› Ethics on Edge?

Moral Demandingness and 'Ought Implies Can'

Marcel van Ackeren / Michael Kühler

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There is a growing interest in ideas that seek to provide reasons for why moral claims may lose their validity based on what they ask of their addressees. Two main ideas relate to that question: the moral (over-)demandingness objection and the principle 'ought implies can.' Both ideas are meant to mark, and give reasons for, certain limits or boundaries of moral obligations. Conversely, if these boundaries were about to be crossed by moral demands, ethics would seem to be "on edge"— literally as well as figuratively. Yet, although these two ideas can be understood as providing an answer to the same question, they are usually discussed separately in the philosophical literature. In this brief overview of the topic, we will introduce and explain the most crucial features of both ideas and address the question of how they could be interrelated.

1 (Over-)demandingness

The debate on (over-)demandingness has evolved greatly. But it is best to distinguish two strands, namely one on demandingness and one on overdemandingness. In a nutshell, the discussion on demandingness tries to answer the question of how to analyze that morality demands something of agents and what the nature and sources of demandingness are. Discussions on overdemandingness or the demandingness objection[1] focus on the questions if, why, and when demandingness becomes excessive, and if and how normative theories which make very heavy demands of individual agents should be altered.

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1   The common phrase 'demandingness objection' is the objection that a theory is overdemanding. In order to distinguish this debate from the one on demandingness it would be clearer to speak of an 'overdemandingess objection.'

This two sets of questions have not always been analyzed separately. In one sense this is possible, in another it is not. For, on the one hand, demandingness is an interesting philosophical issue on its own, without any specific stance on the questions that constitute the debate on overdemandingess. Demandingness alone poses serious philosophical questions:[2]

1) What are the poles of the conflict that is essential to demandingness? Is the conflict not to be found between morality and self-interest (narrowly understood), but only between morality and well-being (interests) or ground projects, as some have claimed?[3] If so, what is the relation between self-interest and well-being? Is there a gap or is self-interest a part of well-being? Do the poles of the conflict consist of context-independent sets of considerations, i. e. a moral point of view and a personal point of view as well as a corresponding dualism of practical reasons?[4]

2) What is the nature of the conflict? Are conflicts conceptually[5], or empirically necessary[6], or impossible like ancient eudaimonist have claimed? If conflicts are possible—under which conditions?[7] What causes these conflicts?

On the other hand, there is a close relation between the two strands, for every position on overdemandingness at least presupposes an idea of what might be excessive, namely demandingness. The debate on overdemandingness is essentially a debate on ethical theories, for the related demandingness objection was meant to criticize ethical theories for making implausible heavy demands, in the sense that acting in accordance with these demands would be too costly for an agent. Here are some key questions of this debate on overdemandingness:

1. If and how can we distinguish between plausible and excessive demands? Can we define a demarcation line between what would be acceptably demanding and what could be evaluated as 'excessive'? Can otherwise plausible demands be excessive? If so, why and under which circumstances?

2. Which aspects or claims of a normative theory are the sources of overdemandigness? How are these aspects and claims related to each other?

3. Should we alter normative theories which make heavy demands? If so, how?

The question of whether moral demands are (conceptually or empirically) in conflict with the well-being or (self-)interest of the addressees of those demands is thus distinguishable from the question of whether the conflict may only arise to a certain degree (or frequency), or else has to be seen as a product of invalidly overdemanding moral claims, or if and how theories have to be altered to minimize the conflict. Therefore, the problem of demandingness is different from the problem of overdemandingness or the demandingness objection. It seems to be possible to deal with the first problem without the second, but speaking of overdemandingness—regardless whether one wishes to argue for or against a form of the overdemandingness objection—presupposes a clarification of what might be excessive (or not), namely demandingness. At least

2   See the collection Bloomfield 2008.
3   See Wallace 2008 and Raz 1986.
4   See Crisp 1997 vs. Raz 1999.
5   See Finlay 2008.
6   See Crisp 1997.
7   See Scheffler 1992 and Raz 1986.

from the standpoint of the overdemandingness objection a strict separation of these two topics, demandingness and overdemandingness, seems neither desirable nor possible. But nonetheless it might be useful to keep in mind that it is, indeed, possible to distinguish these two sets of questions. One reason is that the expression 'the problem of demandingness' sometimes gives rise to confusing the topics, for some took it to refer to the questions (i. e. problems) which we listed under the topic *demandingness*, while others read the expression as referring to 'problematic demandingness' in the sense of 'excessive demandingness,' which is a key term in the debate on *overdemandingness*.

