'Ought Implies Can': Not So Pragmatic After All[1]

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Abstract. Those who want to deny the 'ought implies can' principle often turn to weakened views to explain 'ought implies can' phenomena. The two most common versions of such views are (a) that 'ought' presupposes 'can', and (b) that 'ought' conversationally implicates 'can'. This paper will reject both views, and in doing so, present a case against any pragmatic view of 'ought implies can'. Unlike much of the literature, I won't rely on counterexamples, but instead will argue that each of these views fails on its own terms. 'Ought' and 'can' do not obey the negation test for presupposition, and they do not obey the calculability or the cancelability tests for conversational implicature. I diagnose these failures as partly a result of the importance of the contrapositive of 'ought implies can'. I end with a final argument emphasizing the role the principle plays in moral thinking, and the fact that no pragmatic account can do it justice.

1.   'Ought Implies Can'

It has struck many philosophers as very plausible that, if someone ought to do something, then she can do it:

'Ought Implies Can'. If one ought (at some time) to φ, then one can (then) φ.

So presented, the principle is under-described. The dominant view of 'ought implies can' includes interpretations of the 'ought', 'can', φ, and conditional. In this paper, I'll be focusing on the conditional, but I'll briefly lay out the other pieces.

First, the 'ought' is generally taken to be moral and deontic, i.e., to signal obligation or duty, rather than predictive ("The mail carrier ought to come around noon.") or ideal ("There ought to be world peace.").[2] It's

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[2] See, e.g., Stocker (1971), Kekes (1984), Widerker (1991), Howard-Snyder (2006).

furthermore about actual obligations, not merely apparent ones.[3] Since we're interested in 'ought implies can' as a moral principle, the predictive 'ought' is clearly not what we're looking for. The ideal 'ought', or the it-would-be-better-if 'ought', while potentially moral, doesn't seem to entail any sort of corresponding ability or possibility. That it would be better if there were world peace doesn't bear any evident relationship to a claim about the possibility of world peace or anyone's ability to bring it about. Compare, for example, claims like "People ought to be able to live forever," and "Humans should never have existed." We completely intelligibly say things like this, even if given our world, such circumstances simply aren't possible.

The 'can', second, is notoriously difficult to fix, but is often understood as ability.[4] Here, roughly speaking, you're able to do things that (a) you would do (or tend to do) if you tried and (b) you have the opportunity to do. It's debatable whether the relevant ability includes or excludes physical or psychological possibilities or certain kinds of ignorance, but nothing I say will depend on resolving these debates. Third, the φ above ranges over actions, as opposed to emotions, beliefs, or other mental states.[5]

In this paper, I'll take 'ought' to be moral and deontic.[6] I'll leave the 'can' open to reasonable differing options, and grant that the φ ranges over actions. The fourth piece, the nature of the conditional, will be the main concern of this paper. The standard view is often presented as a conditional (as I have it above), but sometimes it is presented as though the relationship between 'one ought to φ' and 'one can φ' is only that the former entails the latter. On the latter, there is an 'ought'–'can' inference rule licensing one to infer 'can' claims from the corresponding 'ought' claims, rather than an allegedly true conditional proposition relating the two.[7]

Problems have been raised that apply equally to both models. Many philosophers thinking about 'ought implies can' in ethics have argued against it by way of counterexample: cases in which one morally ought to do

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[3] It's a matter of debate whether these must be all things considered moral obligations or can comprise *pro tanto* obligations as well, but what I say here won't rely on one or the other. It excludes merely apparent obligations because we could easily imagine, for example, that an obligation is merely apparent precisely because one doesn't realize that it cannot be fulfilled.

[4] See, e.g., Forrester (1989), Copp (1997), Vranas (2007), Graham (2011).

[5] For a discussion of this see King (2014).

[6] I am not hereby committing myself to any view about whether the 'ought' is *prima facie* or *ultima facie*. This will depend on what one thinks of the nature of *prima facie* obligations (in particular, whether they're genuine or merely apparent obligations).

