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Introduction

Who am I to uphold unrealizable normative claims? Usually, such a question is deemed to be rhetorical. Of course, this one seems to say, I do not uphold a normative claim if it is supposed to be action-guiding while at the same time proves to be unrealizable by its addressee. After all, "ought" implies "can," and to be more specific: "ought" *conceptually* implies "can," doesn't it? Taken literally, the question then implies that if I were to uphold unrealizable normative claims, I would simply be a silly person who is conceptually mistaken.

More than ever, this seems to be true in cases in which I am both author and addressee of the claim in question.[1] In the following, I will only be concerned with such self-addressed normative claims and, moreover, of these only with claims that have a bearing on one's self.[2] Take, for example, the claim to be a caring parent and always be there for your children if they are in need of your help, or take the claim to be an exemplary tutor who always gives his students a thorough and detailed feedback to all their papers. These claims not only tell us what to do, but by that also what kind of person to be. Hence, they comprise at least a partial answer to the question of who one is or wants to be and cannot be ignored or failed to be met without running the risk of compromising one's self. However, maybe at some point you have no idea how to help your child concerning some special hobby of his and you also cannot manage to get to know the necessary details in time, or maybe sometimes there are so many students' papers that there is simply not enough time to talk each of the papers through individually.

1 However, this shall not imply any specific position on the "ought's" foundation. Hence, being "author" of a self-addressed normative claim could be read either as marking a volitional foundation of normativity or as marking the fact that a person only acknowledges an already existing "ought", thereby pointing, for example, to a communitarian position or to moral realism concerning the "ought's" foundation.

2 Nevertheless, I think that the argument I am trying to develop here holds for normative claims in general.

A further, and much more tragic, example is "Sophie's Choice." It was introduced in the debate on moral dilemmas by Patricia S. Greenspan,[3] and is in turn based on a novel of the same name by William Styron.[4] After arriving at Auschwitz concentration camp, Sophie is forced to decide which of her two children will be gassed immediately and which one shall live with her in the camp. If she refuses to choose, both children will die. Having no other option than to choose in order to save at least one of her children, she finally cries to take her younger child. The guilt feelings she develops because of her choice finally lead to her committing suicide.

Greenspan uses "Sophie's Choice" and the plausibility of her guilt feelings to argue in favor of the existence of "real" moral dilemmas, and to be more exact, of *prohibition* dilemmas because all options open to Sophie (choosing either one of her children to die or refusing to choose and letting both her children be killed) seem to be morally forbidden. I will not be concerned with the debate on moral dilemmas in this paper though.[5] Despite the moral implications of "Sophie's Choice," it is hardly necessary to refer to some special moral obligations to understand the tragic of her predicament for the topic at hand. It is quite enough, and maybe even more true to Styron's novel anyway, to see Sophie as being caught in a personal dilemma. As a caring mother she loves both her children equally and is committed to their well-being equally as well. In being forced to let one of her children getting killed and, moreover, being forced to make the decision herself, she *cannot* live up to her self-addressed normative claims. Thus, her *self* is inevitably and fundamentally damaged, letting her commit suicide in the end.

Given the range between the aforementioned examples stemming from situations in everyday life and such tragic and exceptional situations like "Sophie's Choice," it is fair to say that at least occasionally situations will arise in which you are, through no fault of your own, simply not able to meet the claims you uphold and identify yourself with. What then should we make of the idea of identifying oneself with normative claims that prove to be unrealizable, at least at times or to their full extent? Intuitions on how to judge an agent (and, consequently, the normative claims in question) seem to differ profoundly depending on the situation. In situations in everyday life, like the first two situations mentioned above, the agent, in staying committed to these claims and upholding them even in cases where he or she is unable to meet them, usually runs the risk of being judged as a silly person, true to the principle "ought implies can." In more tragic cases, however, like in "Sophie's Choice," judging Sophie as *silly* seems to be not only rather insensitive. It also seems to be misguided with regard to a comprehensive normative assessment of the situation and predicament Sophie finds herself in.

Still, if taken for granted that the pivotal aspect in all cases lies in the fact that the agents simply *cannot* act in accordance to normative claims they identify themselves with, all cases should be evaluated equally. Assuming further that "ought" (conceptually) implies "can," there can be no valid normative claim without the addressee being able to act accordingly. Hence, identifying oneself with unrealizable claims displays a conceptual error and thus irrational behavior. Consequently, Sophie would have to be judged as a silly person as well, at least with regard to her upholding and identifying herself with the claim to save both her children. However, even if that were true as it stands, something still seems to be amiss concerning an adequate assessment of the tragic of Sophie's situation as well as her *self* as devoted and loving mother.

Furthermore, the assessment so far yields the following general consequences with regard to an agent's self. Assuming, on the one hand, the idea of being able to choose freely which

3 See Greenspan 1983. esp. 118f.

4 Styron 1979.

5 With regard to moral dilemmas and an analysis of the moral obligations involved, see Kühler 2008a.

normative claims I want to identify myself with, I would display an irrational self in choosing unrealizable ones and, hence, should abstain from or give up all unrealizable commitments. Assuming, on the other hand, the contrary idea according to which my commitments are "given" and "not up to me," e.g. in the sense of "volitional necessity" put forward prominently by Harry G. Frankfurt,[6] not only would it be impossible for me to meet the demands of fundamental constituents of my self, but it would also be impossible for me to change those constituents. Hence, my self would have to be regarded as pathological, being necessarily and unavoidably irrational as well as tragic. Consequently, Sophie would have to be judged not only as silly but as pathological as well which surely seems to be overly harsh. In any case, further analysis seems to be necessary.