Another reason for distinguishing the two strands stems from the observation that some positions in the debate on overdemandingness seem to presuppose a certain conception of demandingness or are influenced by it. To put it simply, those who think that moral demands and self-interest, or the well-being of agents, inevitably or always conflict with each other are more inclined to rebut attempts by those who advocate a form of moral demandingness objection and their call for moderate theories. On the other hand, the stance in the overdemandingness debate which calls for moderation very often seems to be connected to or even based on an understanding of demandingness which takes conflicts between moral demands and self-interest not to be necessary, or necessarily deep or frequent.

A brief history of the debate support this observation, but also makes it clear how the topics interrelate. According to the *opinio communis* the demandingness objection arose as a reaction to Consequentialism,[8] especially against impartial maximizing act-consequentialism.[9] The main argument can be summarized as follows:

> "If it is wrong for me to act in my own interest whenever I could instead do something that would serve the interests of others more than any act open to me could serve my own interest, then arguably I am only rarely allowed to act in my own interest. This is absurd, and a view of morality of which this is a consequence is surely wrong."[10]

The following, increasingly detailed discussion concerning the premises and conclusion of this anti-consequentialist objection is still ongoing.[11] It was argued that consequentialism cannot or should not be made more moderate;[12] or conversely, that moderate and less overdemanding variants are possible[13] and desirable, for instance by referring to rules[14] or by disproportionately strengthening the interests of the addressees of the demands[15].

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8   From a historical perspective this account might not be fully correct, for (a) Kant has criticized Stoic ethics for being overly demanding (V: 127.2–3), and his critique of "rationalizing" (e. g. IV: 405.13–16) entails arguments against a demandingness objection (van Ackeren/Sticker 2015; Sticker 2015). Also, (b) Hegel's critique of Kant's moral theory has been taken to entail a demandingness objection (Habermas 1991; Engelhard 2007a and 2007b). The earliest demandingness objections against consequentialism have been debated by its proponents (see Godwin 1793, II 2., and Mill 1861, 219).

9   Cp. Hooker 2009, 148.

10   Raz 1993, 1297.

11   See Mulgan 2001 and Sobel 2007.

12   See Kagan 1989 and Murphy 2000.

13   See Carter 2009.

14   See Hooker 2000 and 2009

15   See Scheffler 1994.

16   See Unger 1996 and Cullity 2004.

The debate, which became virulent after Peter Singer's famous paper "Famine, Affluence and Morality" (1972), always had a focus on global poverty,[16] for the terrible situation of a growing number of human beings creates a steady und enormous demand to help other people. But the problem of demandingness is not only related to world poverty. In recent years, other possible sources of demandingness have been debated, e. g. future generations[17], climate change[18], and animal rights[19]. Nor are demandingness and the demandingness objection problems that only consequentialist theories are facing. Among other types of theories that have come under scrutiny are contractualism[20], virtue ethics[21], and Kant[22].

Apart from debating the (specific) demandingness of specific types of theories, there are other strands in the literature which refer to all normative theories as such. Many of these strands are influenced by the work of Bernard Williams. Accordingly, a number of authors have raised doubts concerning the role of ethical theories in our lives. Especially modern theories are supposed to neglect or diminish the importance of personal ground projects, goals, values or the weight of personal non-moral reasons.[23] This has led some to conclude that ethical theories are less important, i. e. authoritative[24], or that their scope should be diminished[25]. Others started to criticize ethical theories as such: anti-theorists take ethical theories to be impossible, unnecessary, or not helpful, because ethical theories imply aspects such as principles, reductionism, monism, or impartiality. Some also argue that ethical theories deal with external reasons which are not useful or not relevant if agents do not have a matching internal set of reasons or virtue.[26] Consequently, anti-theorists argue that the only way to avoid overdemandingness is to avoid ethical theories.