[7] Examples of the former include Widerker (1991), Vranas (2007), Graham (2011). For the latter, see Zimmerman (1996).

something, but is unable. (These will generate contexts where it makes sense to say that one ought, but unfortunately one can't.) There are many potential counterexamples, but the most common include promissory obligations or institutional and role-given obligations that one cannot fulfill;[8] moral obligations that persist despite compulsions;[9] and moral dilemmas, wherein the agent is obligated to perform two actions that aren't jointly satisfiable.[10] There are also considerations from linguistics and deontic logic that give rise to skepticism. Many have thought that 'ought' is too weak to entail 'can', and have attempted to show that it is rather 'must' claims that entail corresponding 'can' claims.[11]

There are, however, a couple of very attractive alternatives for those who find this version too strict. These involve weakening the relationship between 'ought' and 'can' to either presupposition or conversational implicature. Stuart Hampshire and R.M. Hare inaugurated the view on which 'ought' presupposes 'can',[12] and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong famously defends the view that 'ought' conversationally implicates 'can'.[13]

Though these views have gained a lot of currency in the past sixty years, they're ultimately unsatisfactory. In this paper, I attempt to undermine these views in a couple of different ways, in rough order of increasing seriousness. First, much of the paper will be devoted to arguments that, whatever the relationship between 'ought' and 'can', it doesn't satisfy certain hallmarks of presupposition and conversational implicature. In the case of presupposition, 'ought' and 'can' fail the negation test, in addition to projection tests more generally. Furthermore, 'can' isn't conversationally implicated by 'ought', since 'can' claims aren't always calculable given 'ought' claims, nor are they always (if ever) cancelable. In other words, they fail two of the hallmark tests for conversational implicature. I diagnose the failures as related to the accounts' not taking the contrapositive of 'ought implies can' seriously enough.[14] This is the second major point. Because these views are essentially about

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[8] Brouwer (1969), Robinson (1971), Forrester (1989), Heuer (2010).
[9] Hare (1951), Dahl (1974).
[10] Lemmon (1962), Sinnott-Armstrong (1988), DeLapp (2013).
[11] Kratzer (1977, 1991); McNamara (1996); von Fintel and Iatridou (2008).
[12] Hampshire (1951), Hare (1951, 1963). Later subscribers include Cooper (1966), Martin (2009), Besch (2011), Driver (2011); and though Mizrahi (forthcoming) denies it, he cites it as "the best candidate for a relation between 'ought' and 'can'."
[13] Sinnott-Armstrong (1984). Among others who have found this view attractive are Oppenheim (1987), Vallentyne (1989), Saka (2000), Littlejohn (2009), Vogelstein (2012).
[14] Mizrahi (2009) also argues against these two views, in addition to the entailment view, though he does so using counterexamples.

what's assumed in the background of a conversation involving 'ought' claims, they wind up emphasizing the conditional at the expense of the contrapositive. With 'ought implies can', this is a pretty grave problem, since the paradigm uses of 'ought implies can' are something more like 'cannot implies not-ought'. Sections 2 and 3 will cover these arguments by addressing, respectively, the presupposition and the conversational implicature views.

I'll finally raise the most trenchant worry, this one about pragmatic accounts in general, which is that they aren't powerful enough to explain non-conversational uses of 'ought implies can'. We need to explain why something like 'ought implies can' operates not only in interpersonal communication, but in moral thought and deliberation. In the last section, I will offer examples of such uses of 'ought implies can', and I will argue that pragmatic accounts are ill-suited to explaining these phenomena. This isn't a small problem, either, since the deliberative phenomena are central to our understanding of 'ought implies can' as a principle tied up with our very concepts of 'ought' and 'can'. The principle, or whatever true principle that is like it, is much more deep and pervasive than pragmatic views give it credit for being.

Nothing I say will presume the truth of 'ought implies can' understood in the standard way. Because I argue that no pragmatics-based account of 'ought implies can' is ultimately satisfactory, the paper is friendly to defenders of the standard version of 'ought implies can'. While there are certain arguments that I will offer to the defender, none of my conclusions ultimately rest on those arguments.[15] These conclusions should motivate us to look away from pragmatics to account for 'ought implies can' intuitions, but nothing I say will suggest that we should obviously go in the direction of the original principle. Instead, we might want to abandon it as well as any pragmatic version of it.

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[15] In fact, in King (2014), I argue that we should reject 'ought implies can'.