Of course, an alternative analysis quickly springs to mind that apparently avoids the threat of being forced to judge agents as silly or pathological out of hand, while it still provides one with the opportunity to adhere to the principle "ought implies can." The examples given above should generally not be regarded as comprising strictly action-guiding normative claims, but rather as expressing *ideals*. Those two notions, therefore, should be kept conceptually separate. Whereas action-guiding normative claims, indeed, imply the corresponding "can," ideals only tell us that some state of the world would be a good thing if it were the case, regardless of its realizability. In fact, ideals are often defined as unrealizable perfections in the first place. Hence, they do not conceptually imply "can," and I could identify myself with them without being silly or pathological. Instead, I would have to be regarded simply as an idealist.

However, this provokes the question of how to explain the possibility of my ideals functioning as a basis for my action-guiding decisions. If I deliberate on what to do, my ideals, being at least partly constitutive of who I am, play a key role with regard to my decisions concerning which course of action is the right one or the one most true to my self. As mentioned above, I also cannot simply choose to ignore my ideals without running the risk of compromising my self. Thus, one's ideals seem to comprise a certain normative claim to act in accordance to them after all. Hence, the question is how my ideals can provide that action-guiding function if all action-guiding normative claims have to be understood as conceptually implying "can."

This challenge, so it seems, can be easily met as well. First of all, one would have to realize that a normative claim imposed by an ideal does not say that it ought to be realized entirely if this proves to be impossible. Due to its explicit idealistic character, what is claimed is only that one should do the best one can in light of the ideal in question, e.g. helping your children or giving your students feedback only to the best of your abilities. Thus, the principle "ought implies can" is fully acknowledged while ideals can not only count as rationally acceptable constituents of one's self, but can also provide the required action-guiding function.

So far, everything seems to be perfectly in order and the story even true to common sense. On second thought, however, I think the way in which the challenge is met is flawed. Therefore, even admitting that the story so far presents us a rather reasonable result, it at least does so for the wrong reasons. To make this critical assessment plausible, in the following, I will first take a closer look at the story so far and work out its details. Secondly, I will argue that, contrary to the story's assertion, the assumption of "ought" conceptually implying "can," when taken seriously, leaves no room for the possibility of requiring oneself to do the best one can in light of those unrealizable ideals one is committed to. Consequently, I will argue that the principle "ought implies can," when understood as conceptual implication, should be rejected.

6 Cf. Frankfurt 1993.

Finally, I will sketch an alternative story which, I hope, can avoid the flaws criticized while at the same time being able to retain the plausible result that, basically, one should be able to meet the normative claims one is facing.

Non-binding ideals and binding requirements under the assumption of the principle "ought implies can"

The main ingredients of the story so far are a strong conceptual distinction between ideals and action-guiding normative claims, on the one hand, and the assumption of "ought" conceptually implying "can," on the other hand. A highly elaborated account of this view is presented by Michael J. Zimmerman.[7] He explicitly distinguishes between two senses of "ought."[8] In a first sense, "ought" expresses an ideal or a desideratum. Such an ideal-"ought," he claims, has to be understood in a non-binding sense, meaning that although what ought to be the case is desirable, no one is required to bring it about. Acting in accordance to ideals, if possible at all, hence, proves to be supererogatory and commendable, but not obligatory. Accordingly, ideal-"ought"-statements can always be formulated in passive voice: "Something should be brought about."[9] Ideals, thus, primarily convey a statement about some desirable state of the world which might be brought about by a whole range of suitable actions or which might not be realizable at all.

Secondly, there is a binding sense of "ought," meaning that its addressee is required, or obligated, to perform a certain action. Such a requirement, then, implies a corresponding "can," whereas Zimmerman explains the notion of "can" by an agent's accessibility to two possible worlds, one in which he performs the action in question and another in which he does not. Put in other words, if an agent "can" do something, he has both the ability and the opportunity to do it and then decides whether actually to do it or not.

It should also be remarked that Zimmerman formulates a double time-indexed version of both "ought" and "can."[10] The thesis goes as follows: You ought at t_1 to do an act at t_2 implies that you can at t_1 do that act at t_2. Put simply, Zimmerman holds a view that whenever you are required to do something you are in fact able to carry out that action at the required time. The double time-indexed version of "ought implies can" enables Zimmerman to establish not only the notion of "immediate obligation" and "immediate can," but also the notion of "remote obligation" as well as "remote can." These further notions clearly provide an advantage in cases where obligations are met or broken at some other time than expected, for example when I intentionally render myself unable to fulfill a certain requirement beforehand. It is true, Zimmerman admits, that I am no longer be required to act at that later time because I am no longer able to. However, rendering myself unable beforehand can now be seen as "remotely breaking my obligation."

Despite this advantage, I think Zimmerman's double time-indexed version of "ought implies can" still has to face serious challenges. For example, he has to draw a line between the subjective assumptions by the people involved regarding the addressee's "can" at any given

7 Zimmerman 1987 and 1996. Of course, the thesis that "ought" conceptually implies "can", prominently ascribed to Kant, is defended by a wide variety of philosophers. See, for example, Streumer 2003 and Vranas 2007, to mention only two more of the most recent defenders.