Various aspects of the demandingness objection itself have been hotly debated. Apart from assessing different versions of the demandingness objection, like the integrity-objection by Williams[27], or alienation[28], the appeal to well-being, or the difficulty to conform to moral demands, many scholars have struggled to define the threshold between acceptable and unreasonable or excessive demands. Aside from arguments from presuppositions[29], the following suggestions[30] were put forward to define the limit of demands:

Compliance with a moral demand must not

(i)   reduce the decency of the agent's life below a certain threshold,

(ii)   reduce the goods of the agent too much,[31]

17 See Mulgan 2006.
18 See Mulgan 2011.
19 See Hills 2010.
20 See Ashford 2003.
21 See Swanton 2009.
22 See van Ackeren/Sticker 2015.
23 See Wolf 1983 and Williams 1986.
24 See Foot 1979.
25 See Wolf 1983.
26 See Clarke 1987, Clarke/Simpson 1989, Hämäläinen 2009, and Hooker 2012.
27 See Chappell 2007 and Thomas 2009.
28 See Murphy 2000.
29 See Cullity 2009.
30 Taken from Hooker 2009.
31 On (i) and (ii) see Murphy 2004, 20–1, 61–2, and 66.

(iii)   reduce the goods of the agent disproportionately compared to the benefits of the demanded action[32].

(iv)   "[A]n act is wrong only if it is forbidden by the code of rules whose internalization by 90 per cent of people in each new generation of each socio-economic group in each society has the greatest expected value."[33]

The various problems of defining a demarcation line between reasonable demands and excessive ones have been taken to be a fatal blow for the demandingness objection as an objection.[34] One fundamental critique argued that (no amount of) demandingness can be taken to be a criterion being relevant when it comes to the first order question of establishing the demands itself.[35]

Other protagonists of the debate are more sympathetic to Williams's challenge. Thomas Nagel aims at a mediation of the universal and impartial moral perspective, as well as the personal non-moral perspective, for he assumes that they are both irreducible and legitimate.[36] Based on Nagel, Samuel Scheffler discusses the relevant conflict in *Human Morality* (1992) deliberately without reference to any specific demand and without limiting himself to the discussion of certain isolable types of normative theories. Instead, Scheffler is the first to conduct a systematic study, distinguishing four aspects (scope, authority, content of moral demands, and requirements concerning deliberation) that together play a central role in determining the overalldemandingness of a moral theory. In his argument for moderate ethics, those aspects function as a basis for a fundamental, genuine, and very differentiated analysis of the relation between moral demands, on the one hand, and well-being or (self-)interest, on the other.

This relation between moral demands and well-being or self-interest is the central topic of the debate on demandingness and the foundation of the debate on overdemandingness. The former debate focuses on *demandingness* as a conflict between moral demands and self-interest, well-being or the good life of the addressees of moral demands. The latter debate discusses the existence and specification of criteria that distinguish overly or excessive demands from acceptable, reasonable ones, and if and how ethical theories should be altered when facing the charge of being overdemanding.

2   'Ought Implies Can' (OIC)

Apart from the problem of (over-)demandingness, the popular principle 'ought implies can' (OIC) marks a fundamental, and apparently self-suggesting, limit of normative claims in general. If a person is unable to do something, then it seems to be pointless to ask her to do it. Who would, for example, sincerely ask a three year old child to repair a car? The issue becomes even more pressing when it comes to moral obligations. Likewise, it is apparently pointless to place a person under a moral obligation if she is unable to fulfill it. Accordingly, the philosophical principle OIC, when put contrapositively, ensures that if a person cannot do something she cannot be (morally) obligated to do it.

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32   Cp. Scheffler 1999, ch. 1–3.
33   Hooker 2009, 161.
34   See Murphy 2004.
35   See Goodin 2009.
36   See Nagel 1986.

However, certain situations and circumstances seem to be able to raise doubts about OIC's validity and scope. For example, if I run a red light because my brakes fail and I cannot stop, I still *run a red light* and thus do something which I ought not do. The red light, i.e. my obligation to stop, does not simply vanish in such cases. This holds especially in cases in which I have manipulated my brakes beforehand in order to make myself unable to stop at the red light, thus trying to reject its normative validity for me. If such a strategy were successful, we could obviously get off the hook far too easily when it comes to our moral obligations. Hence, not all obligations seem to disappear because of our impossibility to fulfill them, and this holds especially if the impossibility is intentionally brought about by ourselves in order to avoid having to fulfill the obligation in the first place.