2.   'Ought' presupposes 'can'

Presupposition and negation

Presupposition in the technical linguistic sense doesn't simply mean the stuff that's assumed in a conversation. I assume all kinds of things in virtually all of the conversations that I have: that the gravitational constant won't change, that my father's name is Chris, that 37 is prime, and that my car hasn't been stolen. But I presuppose very few of these things in conversations that I have. The technical notion of presupposition can be brought out by sentences like these:

> (1) My cat is on the mat.
>
> (2a) I have a cat.
>
> (2b) There is a unique and contextually salient mat.

Here, (1) presupposes (2a) and (2b). Of course, though, definite descriptions like (1) aren't the only way to pragmatically presuppose things. Presuppositions can be engendered in many different ways. Factive predicates presuppose the truth of the fact; counterfactuals presuppose the falsity of the antecedent; cleft sentences[16] presuppose the existence of things that satisfy their subordinate clauses; and so on. Presupposition is importantly different from entailment. For example, take

> (3) Somebody's cat is on the mat.

Sentence (1) entails (3), but doesn't presuppose it. The rough idea is that the truth of a presupposed proposition is taken for granted in uttering the sentence. It is part of the background knowledge assumed by the speaker or a condition for understanding or using the sentence properly. In uttering (1), one is not simply taking (3) for granted. One says something whose truth entails the truth of (3). In contrast, (1) takes (2a) for granted.

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[16] These are sentences of the form "It was X that/who …"

Several have defended the view that this is the relationship between 'ought' and 'can'.[17] As Hare writes,

> If there is no King of France, then the question whether the King of France is wise does not arise. And so, by saying that the King of France is wise, we give our hearers to understand that we think, at least, that the question arises to which this is one possible answer, and that, accordingly, there is a King of France. And similarly, if we say that somebody ought to do a certain thing […], then we give our hearers to understand that we think that the question arises to which this is a possible answer, which it would not, unless the person in question were able to do the acts referred to.[18]

Julia Driver has also argued for a presupposition model because "whenever the utterance is used or made in a conversationally acceptable manner, the speaker both assumes F and takes his audience to assume F," where we have in mind an 'ought' utterance and a corresponding 'can' assumption.[19] Take, for example,

> (4) Taylor ought to help his mother.

> (5) Taylor can help his mother.

Here, the presupposition view holds that (4) presupposes (5). So, that when I say "Taylor ought to help his mother," I must think that he can do so.

Before continuing, note that it would be surprising and very interesting if presupposition were at play here. It doesn't fit into any class of presupposition we typically admit (e.g., definite descriptions, factives, counterfactuals, cleft sentences). And it would suggest that there were some broader linguistic principle at play, such as that certain modals presuppose each other ('ought' and 'can', but perhaps also 'must' and 'can', and who

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[17] See fn.7.
[18] Hare (1963), 54.
[19] Driver (2011), 194. She takes this characterization from Stalnaker (1999b), where he presents it as only a rough characterization and not a definition. I will have more to say on Stalnakerian presupposition below.

knows what else). This doesn't mean it's false, but it would suggest something more general than just a solution to debates about 'ought implies can'.

Dismantling this view requires first recognizing that there are two different views about presupposition: one sees it as semantic; the other, pragmatic. On the semantic view, the presupposing statement lacks a truth-value when the presupposed statement is false, called cases of "presupposition failure".[20] So in the case of my cat, we'd have

(1) My cat is on the mat.

(~2a) I don't have a cat.

The semantic view doesn't hold that (1) is false, but rather that it's no longer truth-apt. Though this is the dominant view, it's controversial, so my arguments won't assume it.[21] That said, it's worth mentioning that Sinnott-Armstrong, assuming a semantic account, rejects the presupposition view of 'ought implies can'.[22] He points out that an 'ought' claim might very well be false (or, he argues, true) without the presupposed sentence being true. For example, it might both be false that you *ought* to have another drink and simultaneously be false that you *can* have another drink (say, if the bar has closed). But this is incompatible with the semantic view, on which the claim *that you ought to have another drink* lacks a truth-value (and thus can't be false). So 'ought' doesn't presuppose 'can'. I take this to be conclusive reason to deny that 'ought' presupposes 'can', assuming the semantic view. But a defender of the presupposition view might prefer the pragmatic account, in which case this argument has no teeth.