8 Cf. Zimmerman 1996, 2-5 and 90-93.

9 Ideal "ought"-statements are "passive-transformable", as he calls it. Cf. Zimmerman, 1996, 5.

10 Cf. Zimmerman 1987 and 1996, 40-53 and 96-113.

time, on the one hand, and the addressee's actual, or objectively given, ability and opportunity, on the other hand. The question is whether Zimmerman's account might produce objective obligations no one is aware of because everybody falsely believes that the addressee "remotely" cannot act accordingly, or, the other way round, it might produce "false" subjective obligations because everyone, again falsely, believes that the addressee "remotely" can act accordingly. For all my intents and purposes in this paper, there is no need to discuss this special issue further.[11]

According to Zimmerman, the resulting implication between the binding sense of "ought" and the corresponding "can" is analytical. For every true "ought"-statement there exists a corresponding true "can"-statement. Hence, his account leads to the thesis that it is irrational to identify oneself with binding normative claims that cannot be fulfilled. This holds both in cases where a specific action cannot be performed as well as when no suitable action can be performed to bring about the required state of the world. There seems to be no problem, however, in identifying oneself with ideals because they only comprise a non-binding sense of "ought," expressing in passive voice simply that something is desirable or worth being brought about.

Still, as it stands, Zimmerman's account is in need of one important clarification for the topic at hand. For so far, the implication between "ought" and "can" reads as follows: if it is true that an agent is required to perform some action x, then it is also true that the agent can perform it. And put contrapositively, if it is true that an agent cannot perform an action x, then it cannot be true that he is required to perform it. Taken for granted that this last conclusion assigns a new normative status to the action in question, namely that it is no longer forbidden or blameworthy not to perform it, especially the second inference, therefore, faces the challenge of breaching Hume's Law, i.e. the well-known view that there is no legitimate way of deriving "ought" from "is." That is so because a descriptive statement, regarding the agent's missing ability or opportunity to perform an action x, leads to the normative conclusion that he cannot be required to perform it and also cannot be regarded as blameworthy for not performing it. The first inference mentioned takes the other way round, deriving the truth of a descriptive statement, namely that an agent is able to perform an action x, from the normative statement that the agent is required to perform it.[12]

11 For an elaboration of this argument, see Kühler 2008b.

12 For an elaboration of this argument within the discussion of the principle "ought implies can", see Collingridge 1977 and Statman 1995, 37. Albert 1991, 91ff., however, defends the principle in the way mentioned, interpreting it as a "bridging principle" (Brückenprinzip) between "is" and "ought."

13 Two other lines of argument have been put forward. However, if a strong conceptual connection between "ought" and "can" shall be maintained, both attempts seem to me only to provide weaker arguments. Firstly, it is argued that "ought" and "can" are not connected via conceptual implication, but via conversational implicature. This suggestion is brought forward mainly by Sinnott-Armstrong 1984 and 1988, 110-126, who follows Grice 1989, 22-40. See also Forrester 1989, ch. 2, and Pigden 1990. However, the thesis that we only pragmatically assume and can always step back from the proposition that an agent, when he ought to do an action x, can act accordingly, essentially gives up the idea of any strong conceptual connection between "ought" and "can." Hence, the first line of argument fails. See on this note also Saka 2000, 94, and Streumer 2003. Secondly, it is argued that no normative statement is involved in the first place. If an ought-statement is considered false, it is claimed that this has no normative bearing, but simply means that the normative claim does not exist, at least in any relevant way. See on this note mainly von Wright 1963. However, one has to ask what is meant by the assertion that a normative claim does not exist. Either this has to be understood in some sociological and purely descriptive sense, then this seems to be outright false if, for example, the normative claim in question could be found in texts of law. Or it might mean that the claim in question could not be valid. Yet "valid" obviously comprises a normative sense. Hence, also the second line of argument fails.

The most promising way of rebutting this challenge of breaching Hume's Law, while retaining a conceptual relationship between "ought" and "can," goes as follows.[13] As mentioned before, Zimmerman claims that the relationship between "ought" and "can" is analytical. However, one should not make the mistake of understanding it as deriving the truth or falsity of one proposition from another one. Instead, one should follow Peter F. Strawson[14] and the idea of *conceptual presupposition*. Strawson exemplifies this notion with the sentence: "The king of France is wise." As there is (at least currently) no king of France, the sentence lacks a proper reference. Hence, it is absurd to ask whether the sentence is true or false. It is neither. However, this does not mean, as Strawson stresses, that the sentence is meaningless. At least its utterance remains significant and, hence, comprehensible. We can understand its meaning by way of hypothetically presupposing its proper reference: If there were a king of France, he would be wise. However, as long as the object referred to does not exist, the question whether the corresponding sentence is true or false remains absurd and cannot be answered.[15]

The relationship between "ought" and "can" should now be seen analogical. The binding sense of "ought" conceptually presupposes that an agent can act accordingly. Otherwise, the "ought"-statement in question is neither true nor false, but absurd. Hence, the challenge of breaching Hume's Law is rebutted because no inference is made between two propositions. Instead, any correct use of the binding sense of "ought" hinges on the fact that its addressee is able to perform the action in question in the first place. So understood, "ought implies can" holds because it just makes explicit what is taken for granted right from the start anyway. The same holds for the contrapositive formulation. Whenever an agent is not able to perform some action x, a crucial presupposition for uttering a correct, i.e. either true or false, "ought"-statement is not met, and, as the question whether he is required to do x is absurd, he cannot be required to do it. Therefore, the principle "ought implies can" should be read as "ought in its binding sense conceptually presupposes can."