Moreover, if, for example, a friend of mine asks me to help him change the tires of his car, he usually would not withdraw his request if I were to reject it by mentioning that I am not capable of lifting the car. Instead, he would presumably point to the car-jack in the back of the garage and hand me the instructions on how to use it. So even if I cannot do something right now, it could be possible for me to make myself capable of doing it, either generally or maybe even in time to meet the current request. Consequently, we often hold on to normative demands and moral obligations precisely in order to bring the addressees to make it possible to meet them, either in time or at least on future occasions. Otherwise, OIC had the absurd consequence that, for example, all our debts would vanish if we were at some point unable to repay them.

OIC is, therefore, far from being a clear and self-evident principle, as some proponents of it claim. First of all, its exact meaning has to be clarified:

1. To what kind of 'ought' does OIC refer to?

2. What kind of 'can' shall be implied?

3. And what kind of 'implication' is claimed?

In the following, the most influential positions of the current debate on how exactly OIC should be understood and what conceptions are involved shall briefly be explained.[37]

First of all, however, a very basic interpretation of OIC should be mentioned, namely the relationship between normativity, or our normative practice in general, and freedom, especially freedom of the will. So understood, OIC refers to the basic problem of what it means to understand ourselves as beings capable of recognizing normative claims and intentionally acting upon them, i.e. to understand ourselves as free and responsible agents. OIC would then state that the concept of normativity implies the existence of free and responsible agents, and vice versa. However, this issue is usually addressed within the debate on freedom of will, while the debate on OIC concentrates on specific normative claims and the question of what addressees must be able to do in order to render these claims plausible. For the purpose of this volume, therefore, the basic interpretation of OIC can be set aside.

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37   For a more detailed overview and discussion of the various interpretations of OIC, see Kühler 2013a.

2.1 Ought

The first question with regard to OIC is what kind of 'ought' is involved. Most prominently, the following possible conceptions are discussed.

Firstly, *ideals* are not supposed to imply 'can.' Ideals typically refer to some state of affairs that is acknowledged to be of value and thus worthy to be pursued, for example global peace or the absence of disease and suffering. However, even if the ideal state of affairs *ought* to be realized, such claims are typically *impersonal* in that they are not addressed to specific agents who are intended to bring them about. Hence, the question of whether a specific person is capable of doing so does not come up in the first place. However, one might argue that ideals should at least be realizable in terms of logical possibility, or being realizable within the laws of nature. Moreover, *personal ideals*, if they are to be understood as constituting *self-addressed* normative claims, raise the question of whether they imply that the person committed to them is, or should be, capable of realizing them. For example, if I had the personal ideal of being a good parent, so that I ought to do what it takes to be one, it seems sensible to say that the specific normative claims involved should be taken to imply my being able to act accordingly. However, ideals, including personal ideals, are usually taken to express a *perfect* version of what is of value, and given that we live in an *imperfect* world, they are, therefore, necessarily impossible to be realized to their full extent. Hence, we may indeed strive for perfection, but we necessarily fall short in achieving it. Consequently, it is usually argued that ideals, including personal ideals, do not imply 'can.'[38]

Secondly, and more importantly for the purpose at hand, the notion of 'ought' is taken to refer to *moral obligations* or *moral duties*. Following William D. Ross, it is then further distinguished between *prima facie* duties and *all things considered* or *actual* duties.[39] To begin with, it should be noted that the notion of *prima facie* duty, while seemingly indicating only an apparent duty, which, if given a closer look, may disappear or may never have been valid in the first place, indeed refers to a *real* duty, i. e. a duty a person actually has in a certain situation.[40] However, a *prima facie* duty may be outweighed by another *prima facie* duty if, *all things considered*, the latter proves to be morally more important and if the agent is unable to fulfill both. Hence, only the morally most important *prima facie* duty will become one's action-guiding *actual* or *all things considered* duty, i. e. what one actually ought to do.[41] For example, I may have a *prima facie* duty to keep an appointment with my friend but may at the same time have a weightier

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38 See, for example, Stocker 1971, Zimmerman 1996, and Haji 2002. For a more intricate discussion of the relationship between personal ideals, self-addressed normative claims and OIC see Kühler 2013b.