Better, then, to find a way of identifying presuppositions that both views can agree to. Constancy under negation is such a way, and it is a central test for the presence of presuppositions. (It is not, however, the only

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[20] This is the Frege-Strawson view, denied by Russell, who argued that presupposing sentences could have truth-values. This is exemplified by his famous analysis of the sentence "The King of France is bald."
[21] Others do take this for granted. See, e.g., Saka (2000), who describes the view this way: "In cases where you are not able to do A, implication-as-entailment treats 'you ought to A' as *false*, while implication-as-presupposition treats it as *meaningless* or otherwise without truth-value" (93).
[22] Sinnott-Armstrong (1984), 254-255.

test – a fact I will return to at the end of this section.) According to constancy under negation, the presupposed statement is also true when the presupposing statement is negated. For example:

(1) My cat is on the mat.

(~1) My cat isn't on the mat.

(2a) I have a cat.

Constancy under negation tells us that both (1) and (~1) presuppose (2a). It's this hallmark of presuppositions that Neil Cooper uses to present a precise characterization of the phenomenon. He writes that "to assert that you ought to and to deny that you ought to do a certain action both presuppose that the action is possible for you. By showing that the action is not possible, one rebuts both 'ought'-judgments."[23] Characterized this way, the presupposition view is surprisingly attractive. It shares with the entailment view that saying that someone ought to do something means that we think the person can do it. But it adds to this a further suggestion, i.e., that our saying that it's *false* that someone ought to do something also means we think the person can do it. It simply doesn't make sense to tell someone either that they ought or that it's not true that they ought to do something unless we think they can do it. Why would we bother saying it at all?

Despite its initial attractiveness, the view ultimately fails. In the remainder of this section, I'll argue that 'ought' and 'can' claims fail to satisfy constancy under negation as well as other embedding tests for presupposition, and thus that these aren't cases of presupposition. Negating modal sentences is difficult, though, so after presenting the initial negation test, I'll offer two ways to strengthen it.

Let's start by returning to Taylor.

(4) Taylor ought to help his mother.

(5) Taylor can help his mother.

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[23] Cooper (1966), 46. Cooper also adopts the Frege-Strawson view.

Constancy under negation says that a presupposition remains intact if we negate the presupposing sentence. But of course it's a bit tricky to negate (4) because there's no nice way of negating English modal sentences in natural speech. We could, of course, say 'Taylor ought not help his mother,' but that's not the meaning we're after. We want something more along the lines of the following options:

(~4a) It isn't the case that Taylor ought to help his mother.

(~4b) It isn't true that Taylor ought to help his mother.

(~4c) It isn't as if Taylor ought to help his mother.

(~4d) It's not like Taylor ought to help his mother.

It's evident that (~4a)–(~4d) do not presuppose (5). When we say that it isn't true that Taylor ought to help his mother, there is just no reason – linguistic or otherwise – to think that he *can* help his mother. Simply put, the fact that one has no obligation to do something says absolutely nothing about whether one can do it.

There is some trickiness to deal with, though. In the rest of this section, I will present an objection to the above use of the negation test, defend the test's verdict with two refinements, and use other presupposition tests to support that verdict.

The objection, external negation, and first response

The negation test works, typically, only for normal negations like "My cat isn't on the mat" (~1), rather than "It isn't the case that my cat is on the mat." The former sort of negation is sometimes called *internal* negation; the latter *external*. So the worry is that the sentences in (~4) are the wrong kind of negation (external negation), and then it's no wonder that the presupposition doesn't remain intact. It doesn't undermine the presupposition view of 'ought implies can' in the least. Thus, we might just be in a situation where normal negation is impossible, and we can't invoke the negation test.

This is an important objection. But there are two ways of refining the basic point to circumvent this problem. First, we can try to get at an internal negation expressed in the context of a conversation.

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Scenario 1

Avery: Taylor's mother is having an awful time recovering from surgery.

Zelda: Oh, that's terrible.

Avery: You know, he really should help with her recovery!

Zelda: Well, no…

Avery: Why not?

Zelda: Because he can't. He was in the accident, too, and can't even get out of bed himself!

In this conversation, Zelda's denial is understood as a negation of Avery's sentence. Zelda is trying to express *~(he should help her then).* This clearly doesn't presuppose that he can help her, since she goes on to say that he can't. Why not think that this is also a way of expressing external negation, and therefore a way of indicating a presupposition failure? Because a case in which there was a presupposition failure wouldn't sound like this. Compare a similar conversation, but one in which Zelda believes Taylor's mother has already died:

Scenario 2

Avery: You know, Taylor really should help with his mother's recovery!

