & Turri, J. (2015). Inability and Obligation in Moral Judgment. *PLoS One, 10*(8), e0136589.

Chituc, V., Henne, P., Sinnott-Armstrong, W., & De Brigard, F. (2016). Blame, not ability, impacts moral "ought" judgments for impossible actions: Toward an empirical refutation of "ought" implies "can". *Cognition, 150*, 20–25.

Cohen, Y. (2017). An Analysis of Recent Empirical Data on 'Ought' Implies 'Can'. *Philosophia*, 1–11.

Copp, D. (1997). Defending the principle of alternate possibilities: Blameworthiness and moral responsibility. *Nous, 31*(4), 441–456.

Driver, J. (1983). Promises, obligations, and abilities. *Philosophical Studies, 44*, 221–223.

Hannon, M. (2017). Intuitions, reflective judgments, and experimental philosophy. *Synthese*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1412-1.

Hare, R. M. (1963). *Freedom and Reason*. New York: Clarendon Press.

Henne, P., Chituc, V., De Brigard, F., & Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2016). An empirical refutation of "Ought" Implies "Can". *Analysis, 76*, 283–290.

Heuer, U. (2010). Reasons and impossibility. *Philosophical Studies, 147*(2), 235–246.

Kant, I., & Smith, N. K. (1933). *Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Macmillan and Co..
King, A. (2014). Actions That We Ought, But Can't. *Ratio, 27*(3), 316–327.
Kissinger-Knox, A., Aragon, P., & Mizrahi, M. (2017). Ought Implies Can, "Framing Effects, and Empirical Refutations". *Philosophia*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-017-9907-z.
Kurthy, M., Lawford-Smith, H., & Sousa, P. (2017). Does ought imply can? *PLoS One, 12*(4), e0175206.
Mizrahi, M. (2009). "Ought" Does Not Imply "Can". *Philosophical Frontiers: A Journal of Emerging Thought, 4*(1), 19–35.
Mizrahi, M. (2012). Does 'Ought' Imply 'Can' from an Epistemic Point of View? *Philosophia, 40*(4), 829–840.
Mizrahi, M. (2015a). Ought, Can, and Presupposition: An Experimental Study. *Methode-Analytic Perspectives, 4*(6), 232–243.
Mizrahi, M. (2015b). Ought, Can, and Presupposition: A Reply to Kurthy and Lawford-Smith. *Methode, 4*(6), 250–256.
Moore, G. E. (1922). *Philosophical Studies*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co..
Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: OUP.
Phillips, J., & Cushman, F. (2017). Morality constrains the default representation of what is possible. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 114*(18), 4649–4654.
Portmore, D. W. (2011). *Commonsense consequentialism: Wherein morality meets rationality* (Vol. 2). New York: OUP.
Ross, W. D. (2002). *The right and the good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sidgwick, H. (1884). *The Methods of Ethics*. London: Macmillan and Co..
Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (1984). Ought conversationally implies can. *The Philosophical Review, 93*(2), 249–261.
Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (1985). "Ought to Have" and "Could Have". *Analysis, 45*(1), 44–48.
Southwood, N. (2016). "The thing to do" implies "can". *Noûs, 50*(1), 61–72.
Streumer, B. (2003). Does 'ought' conversationally implicate 'can'? *European Journal of Philosophy, 11*(2), 219–228.
Streumer, B. (2007). Reasons and impossibility. *Philosophical Studies, 136*(3), 351–384.
Streumer, B. (2010). Reasons, impossibility and efficient steps: reply to Heuer. *Philosophical Studies, 151*(1), 79–86.
Turri, J. (2017). How "ought" exceeds but implies "can": Description and encouragement in moral judgment. *Cognition, 168*, 267–275.
Vranas, P. B. (2007). I ought, therefore I can. *Philosophical Studies, 136*(2), 167–216.
Zimmerman, M. (1996). *The concept of moral obligation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.