39 See Ross 1930.

40 It should be noted, however, that Ross himself thought that the term '*prima facie* duty' is somewhat misleading. The crucial feature of so-called *prima facie* duties is that they represent moral facts of a situation, or moral reasons, that speak in favor of a certain course of action. Hence, strictly speaking, the terms 'duty' or 'obligation' are adequate only when it comes to what a person ought to do *all-things-considered*. See Ross 1930, ch. 2.

41 A further distinction should be mentioned at this point, as well, namely between *subjective* and *objective* duties. On the one hand, the notion of subjective duty refers to an agents first person perspective and thus to what an agents *thinks* is his duty. On the other hand, an objective duty is one that the agent actually has based on a third person point of view and given all relevant moral facts or reasons. See, e. g., Zimmerman 1996, 10ff., and Vranas 2007, 19ff. On a critical note, see Widerker/Katzoff 1994 and Graham 2011, 339f. and 365f.

prima facie duty to help the victim of a car accident on my way to the appointment, which makes it impossible for me to meet my friend in time. Hence, although my *prima facie* duty to keep my appointment is outweighed or overridden by the *prima facie* duty to render first aid, this does not mean that I no longer have the *prima facie* duty to keep my appointment. It just means that, *all things considered*, I ought to render first aid, which is, therefore, my *actual* or *all things considered* duty. Yet, the fact that I agreed to meet my friend still speaks in favor of keeping the appointment, even if not decisively. However, it explains why I ought to give my friend at least an explanation later on why I could not be there in time. Obviously, this means that I can have a number of *prima facie* duties which I am unable to fulfill in case they are overridden by my *actual* duty. Accordingly, it is usually argued that only *actual* duties, but not *prima facie* duties, imply 'can,' for only one's *actual* duty expresses in an action-guiding way what one ought to do.[42]

Finally, the notion of 'ought' can also refer to an agent's *moral responsibility* or *praise-* and *blameworthiness*, which is also usually taken to imply 'can.' Hence, if an agent could not do something, then he does not count as morally responsible or blameworthy for not doing it. For example, if my friend asked me to drive him to the airport, I would not count as responsible or blameworthy for not doing it if my car was broken and could not be repaired in time. However, as mentioned at the beginning, there may be circumstances that raise doubts about this rejection of responsibility and blameworthiness. For example, if I had broken my car on purpose in order to make myself unable to meet my friend's request, it seems to be intuitively plausible to see me as responsible and blameworthy. And while it is argued that I am not responsible or blameworthy if, as mentioned above, I failed to fulfill my *prima facie* duty to meet my friend because I rendered first aid instead, this only seems plausible in cases in which fulfilling my *actual* duty is the reason for failing to fulfill my *prima facie* duty. If I had done something else instead, like sitting down in a café and reading a book, it seems that I would not only be blameworthy for not fulfilling my *actual* duty to render first aid but also for failing to fulfill my *prima facie* duty to meet my friend. Consequently, the circumstances of my being unable to do something seem to play an important role when it comes to questions of responsibility and praise- and blameworthiness.

To sum up, not every 'ought' is taken to imply 'can.' The most prominent candidates for OIC are *actual* duties as well as moral responsibility and praise- and blameworthiness, although especially the latter notions need to be spelled out in more detail when it comes to taking into account the specific circumstances of why the agent could not do something.

2.2 Can

Much the same holds for the notion of 'can,' for it is far from clear, at least at first glance, what kind of 'can' 'ought' apparently implies. Basically, two major strands of interpretation can be distinguished, namely *objective* and *subjective possibility*, both of which including a number of further internal distinctions. If something is objectively possible, most generally this means that it could happen independent of the specific features of individual agents. On the other hand, subjective possibility usually means that something has to be possible for a certain agent,

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42   See, however, Vranas 2007 who argues that also *prima facie* duties imply 'can,' for apparently the addressee is, or has to be, able to fulfill them were it not for the overriding actual duty.

i. e. it depends on an agent's individual features to bring it about or do it. For example, it might be objectively possible for people in general to swim, but *I* have to know how to swim, i. e. I have to have this specific ability, in order for it to be subjectively possible *for me*.

Accordingly, *objective possibility*, firstly, includes logical possibility. Put simply, doing A is logically possible for me if nothing else I do implies doing non-A. Logical possibility is of special importance within the debate on moral dilemmas, for if real moral dilemmas were possible, an agent would apparently face a situation in which she ought to do something logically impossible, i. e. she ought to do A and, at the same time, do non-A.[43] Secondly, objective possibility includes physical possibility, i. e. being possible within the laws of nature. In this regard, for example, it is physically possible for people, including myself, to swim, even if I personally lacked the ability. In contrast, running faster than the speed of light is physically impossible.