Zelda: Wait, what?

Avery: He should help her.

Zelda: Oh, she's still alive? I thought she'd already passed away…

Avery's initial statement in this scenario presupposes that Taylor has a living mother. Since, to Zelda, it looks like a presupposition failure, because she thinks the mother is dead, she doesn't respond with "no." She responds instead with a demand for clarification, which is what we expect in cases of presupposition failure. Something about Avery's initial statement doesn't make sense and needs sorting out. This isn't how the first version of the conversation goes, though. Compare again to the cat on the mat.

Scenario 3

Avery: My cat is on the doormat.

Zelda: No he isn't. I just saw him in the kitchen.

Avery: Oh, I guess he's not on the doormat then.

Scenario 4

Avery: My cat is on the doormat.

Zelda: Wait, since when do you have a cat?

Avery: I got him last week.

In *Scenario 3*, Avery and Zelda have a straightforward disagreement about whether Avery's cat is on the mat. Both acknowledge the relevant presuppositions. But in *Scenario 4*, Avery and Zelda have a more complicated interaction, one not necessarily characterized as a disagreement. (It might be a disagreement of a kind, if we assumed, say, that Zelda were antecedently very confident that Avery had no cat.) Presupposition failures in conversation, then, manifest differently than disagreements where all parties agree to the presupposed statements. The parties need to get on the same page in order to be in position to agree or disagree in any straightforward way, and sorting out the presuppositions is one means of getting on the same page with each other.

We can, then, sum up the argument against 'ought' presupposing 'can' this way: Suppose the presupposition view is correct. Then, Avery's claim that Taylor should help his mother carries the presupposition that he can help her. Constancy under negation says that Zelda's "Well, no…" in *Scenario 1* should also carry that presupposition. But this isn't what we see. In fact, Zelda disagrees with Avery *precisely on the basis that* Taylor cannot help his mother. Zelda both denies the (alleged) presupposition *while* negating the (alleged) presupposing sentence. And this is what shouldn't be possible, if this were a genuine case of presupposition.

In fact, this is linked to the paradigm use of 'ought implies can' as a contrapositive principle or as a reverse entailment.[24] Notice that we typically don't infer 'can' claims directly from 'ought' claims in conversation, but rather use 'cannot' claims to infer what we might call 'not-ought' claims. That is, we most often encounter or deploy 'ought implies can' as 'cannot implies not-ought'. In *Scenario 1*, Zelda does just this.[25] Here we see the problem. To get contraposition or reverse entailment, we need the 'can' claim to be false *while* the 'ought' claim is false. In fact, we want the latter to follow in some way from the former. But this can't work on a presupposition view for the same reason that the negation test fails. If the negation test worked, we should find that, anytime we denied an 'ought' claim, we were presupposing the associated 'can' claim, and thus that they couldn't simultaneously be false. But in many cases precisely what we want is their simultaneous falsity. These remarks suggest two things. First, constancy under negation is opposed to 'cannot implies not-ought' phenomena. If we successfully capture the former, we lose the latter. Second, even if a presupposition account were to circumvent this problem, there would be a burden on any such account to explain phenomena seemingly intimately related to 'ought implies can' phenomena, namely, 'cannot implies not-ought'. But a presupposition account that only explains 'ought implies can' is ill-equipped to do this.

Earlier, I promised two ways of refining the negation test. I've just given the first. The second relies on how we've been understanding the 'ought'. So while the first response is a response to any presupposition view of 'ought implies can', combined with any understanding of 'ought', this reply is only a suitable response to views where the 'ought' is interpreted as moral obligation, and as such is directed at a particular, though quite common, view defended among ethicists. Those convinced by the foregoing may skip this subsection without loss; those interested in the ethical nuances should read on.

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[24] Depending on whether one prefers the conditional or the rule-of-inference view of 'ought implies can'.

[25] This doesn't commit us to any stance regarding the Frege-Strawson view of presupposition for 'ought' and 'can'. It may be that the presupposition fails while the presupposing statement retains its truth-value. Acknowledging this doesn't earn the Russellian view contraposition, since the negation of the presupposing sentence is ambiguous. In other words, if there is no unique King of France, then we have to do some further disambiguating in order to determine whether it's true or false that he's not bald. The point to underscore here is that, whatever we think of the Frege-Strawson vs. Russell debate, projection is the best grasp we have on presupposition, and constancy under negation is the cleanest projection test. And ultimately, the failure of the negation test does not sit well with our desire for contraposition.