Where does the story so far leave us, regarding the question of identifying oneself with non-binding ideals, on the one hand, and binding requirements, on the other hand? Firstly, and regarding the latter, I can only identify myself with any binding requirements, if I am in fact able to perform the action in question. Hence, even if talking about commitments to unrealizable binding requirements remains comprehensible, it contradicts a necessary presupposition and is, therefore, absurd. Furthermore, it yields the thesis that it is not even conceptually possible to identify oneself with unrealizable binding requirements in the first place. If I were to say that I identify myself with requirement x, but I cannot perform either the specifically required action or any suitable action to bring about the required state of the world, I would make the same mistake as if I were to say, for example, that I am getting married without a partner. Therefore, one might even question whether I really would exhibit an irrational self when claiming that I identify myself with an unrealizable binding requirement because this has itself proven to be conceptually impossible. Hence, if I were to say so, not only would I make a (rather silly) conceptual mistake, but I would also fail in really doing it. However, one could at least deem me irrational for (unavailingly) assuring that I do. This may hold for being objectively irrational or even subjectively if I were also aware of the (alleged) conceptual relationship between "can" and the binding sense of "ought."

14 Strawson 1950.

15 Cf. Strawson 1950, 324-331. See also Hare 1962, 53-61, although Hare seems to miss Strawson's emphasis that such sentences remain comprehensible. This critique against Hare was soon brought forward by Lemmon 1965, 49.

Secondly, there is no problem in identifying oneself with ideals because they comprise only a non-binding sense of "ought," formulating in passive voice only that something is worth being brought about. If, on the one hand, an ideal proves to be realizable, acting accordingly is then not required but supererogatory. If, on the other hand, an ideal proves to be unrealizable, i.e. if one cannot perform a suitable action to bring about the "ideal" state of the world entirely, the ideal serves as practical orientation with regard to the best one can do in its light. However, because of the comprised non-binding sense of "ought," this decision-guiding function can also only count as advice. Likewise, one is not required to do the best one can.

This is so because, thirdly, the possibility of deriving a binding requirement from a non-binding ideal is strongly rejected by Zimmerman himself. He argues that even a personally addressed ideal, like "that old lady ought to be helped by Jones," when derived from the impersonal ideal "that old lady ought to be helped by someone," cannot be transformed without loss of meaning into a binding requirement, i.e. "Jones ought to help the old lady."[16] Whereas the latter would, on Zimmerman's account, express that Jones has an obligation to help the old lady, the former would only express that it would be a good thing if Jones decided to act in a supererogatory way and help her. Hence, at best additional arguments would have to be provided in order to establish a connection between non-binding ideals and binding requirements. Therefore, if one identifies oneself with ideals, the story so far only allows for them to serve as advice. Likewise, it remains supererogatory to do the best one can in their light.

Why the story so far is flawed

This result might leave one a bit startled. There seems to be something wrong with the idea that it remains supererogatory to act in accordance to one's ideals if, at the same time, they shall play a major role in constituting one's self. For this would render optional following vital constituents of one's self. It would be commendable, to be sure, but in no way required. This result seems to be clearly at odds with our intuition that our ideals cannot, or at least should not, be disregarded so easily. On the contrary, as vital constituents of one's self, ideals do seem to comprise a binding sense of "ought." Take again the examples mentioned at the beginning of being an exemplary tutor or a helpful and caring parent, especially in tragic cases like "Sophie's Choice." It is simply not just an *advice* to act either in accordance to these ideals or, if they prove to be unrealizable, to do the best one can in their light. Rather it is more adequate to say that one *requires* oneself to act accordingly or to do the best one can respectively.

In order to maintain the story so far, a first reaction then would be to stress that what is at stake here is not requiring oneself to perform some impossible action, but only requiring oneself to do the best one can when committing oneself to unrealizable ideals. This conceded, no conceptual problem seems to arise because when requiring oneself to do the best one can in light of one's unrealizable ideals one can, per definition, do the best one can.

Although this argument might sound plausible at first, I think it is deficient. First of all, it leaves open the question whether ideals that are constitutive of one's self comprise a binding sense of "ought." Depending on whether they do or not, the crucial follow-up question then is whether the notion of "requiring myself in light of my unrealizable ideals" still makes sense. After all, it is still assumed that it is conceptually impossible to identify oneself with any unrealizable binding "ought."

16 Cf. Zimmerman 1996, 4f.

A first line of argument: ideals which are constitutive of one's self comprise a binding sense of "ought"

A first line of argument that might readily come to mind to defend the story so far further is to ascribe a binding sense of "ought" to those ideals that are constitutive of one's self. Deriving from them a binding requirement to do the best one can in their light then seems to be no problem. However, this would mean that the principle "ought implies can" now applies to these binding ideals as well. Hence, one can indeed identify oneself with realizable binding ideals, but it has to be admitted that if binding ideals prove to be unrealizable, i.e. if in some situations there is no action one can perform to bring about the state of the world described by the ideal, then it is conceptually impossible to commit oneself to these ideals, at least in a binding sense, and it is irrational to assert that one does.