Although 'ought' is usually taken to imply objective possibility in both forms, leaving it at that would make OIC too weak a principle. If what I ought to do only has to be objectively possible, I could have, for example, an *actual* duty to save a drowning child even if I personally cannot swim, i. e. if I lack the ability. Consequently, 'can' in OIC is usually interpreted as *subjective possibility*, which, in turn, is analyzed in terms of a person's *ability* and *opportunity*. Put simply, an agent is taken to have the *ability* to do something if it is in her power to do it intentionally, even if sometimes circumstances prevent her from being successful. Accordingly, I have the ability to swim if I decided to do so and then did it successfully, but also, for example, if I had a major cold temporarily preventing me from doing it or if there was no pool nearby.[44] To have an ability, therefore, does not necessarily depend on its actualization. Moreover, in order to be able to actualize an ability, one needs to have the *opportunity* to do so. For example, in order to actualize my ability to swim, I need a suitable opportunity, like a pool, a lake, or an ocean nearby. Consequently, if I either lack the ability *or* opportunity to do something, then I *cannot* do it.

Accordingly, in order to make OIC a strong enough principle to meet our intuitions about the corresponding limit to moral obligations and what may reasonably be demanded of people, the notion of 'can' is predominantly interpreted as subjective possibility, i. e. as an agent's *ability and opportunity*.[45] So understood, OIC reads: "*Actual* duties, as well as moral responsibility and praise- and blameworthiness, imply the agent's ability and opportunity to act accordingly."

2.3 Implication

However, this still leaves open the crucial question of how exactly to understand the term 'imply' in OIC. Basically, three interpretations are put forward: *conceptual implication, conversational implicature*, and *normative claim*.

The strongest interpretation of OIC claims that 'ought' *conceptually implies* 'can.'[46] At first glance, it seems natural to understand this as follows: if it is true that an agent *ought* to do X, then it is also true that the agent *can* do X; and put contrapositively: if it is true that an agent

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43   For a concise overview of the debate on moral dilemmas and the argument that they yield logical inconsistency in moral theory, see McConnell 2014.
44   For a more detailed overview of the notion of ability, see Maier 2014.
45   See, e. g., Stocker 1971, Haji 2002, Vranas 2007, and Graham 2011.
46   See, e. g., Zimmerman 1996, Haji 2002, Streumer 2007, and Vranas 2007. On a critical note, see, e. g., Kekes 1984, Sinnott-Armstrong 1988, Statman 1995, Saka 2000, and Graham 2011.

cannot do X, then it cannot be true that the agent *ought* to do X. However, it has been criticized that to understand OIC in this sense, i. e. as conveying the truth of a statement about 'ought' to a statement about 'can' and vice versa, it breaches Hume's Law. 'Can' statements are descriptive statements about what *is* the case, namely what a agent actually can do. 'Ought' statements, on the other hand, are normative statements about what *should* be the case. If, according to Hume's Law, 'ought' cannot be derived from 'is' and vice versa, OIC would then simply amount to an is-ought-fallacy.[47]

In order to avoid the danger of breaching Hume's Law while still holding on to the idea of a conceptual implication between 'ought' and 'can,' it has been argued that OIC marks an *analytic implication* according to which 'ought' analytically implies 'can' in the same way as, for example, 'bachelor' analytically implies 'unmarried.'[48] Hence, if an agent could not do something, it would be conceptually incoherent to say that he ought to do it—just like talking about a 'married bachelor' is a contradiction in terms.

However, it has been criticized that this analogy is misleading, for we usually do not take statements such as "I ought to save a drowning child but I cannot swim" to be conceptually incoherent and thus not even comprehensible. Unlike statements such as "this bachelor is married," which are incomprehensible as well as necessarily false because they represent a contradiction in terms, we understand unrealizable 'ought' statements quite well, at least in principle. Accordingly, it has been claimed that unrealizable 'ought' statements are conceptually misguided for another reason.