'Ought' and moral obligation

Given 'ought' as obligation, any 'ought implies can' statement can be translated without loss to a claim that replaces 'ought' with 'is obligated' or 'has an obligation'. For example, (4) above can be unproblematically translated as

(4') Taylor has an obligation to help his mother; or

(4") Taylor is obligated to help his mother.

And on the presupposition view, these presuppose the truth of

(5) Taylor can help his mother.

It doesn't matter which the reader prefers between these two. Both have straightforward internal negations:

(~4') He doesn't have an obligation to help his mother; or

(~4") He isn't obligated to help his mother.

Once we have these, the rest of the argument is easy. (It's exactly parallel to the previous subsection.) Again, suppose that the presupposition view is true. Then, (4') and (4") presuppose the truth of (5), i.e., Taylor's being obligated to help her presupposes that he can help her. Constancy under negation says that (~4') and (~4") must also carry this presupposition. But this isn't what we see. We could easily utter either negated sentence without taking it for granted that he can help his mother. In fact, a fairly typical application of 'ought implies

can' to the situation makes this evident. If he can't help his mother, then he isn't obligated to.[26] If the presupposition view were true, then in order to say that he *isn't* obligated to help his mother, one must think that he *is* able. (Compare: In order to say that my cat isn't on the mat, one must think that I have a cat.)

One final note about this argument. As it stands, it's only a suitable response to views of 'ought implies can' where the 'ought' stands for moral obligation. But the same translation argument would work, *mutatis mutandis*, to alternative renderings of 'ought'. For example, if 'ought' in 'ought implies can' means 'has most reason to', we could run the same argument using 'doesn't have most reason to' in places where we want something like 'not-ought'.

Further tests and intuitive cost-raising

I suspect that this alone will suffice, for most, to refute the view that 'ought' presupposes 'can'. However, there might be a lingering worry that these linguistic tests aren't perfect. They are meant as rough guides, created descriptively to capture what we do with words. So the fact that 'ought' and 'can' claims don't pass the negation test might tell us more about the test (and its limits) than it does about the relationship between 'ought' and 'can'.

Of course, an account of why the negation test fails here would need to be motivated independently, and it's not obvious how that explanation would go. So far, maybe, the arguments I've given raise the intuitive cost of 'ought presupposes can' rather than conclusively refute it. The costs, however, are higher than just the cost of giving up the negation test. I've been relying heavily on that particular test, but there's a broader class of tests for presupposition of which negation is only one type. The classic feature of presupposition is that presuppositions *project* into certain embedded contexts. Negation is one of those contexts, but so are questions, antecedents of conditionals, modal adverbs, etc. But it's clear that the alleged 'can' presupposition is absent in these contexts, too. For example, if we take the earlier 'cat on the mat' sentence and embed it in the antecedent of a conditional, we can see the conditional carries the same presuppositions as the original sentence.

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[26] Even if 'ought implies can' is false, and therefore this inference isn't generally a good one, it certainly isn't *linguistically* anomalous. We can make obvious sense of it.

(1) My cat is on the mat.

(1a) If my cat is on the mat, then he must be napping.

(2a) I have a cat.

(2b) There is a unique and contextually salient mat.

The truth of (1a) does not entail the truth of (1), but it does carry its presuppositions, (2a) and (2b). In particular, (1a) takes for granted that I have a cat. He may not be on the mat (i.e., (1) may be false), but if he is, then he's napping. We can take a look, then, at an analogous embedding with 'ought':

(4) Taylor ought to help his mother.

(4a) If Taylor ought to help his mother, then his sister ought to help her, too.

(5) Taylor can help his mother.

If (4) presupposes (5), then so should (4a). But this clearly isn't right. (4a) only gives us a kind of consistency constraint on what we can demand of different people – of Taylor and his sister; it doesn't presuppose that Taylor *can* help his mother.

Furthermore, like (4a), the following lack the presupposition of (5):

(4b) Ought Taylor to help his mother?

(4c) Maybe Taylor ought to help his mother.