The first line of argument, thus, works fine for realizable ideals, i.e. if one can perform a suitable action to bring about the "ideal" state of the world. However, firstly, there is then no more need to introduce the notion of doing the best one can because one is, per definition, able to bring about the required state of the world entirely. Secondly, this line of argument explicitly leaves no conceptual room for being committed in a binding sense to unrealizable ideals. Instead, if a binding sense of "ought" shall be ascribed to one's ideals with regard to their action-guiding function, they would have to be formulated in a realizable way. Hence, for example, my ideal to be a caring parent and always be there for my children if they are in need of my help could only hold in a revised version, namely being a caring parent and being there for my children if they are in need of my help *and* if I can provide that help. Likewise, the ideal of being an exemplary tutor would have to be revised. Now it has to be read as giving my students a thorough and detailed feedback to their papers only in cases in which I have enough time for that.

In their unrealizable versions, however, these ideals unavoidably keep their non-binding sense of "ought," which, in turn, means that no *requirement* of doing at least the best one can in their light can be derived from them. This is so because, given the ascription of a binding sense of "ought" to one's ideals, if spelled out fully, this notion now would read as "in light of my unrealizable binding ideals." This, of course, again contradicts the assumed principle that the binding sense of "ought" conceptually presupposes "can." The notion, therefore, is absurd and has to be dropped, and this, in turn, yields the conclusion that the adjacent idea of "doing one's best" becomes pointless as well. For there no longer seems to be any (binding) criterion of what is best, and the question of "doing one's best in light of what?" thus lacks a plausible answer.

To explain this last line of thought further, it is helpful to note that, up to this point, there exists a quite similar argument with regard to the notion of "trying" and its connection to the principle "ought implies can."[17] If it is assumed that all we really can do is try, then we cannot be required to do something, but only be required to try. However, in order to make sense of the notion of trying, it always has to be specified what one tries to do. Hence, there is no conceptual possibility of specifying a certain trying on its own. Besides that, deciding what kind of trying should be regarded as an adequate trying poses another problem. Who could decide that and on what grounds? Both points can now be seen analogically with regard to doing one's best in light of an unrealizable ideal. Firstly, there seems to be no possibility of specifying doing one's best without presupposing some kind of standard according to which this "best" could

17 See McConnell 1989 and Mason 2003.

be measured. Secondly, and likewise, this raises the question of who could or should decide on the standing of one's best and on what grounds.

Still, it could be claimed that the question of doing one's best in light of one's unrealizable ideals might very well have a comprehensible answer. One has to bear in mind that, while it may be absurd to be required to do the impossible, to say so is far from being incomprehensible. As mentioned above, a sentence that lacks the fulfillment of one of its conceptual presuppositions remains comprehensible because we can hypothetically assume the presupposition being met. Hence, the notion of "in light of my unrealizable binding ideals" also remains comprehensible and can, so to speak, light the way to do one's best.

However, even granted this answer, it would only lead to another problem. If it has to be admitted that there can be no "real" unrealizable binding ideals, then it is questionable where the binding requirement of doing one's best in their light should come from. For the idea of ascribing a binding sense of "ought" to one's self-constituting ideals initially was to do just that, to provide a reasonable premise for the needed inference. Yet in trying to do that, while still acknowledging the principle "ought implies can," it has to be accepted that one can commit oneself in a binding way only to realizable ideals. Hence, there is, indeed, no conceptual room for the idea of requiring oneself to do the best one can in light of one's *unrealizable* ideals.

Still, it could be claimed that this result should not be seen as a burden but quite positive. For, firstly, there seems to be no more need for such a requirement because of the revised ideals and, secondly and once again: what sense does it make to require oneself to do the impossible? As mentioned at the beginning, this seems to be quite a silly or even tragic thing to do.

However, given our everyday notion of committing oneself to ideals, one is inclined to reply that this result, together with its last claim, is somewhat implausible. For revising one's unrealizable ideals to a realizable version would deprive them of their very idealistic character, and refraining from such a revision would mean maintaining their non-binding sense of "ought." Either way, this would mean revising one's self.

Moreover, assuming that our commitments are in some way "given," such revisions might very well prove to be impossible themselves, leaving one once again in a tragic predicament. And even given the idea that we could choose our commitments freely, one might think of the needed revisions as counterintuitive. For example, any feelings of regret that go beyond a kind of spectator regret would have to be considered as conceptually misguided and thus irrational, a result that is at odds with the intuition that, if I identify myself with unrealizable ideals, like the ones mentioned at the beginning, at least a kind of agent regret[18] seems to be in place when situations arise in which I fail to be there for my children or fail to give my students a detailed feedback. Such agent regret does not seem to be irrational. Instead, it plausibly expresses that we care about what should have been the case *and* that we were actively involved in the situation. It thus points to a stronger than only a non-binding commitment to an unrealizable ideal.[19] Usually, we would not just say that something we might find desirable, but otherwise has nothing to do with us, did not happen, but that something we care about deeply did not happen due to our inability to bring it about. Hence, this first line of argument, i.e. ascribing a binding sense of "ought" to one's self-constituting ideals together with the assumption of "ought" conceptually presupposing "can," seems to make us give up more than we like.