Following Peter F. Strawson,[49] it has been argued that 'ought' does not analytically imply 'can,' but rather *semantically presupposes* it.[50] Hence, even if 'ought' statements are not conceptually incoherent if the addressee cannot act accordingly, they are still semantically flawed. Strawson's prime example for a semantic presupposition is: "The king of France is wise."[51] This sentence is neither true nor false but *meaningless* because there is currently no king of France. What makes the sentence comprehensible nonetheless is that we can interpret it in a hypothetical way: if there were a king of France, he would be wise. However, only when all vital semantic presuppositions are true can the sentence be either true or false. Likewise, 'ought' statements, although comprehensible, remain meaningless as long as the addressee cannot act accordingly. 'Ought,' it is argued, therefore, *semantically presupposes* 'can.'

Yet, given the different situations mentioned at the beginning, it still seems to be possible that 'ought' statements could be meaningful even if the addressee could not act accordingly. Consequently, some authors reject the idea of OIC marking a conceptual implication altogether and argue for alternative interpretations instead.

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47   See on this note, e. g., Statman 1995, 37. However, other authors explicitly defend OIC as a bridging principle between 'ought' and 'is.' See on this note Albert 1991, 91ff., and Yaffe 2005, 307.
48   See Vranas 2007, 170.
49   See Strawson 1950.
50   See, e. g., Hare 1962, ch. 4, and Cooper 1966. For a critical note, see, e. g., Lemmon 1965, Statman 1995, and Saka 2000.
51   Strawson 1950, 321.

A first alternative is to follow Herbert Paul Grice[52] and the idea of *conversational implicature*.[53] In everyday conversations we usually make a lot of assumptions about what the other person implicitly claims or takes to be true. For example, if I ask a friend of mine what she thinks of my new haircut and all she says is: "well, your hair will grow again," I may safely assume that she thinks it is terrible, although she did not say so and her actual statement does not logically imply it. It is, thus, only *conversationally implicated*. Still, if I were to make my assumption explicit and asked her directly if she thought my new haircut was terrible, she could very well deny it and say that she did not mean to implicate this. Hence, conversational implicatures are not necessarily true, but depend on whether the person, if asked, confirms or denies them. Analogously, if someone makes an 'ought' statement we usually assume that the speaker also believes it to be true that the addressee can act accordingly. However, if asked, it is perfectly possible that the speaker denies this and just wants to claim that the addressee ought to do X while being perfectly aware of the fact that he cannot do so. For example, if my friend says that I should keep my promise, we usually assume that he also thinks I can keep it, but it is perfectly possible that we are mistaken in this assumption and that he just wants to claim that I should keep my promise, regardless of whether I am actually able to do so.

Against the idea of OIC only marking a conversational implicature, it has been argued that leaving the relationship between 'ought' and 'can' at the discretion of whoever makes an 'ought' statement, basically means to defend OIC as a hybrid principle, which ultimately falls back on a normative interpretation.[54] The reason for this is that the speaker would need some idea as to why he wants to claim, or to leave open, that the addressee can act accordingly. This idea, however, can only be backed up by normative reasons, for conceptual reasons, as seen above, would simply lead to the conclusion that the addressee has to be able to act accordingly in order for the 'ought' statement to be conceptually coherent or semantically meaningful in the first place. Hence, interpreting OIC in terms of conversational implicature is insufficient at the least. It merely leads to the third and final interpretation of OIC, namely to understand it in terms of a *normative claim*.

The general idea of seeing OIC as making a normative claim rather than marking a conceptual implication or a mere conversational implicature is to understand the underlying problem as a practical one. The question we face when it comes to the relationship between 'ought' and 'can' is: if a person ought to do something, *should* she be able to do it, and why?

The most natural answer to this question is, of course, to the affirmative. Yes, addressees *should* be able to act as they ought to because, firstly, 'ought' statements, especially *actual* duties, aim at their realization and are meant to be action-guiding. Understood within such a normative context, this means that 'ought' statements serve a *practical* goal and we, therefore, have a good *practical* reason to demand that addressees should be able to act accordingly. Secondly, it would *prima facie* be *unfair* to addressees if they ought to do what they cannot do, or if they were made responsible or be blamed for something they could not have done. Furthermore, given the different situations or circumstances mentioned at the beginning, understanding OIC