The answer to (4b) might be no, exactly because he can't. And (6c) plainly doesn't presuppose that he can help her. Maybe he ought to help her – but maybe he can't, and then it would be false that he ought to.

Without getting into great detail, I have here suggested how one might apply other canonical projection tests, in addition to negation, and receive the same results. Insofar as my arguments are read as cost-raising

rather than knock-down refutations, we must recognize that giving up projection into embedded contexts (for the relevant 'ought'–'can' presuppositions) is a very high cost indeed.

Hope in other presupposition accounts?

Before discussing other accounts, let me reiterate that those who defend a presuppositional account of 'ought implies can' have tended to refer to simple Frege-Strawson semantic presupposition. The foregoing arguments (to say nothing of Sinnott-Armstrong's compelling initial point) show that these views are on very shaky ground, since the 'ought implies can' phenomena do not fit with semantic presupposition. Furthermore, the relevant projection tests are canonical tests for the presence of presuppositions, regardless of what kind of account we offer of them (i.e., semantic or pragmatic). So to the extent that the relevant phenomena do not fit, this is a strike against *any* presupposition-based account.

Maybe, however, there is hope in subtler presupposition theories. These fall into two categories: (1) more sophisticated conventional presupposition accounts, or (2) fully pragmatic presupposition accounts. Let me suggest why I think these will not solve the problem.

Some sophisticated accounts of presupposition allow for complex relationships between entailment, presupposition, and other clearly pragmatic phenomena (e.g., conversational implicature). I will discuss two of these: one from Rob van der Sandt, and one from Gerald Gazdar. On van der Sandt's view, presupposition is understood as anaphoric.[27] For example, on his account, "My cat is on the mat" presupposes that I have a cat because "my cat" points to that particular cat in fundamentally the same way that "he" in "He is on the mat" points to that particular cat. The first hurdle to applying this view to 'ought' and 'can' is that it's not clear how to apply it. So, though we might understand many presuppositions on this model (especially those triggered by certain noun-phrases like "my cat" or "his sister" or "the book"), it is less obvious how to model as anaphoric presuppositions triggered by factive verbs (e.g., "He regrets buying a car" presupposes that he bought a car) or

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[27] Van der Sandt (1992)

aspectual predicates ("She stopped smoking" presupposes that she used to smoke). It is similarly difficult to see how to model a presupposition of 'can' claims triggered by 'ought' claims as anaphoric.[28]

Assuming the kinks in this view can be worked out, though, what makes it look bad for 'ought'-'can' specifically? Put simply, the relationship between 'ought' and 'can' doesn't seem anaphoric. Van der Sandt understands presuppositions and anaphors as fundamentally the same linguistic phenomenon because he sees them both as informationally impoverished versions of their full descriptions or referents. But 'ought' claims simply aren't informationally impoverished versions of 'can' claims. The fact that 'ought' claims contain some normativity that the corresponding 'can' claims don't makes this very clear.[29]

Turning to Gazdar, the central thought is that we add only those presuppositions that are consistent with existing entailments and implicatures.[30] His account was meant to accommodate otherwise difficult to explain cases where the expected presupposition wouldn't be triggered for some reason. Gazdar explained these cases by suggesting that conflicting conversational implicatures were involved. Take the sentence: "If there is a King of France, the King of France is bald." This doesn't carry the presupposition that there is a King of France, since the antecedent conversationally implicates that there may not be one. (You wouldn't say "*If* there is a King of France" if you know there to be one.) To relate this to 'ought' and 'can', the criticism would be this: Maybe the cases above, where the tests fail, aren't special in this way. To respond, there is no such conversational implicature present in the cases we discussed earlier. When one asks "If Taylor ought to help his mother, then his sister ought to help her, too," there is no conversational implicature that he can't (though, depending on the context, there may be the implicature that it's possible that he ought not). Again, it seems simply to be a consistency constraint on our demands.

Finally, let's turn to Stalnaker's fully pragmatic account of presupposition. This view is somewhat looser than the preceding views. On his view, it is "inappropriate to say 'The Queen of England is bald' […] except

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[28] There are some suggestions about this in Krahmer (1998) and Kripke (2009), but not enough to develop an account of how it would work in our case.