18 For an elaboration of the notion of agent regret, see Rorty 1980 and Williams 1981, 27.

19 See on this note also Betzler 2004.

A second line of argument: deriving a binding requirement to do the best one can from non-binding ideals

Therefore, if the very idealistic, i.e. occasionally unrealizable, character of one's ideals shall be maintained, one might think of a second line of argument in which the non-binding sense of ideals is indeed retained, but in which the assumption that a binding requirement cannot be derived from a non-binding ideal is dropped. This, of course, leads to the question, under what conditions such an inference could be valid. Given my question at hand in this paper, the most obvious condition would be that only those ideals that are vital constituents of one's self allow the needed inference. The argument would go like this. Firstly, an impersonal and non-binding ideal is assumed, namely that x would be a good thing if it were the case. Secondly, it is stated that I am committed to this ideal, which makes it a self-addressed "ought"-statement. In retaining the non-binding sense of ideals, this statement has to be read as "it would be a good thing if x were brought about by me." However, in a third step the assumption is made that being committed to an ideal simply means requiring myself to act accordingly or at least to do the best I can in its light. Hence, the third step includes a distinction between realizable and unrealizable ideals. While being committed to a realizable ideal means requiring myself to bring about the state of the world in question entirely, being committed to some unrealizable ideal means requiring myself to do (at least) the best I can in its light. This way, so it could be claimed, it is possible to establish a binding requirement based on a self-constituting non-binding ideal, and the story so far can be reconciled with our intuitions.

As appealing as this second line of argument may sound—indeed, I think it goes somewhat in the right direction—, as it stands, I also think it is still deficient. Besides the impression that it has the smack of being a kind of *ad hoc* solution, on closer look, it either falls back to the first line of argument, or it has to be modified in a way that ultimately leads to a fundamentally different story, and with that, also to the rejection of the principle "ought implies can." For the crucial question is now: what exactly is meant when it is said that being committed to an unrealizable non-binding ideal "simply means" requiring oneself to do the best one can in its light?

Firstly, one might be inclined to say that "being committed" and "requiring oneself" are used synonymously. Consequently, they could be used interchangeably. However, as both terms have different objects—while I commit myself to an ideal, I require myself to act—, when used synonymously, being committed to an ideal now would have to be understood as requiring oneself to act in accordance to it, i.e. to perform a suitable action that brings about the ideal state of the world in question. The statement then could be rephrased as follows: "I require myself to act in accordance (i.e. being committed) to an unrealizable non-binding ideal means requiring myself to do the best I can in its light."

However, this interpretation sounds like I would require myself both to act in (full) accordance to the unrealizable ideal, which would be conceptually impossible in the first place, and at the same time only require myself to do the best I can in its light. One may grant here that "acting in accordance" does not necessarily imply "bringing about the ideal state of the world entirely." However, given the principle "ought implies can," this would once again lead to the same result as the first line of argument, namely that I can no longer be committed to an unrealizable ideal, but only to its diminished realizable version. Again, my ideals would be deprived of their very idealistic character, instead of presenting a conceptual possibility to regain it. Furthermore, it seems that an outright contradiction can be found in the first half of the sentence anyway, namely a *binding* requirement to an explicitly *non-binding* ideal. Thus, clearly, this first interpretation cannot be right.

Therefore, when saying that "being committed to an unrealizable ideal simply means requiring oneself to do the best one can in its light," this can only be understood as marking an inference. The claim, thus, has to be that the notion of "requiring oneself to do the best one can" can in some way be derived from the notion of "being committed to an unrealizable non-binding ideal." However, that seems to be just another formulation of the prior claim that a binding requirement can be derived from a self-constituting non-binding ideal. Hence, the alleged solution turns out either only to restate that claim, instead of giving a reason for why it can be seen as true, or it has to fall back on the first line of argument, which has already proven to be not a very promising one. Either way, the second line of argument is thus back at square one.

A normative interpretation

Still, the idea that by committing oneself to an unrealizable ideal one requires oneself to do the best one can in its light clearly enough seems to point in the right direction. For what else could establish the needed connection? What is so appealing about this idea lies therein that it implicitly points to the practical sphere. Hence, to say that when I identify myself with some unrealizable and, so far, non-binding ideal simply means requiring myself to do the best I can in its light, it should not be understood as marking some kind of semantic or logical inference between true propositions, but it should rather be understood from a practical point of view. It is the practical stance of the person who identifies herself with an ideal that establishes a corresponding binding requirement. The derivation and the resulting requirement are thus either something that one actively decides to do or represent, for example, some kind of "volitional necessity" when following Frankfurt's line of thought. Does this mean that the story so far finally holds?

On the contrary, when taken for granted that this last view is indeed the most plausible one, it seems to undermine fundamentally both of the story's main ingredients, namely a strong conceptual distinction between ideals and action-guiding normative claims, i.e. more precisely now between unrealizable non-binding ideals and the binding requirement to do the best one can in their light, on the one hand, and the principle "ought implies can," on the other hand. For imposing a practical stance to answer the most crucial question of how to derive from the notion of being committed to an unrealizable non-binding ideal the binding requirement to do the best one can in its light, the relationships both between "ought" and "can" as well as the binding and non-binding senses of "ought" also have to be located in the practical sphere.

If it is either something that one does or some kind of "volitional necessity" when a binding requirement is established with regard to an unrealizable ideal, it means that what one does is initially ascribing a self-addressed binding sense of "ought" to this ideal and, because of that, also requiring oneself to do at least the best one can in its light. Hence, the non-binding sense of "ought" with regard to that ideal is given up. Accordingly, this yields the assumption that it becomes either a practical question whether one *should* commit oneself in a binding sense to this ideal and, thereby, also require oneself to do at least the best one can in its light, or it becomes a descriptive statement about the person's given "volitional necessities."