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52   See Grice 1961, esp. 126–132, Grice 1975, and Grice 1989, esp. ch. 2 and 3. For a concise overview, see Davis 2013.
53   See Sinnott-Armstrong 1984, Sinnott-Armstrong 1988, 121–126, Forrester 1989, and Pigden 1990. On a critical note, see Streumer 2003.
54   See Streumer 2003, 221f.

as a genuinely *normative* or *moral* principle would seemingly leave enough room to treat such circumstances differently, based on a more complex notion of fairness involved.[55] For example, even assuming that I was unable to keep a promise I made, it would not be conceptually incoherent or meaningless if I were blamed for failing to keep it, but it would usually be unfair. However, if I intentionally made myself unable to keep it beforehand, understanding OIC as a normative principle based on fairness would easily make it possible to see me as blameworthy, for this would now apparently not be unfair.

Still, authors who defend OIC in terms of conceptual implication have put forward highly elaborate accounts of it in order to do justice to such varying circumstances. The most elaborate account includes a time indexed version of both 'ought' and 'can': *If I have the actual duty at t_1 to do X at t_2, then, by way of analytic implication or semantic presupposition, I can at t_1 do X at t_2, i.e. I have both the ability and opportunity to do X at t_2.*[56] For example, at the time I made the promise to my friend, I was able to keep it later on. Yet, if I made myself unable to keep my promise in between, it would be conceptually incoherent to say that I still have the actual duty to keep it, for it could no longer be action-guiding at this point. However, it could now be said that by making myself unable to keep my promise I broke my corresponding actual duty from earlier on, for until I made myself unable to fulfill it, I was still able to keep my promise later on. Therefore, it is argued that OIC would hold at all relevant time stamps, while being able to handle such circumstances satisfactorily.[57]

Accordingly, the conceptual interpretation of OIC is still the most prominent one in current debate, while understanding OIC as a genuinely normative principle of fairness serves as the most promising alternative to it. This is also reflected in the contributions in this volume discussing OIC.

3 (Over-)demandingness and OIC

Given that the conceptual interpretation of OIC is still the most prominent one, it is not surprising that OIC rarely has been discussed in relation to the question of (over-)demandingness. Apparently, OIC would have to be presupposed in such cases as well, for even asking too much of someone would make sense only if the addressee at least could act accordingly. Consequently, (over-)demandingness would have to be understood as an independent problem, just like other related issues, e.g. supererogation.

However, when assuming the normative interpretation of OIC, it could be argued that both issues are more closely related. There are situations in which we tend to say that a person was *unable* to fulfill a normative demand even if it was not strictly impossible for him. For example, James W. Smith has pointed out that if a student were to miss an appointment with his professor because he was hit by a truck and broke both his legs, we usually say that the student *could not* keep the appointment even if it were true that he could still drag himself, bleeding and under a lot of pain, to the professor's office in time. Still, it would be *unreasonable* to expect

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55   See, e.g., Collingridge 1977, Kekes 1984, 462, Jacobs 1985, Statman 1995, 40–45, Kekes 1997, 52, Kekes 1998, 222, Saka 2000, 100, and Kramer 2005, 332.
56   See Zimmerman 1996, 97, Haji 2002, 14, and Vranas 2007, 171.
57   See Zimmerman 1996, 46–49.

the student to keep his appointment.[58] Accordingly, in everyday life we often tend to mix up the notions of 'impossibility' and '(over-)demandingness.'

Still, the mere fact that we tend to mix up both notions in everyday life does not make for a convincing argument. Defenders of a conceptual interpretation of OIC could easily argue that often enough we do not get things right on a conceptual level—so much the worse for our everyday practice.

However, this rejection simply presupposes OIC as a conceptual interpretation. Hence, proponents of a normative interpretation of OIC could still argue in favor of a close relationship between OIC and (over-)demandingness in that now both notions would have to be regarded as genuinely normative or moral principles. So understood, OIC would be nothing but an extreme case of overdemandingness. Asking a person to do what she (subjectively) cannot do could then be interpreted as being too demanding and thus unfair, whereas the moral reason for this would be precisely its subjective impossibility. On the face of it, favoring the normative interpretation of OIC would thus still go well with positions and arguments put forward in the debate on (over-)demandingness.

Consequently, the relationship between (over-)demandingness and OIC crucially hinges on the interpretation of OIC, which not only makes a combined discussion plausible but ideally also fruitful for both issues in their own respective regards.

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58   See Smith 1961, 367.

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