However, telling the story that way and remembering the unsatisfactory first line of argument mentioned above, it can thus no longer be claimed that, when doing this or when being subject to such a "volitional necessity," it involves some kind of conceptual mistake, namely failing to acknowledge the principle "ought implies can." Hence, I think when trying to make sense of the idea that our ideals, firstly, at least partially constitute our selves, secondly, often

enough prove to be unrealizable in their totality, and, finally, establish a requirement to do the best we can in their light, both of the story's main ingredients have to be rejected, especially the principle that "ought" conceptually presupposes "can."

Rejecting the principle "ought implies can" and setting out for an alternative story

Given this line of thought, why not just give up the principle "ought implies can" entirely? The reluctance most people would presumably show stems from an equally strong intuition, namely that somehow this seems to be a very stupid move. For surely, there is something silly in the idea of being required to do the impossible. However, one has to ask what kind of silliness is involved here.

Until now, I have discussed only the prominent claim that it is a kind of conceptual silliness. Hence, one would make a conceptual mistake when using the binding sense of "ought" without paying attention to the thereby presupposed "can." However, given the result of my discussion above, especially the importance of the practical sphere, I do not think that a conceptual mistake is at stake here at all. The kind of silliness that might be involved, if any at all, is a practical silliness. Often enough, it is indeed a stupid thing *to do* to uphold unrealizable normative claims. Still, it might not always be so. Given the range of examples and situations mentioned at the beginning, is it really that stupid to uphold the self-addressed claims to be a caring and helpful parent *every time* one's children are in need or to give *all* of one's students detailed feedback to *all* of their papers? Is it really stupid for Sophie not to abandon her care for both her children, even given her tragic predicament and her knowledge that she will fail to save them both? What is needed, therefore, is a view that allows a critical practical assessment of unrealizable normative claims, providing reasons why sometimes it might, indeed, be a good idea to uphold them, especially with regard to one's self-constituting ideals, while at the same time also providing reasons why often enough knowingly (and avoidably) sticking to unrealizable normative claims should be judged as an irrational and stupid thing to do.

The crucial point, when trying to introduce such an alternative story, lies in the conceptual analysis of normative claims in general. Defenders of the principle "ought implies can" usually resort to an analysis in which, firstly, "ought"-statements, like descriptive statements, can be true or false—or absurd, if a necessary presupposition is not met. Secondly, the binding sense of "ought," i.e. a requirement or obligation, is seen as some kind of practical necessity. The notion of practical necessity is, in turn, analyzed in terms of modal logic. If some event is deemed to come about necessarily, this means that it will actually happen, and this, of course, implies that it is possible that it will happen. Hence, "actual" implies "possible," whereas "implies" can even be understood literally as inference between true propositions. Analogically, it is claimed that if some action x proved to be of practical necessity, i.e. if an agent were morally or rationally required to do it, then any morally or rationally acting agent would actually perform it. Consequently, the binding sense of "ought" would have to imply "can."

However, I think a major difference between descriptive statements and normative claims is being overlooked here, namely their opposed *direction of fit*.[20] On the one hand, descriptive statements comprise the claim to depict truthfully some portion of the world, i.e., so to speak, to fit the world. They are subject to a *mind to world direction of fit*. Hence, if there is a lack of conformity, i.e. if a descriptive statement does not depict the portion of the world in question

20 See e.g. Searle 2001, esp. ch. 2.

accurately, this descriptive statement has to be considered as false, and it is the statement, not the world, that has to be changed in order to establish the claimed truth.

Normative claims, on the other hand, do not comprise a claim to depict truthfully some portion of the world. On the contrary, they convey some state of the world that is usually not the case (yet), but one that should be the case and be brought about, whereas the meaning of "should be" can range from a desideratum or an ideal up to a practical requirement. Normative claims thus primarily introduce a normative standard to which the state of the world can be evaluated as being in accordance or not. Therefore, normative claims are subject not to a *mind to world*, but to an opposed *world to mind direction of fit*. Accordingly, if there is a lack of conformity, i.e. if a normative claim has not (yet) been met, which is usually the default position anyway, this cannot mean that the normative claim in question has to be considered false. Moreover, this assessment still holds even if the normative claim remains not being met. It is thus not the normative claim that has to be changed because of a lack of conformity to the actual state of the world, but, quite the other way round, it is a matter of changing the world to fit the normative standard raised by the normative claim in question. If that proves to be impossible, it is again not the normative claim, but the world that remains, so to speak, "false" according to the raised standard.

Consequently, talking about the truth or falsity of a normative claim in the same manner as talking about the truth or falsity of a descriptive statement generally seems to be misguided. Given the opposed *direction of fit*, normative claims simply cannot be true or false in the same way as descriptive statements.[21] Normative claims do not belong to the theoretical, but genuinely to the practical sphere. This conceded, it has to be concluded that the above mentioned analogy to the notion of necessity in modal logic is also misguided. Hence, it remains an open and practical question what is to be made of normative claims that prove to be unrealizable. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that they will, per definition, remain unfulfilled.

Furthermore, if normative claims all share the same *world to mind direction of fit*, they seem to have more in common than the initial story would have one think. Hence, there also no longer needs to be an overly strong conceptual distinction between non-binding ideals, especially unrealizable ones, and binding requirements. Committing oneself in a binding sense to an unrealizable ideal thus no longer proves to be conceptually impossible. Consequently, being committed to an unrealizable ideal can, indeed, establish the requirement to do at least the best one can in its light. Moreover, by conceding that also the decision-guiding function even of one's unrealizable ideals can finally be made plausible. However, what one may very well think of now might be a practical evaluation of unrealizable ideals, balancing reasons of why one should uphold them and, if one does, in what way the fact should be dealt with that one cannot act in full accordance to them, but can only do the best one can in their light.

It should be stressed at this point that what one upholds with unrealizable ideals is, first of all, a normative standard to which the state of the world and, more precisely for the topic

21 This assessment at least holds as long as one is not, at the same time, defending a kind of ontological moral realism or normative realism in general; a view that, in turn, has to face a number of other serious challenges. However, I will not dwell on that discussion here. Suffice to say that, given my discussion so far, accepting the principle "ought implies can" seems to encourage one to adopt a realistic position, and, contrariwise, if being skeptic to realistic positions anyway, one's reluctance to give up the idea of "ought" conceptually implying or presupposing "can" might ease up a little.

at hand, one's behavior can be evaluated as being in accordance or not. "Yet what sense does it make to uphold a normative standard of which one knows one cannot fulfill?" friends of the principle "ought implies can" could finally object again. According to the result of my discussion above, the answer is firstly that one needs to uphold the standard in order to retain one's self, i.e. in order to avoid revising one's unrealizable ideals and depriving them thereby of their very idealistic character. Only by upholding one's idealistic standards is one subsequently able to require oneself also to do at least the best one can in their light. For example, I need to uphold the claims of being of help to my children *all* the time they are in need of it or of giving *all* my students a thorough and detailed feedback to *all* their papers in order to require myself to do the best I can in light of these claims. Moreover, only by upholding one's idealistic standards can one's concept of one's self also comprise its idealized version worth striving for. For after all, striving for perfection and doing one's best makes one's best, at least usually, even better.[22]

Secondly, idealistic standards have to be upheld in order to make sense of agents rationally experiencing emotions like agent regret when they, even sometimes unavoidably, fail to meet the standards they identify themselves with. For such feelings, among other things, simply express that one really cares about an ideal and its corresponding normative claims. This especially holds for the tragic case of Sophie's life after having survived Auschwitz. For how could she otherwise maintain her *self* as a caring and loving mother? Of course, the diabolical predicament she was forced into left her no room for any "healthy" solution for her *self*; hence the tragic.

However, a closer look at Sophie's case makes also clear that a more rigorous distinction between guilt feelings and agent regret is necessary to analyze tragic situations like that more plausibly. For (appropriate) guilt feelings imply that she did something wrong for which she rightfully deserves moral blame. However, given her tragic situation, judging her guilt feelings as appropriate and, accordingly, herself as blameworthy surely seems to be too harsh an evaluation, just like judging her as silly or pathological as mentioned at the beginning. The question thus becomes whether her experiencing guilt feelings might display some irrationality after all.

Taken for granted that the discussion is located within the practical sphere, however, this question can now be answered in pointing out that one's inability to act in full accordance to one's ideals may quite reasonably be put forward in favor of Sophie and any other agent when it comes to judgments about praise- or blameworthiness. The idea is as follows. If my inability to act in full accordance to one of my ideals came about through no (itself blameworthy) fault of my own and if I did the best I could in its light, then this may very well excuse me from blameworthiness or guilt because both could be considered as *unfair*.[23] Hence, a *normative* principle can be formulated that (at least) blameworthiness or guilt, if to be assigned in a fair manner, *normatively* presuppose "can." Sophie, because of being forced to choose only between equally horrible options, can thus be excused from guilt and blameworthiness. Accordingly, she should have experienced agent regret and not guilt feelings. For agent regret, while indeed

22 See on this note already Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1790, 25f. and 247f.), where, on two occasions, he distinguishes between two different standards to evaluate and guide human conduct, one unattainable perfectionist and one that expresses the average of human behavior. "The wise and virtuous man directs his principal attention to the first standard; the idea of exact propriety and perfection" (Smith 1790, 247). See on this general note also Martin 2009.

23 See on this note also Austin 1970 and Suttle 1988.

acknowledging that Sophie has done something wrong or bad, does not imply, at least not necessarily, that she also deserves blame for it.[24]

I have tried to show in this paper that one needs to accept the alternative story sketched above in order to be able to make sense of the indeed idealistic but intuitively quite plausible idea that agents are often reasonably committed to (sometimes) unrealizable ideas and require themselves to act accordingly or at least to do the best they can in their light. Moreover, the alternative story incorporates a plausible approach to questions concerning judgments about actions (right or wrong, good or bad) and agents (praise- or blameworthy) when personal ideals and their action-guiding as well as evaluative functions are involved. It is a complex *normative* account of the relationship between "ought" and "can" that is thus finally able to provide us with a coherent analysis of an agent's idealistic commitments should they prove to be unrealizable at times.[25]

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24 Accordingly, it is generally assumed that we can and should distinguish between judging *actions* (as right or wrong, good or bad) and judging *persons* (as good or bad, praise- or blameworthy for their deeds). See on this note, for example, already John Stuart Mill's respective remark in *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2, Mill 2003, 196f.

25 This text is draft version of my contribution to the volume *Autonomy and the Self*, edited by Nadja Jelinek and myself, Dordrecht: Springer, forthcoming.

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