[29] There is a further worry. Presupposition-as-anaphor accounts turn presuppositions into things entailed (see Van der Sandt (1992), 345; Krahmer (1998), 187ff.). This should be unsatisfying to anyone inclined to deny the entailment view *in favor of* a presupposition view. But this is the central motivation of many who are inclined to the latter view.

[30] Chapters 5 and 6 of Gazdar (1979).

in a context in which it is part of the presumed background information that England has a Queen."[31] On this view, then, something is presupposed when the context contains worlds at which the presupposition is true. If that's all there is to presupposition, I don't see any problem with this as an account of the relationship between 'ought' and 'can' statements (at least, not until the final section of the paper). It may well be that, when one utters a sentence of the form 'S ought to φ', one is also typically (but not necessarily) in a context where 'S can φ' is true.[32] But as an account of 'ought' and 'can', it's much worse once we add what Stalnaker calls "the principle criterion" of presupposition: "Q is presupposed by an assertion that P just in case under normal conditions one can reasonably infer that a speaker believes that Q from either his assertion or his denial that P."[33] In other words, the negation test. As we've seen, the negation test fails for 'ought' and 'can' statements, so to the extent that Stalnaker's account will give verdicts consistent with that test, it is a bad model for us.

There may be more to be said in defense of these views as accounts of the relationship between 'ought' and 'can', as these topics are rich and worth exploring further. Even so, I take the foregoing to constitute quite serious grounds for preliminary rejection. I will allow myself a final remark about these accounts. Take, for instance, the version of Stalnaker's view we have prior to adding his "principle criterion". One might think that, because its verdicts could diverge from the above embedding tests, falling back to this weaker account could help us. On this view, we might be able to say that 'ought' claims in general presuppose 'can' claims while negated and other embedded 'ought' claims *don't*. Granting for now that all this would be consistent with our use of 'ought' and 'can', I still worry about this way out. To the extent that we lose those phenomena, I worry that the account has ceased to explain why we should see this relationship as one of presupposition, if it bears none of its most central hallmarks. So while we might allow that such a weakened account could model 'ought' and 'can', it wouldn't model their relationship *as presupposition*.

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[31] Stalnaker (1999b), 53.

[32] Note that, in this sense, it may be that 'York is the biological son of Tyra' presupposes 'Tyra gave birth to York', even though this presupposition is false in the case of surrogacy.

[33] Stalnaker (1999b), 47.

To close this section, it bears repeating that I am not affirming 'ought implies can' in this discussion. Everything I say is compatible with affirming or denying the standard version of the principle (where 'implies' is entailment). So far, I've only been relying on uncontroversial intuitions that support 'ought implies can': cases where the 'ought' and 'can' claims are both false and cases where we embed 'ought' in conditionals or questions. Denying 'ought implies can' will only lead to more cases where even the simple asserted contexts of 'ought' claims don't presuppose or entail the corresponding 'can' claims, i.e., the ones where the 'ought' claim is *true* and the 'can' claim is false. For the denier, the story about why the presuppositions fail will admittedly have to be a bit more nuanced. 'Cannot' claims won't self-evidently defeat the corresponding 'ought' claims, though 'cannot' claims might typically be associated with the falsity of their 'ought' claims. That is, if 'ought implies can' is false, then we won't be able to infer straightforwardly from the fact that Taylor can't help his mother, that it's not the case that he ought to help her. The denier will instead prefer a different sort of explanation; i.e., he can't help her, but more importantly … (and here we'd fill in some substantive details, according to the particular account), and thus it's not the case that he ought to help her.

But perhaps there's still hope in a more well-established pragmatic view of 'ought implies can': the conversational implicature view.

3.   'Ought' conversationally implicates 'can'

For those who dislike entailment and presupposition views, conversational implicature offers yet a weaker way of linking 'ought' and 'can'. Sinnott-Armstrong, like many who adopt this view,[34] is keen to avoid what he sees as counterexamples to 'ought implies can'. For example, he argues that, if Adams has an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00, and Adams goes to a movie at 5:00 that is showing at a theater 65 minutes away from the meeting place, it is counterintuitive to say that, at 5:00, Adams no longer has an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00.

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[34] See fn.12.

His positive view is that 'ought' claims serve three basic purposes: advising, blaming, and deliberating. When we use 'ought' to advise, the associated 'can' is conversationally implicated. 'Can' is not, however, implicated by 'ought' used for blaming or deliberation.[35] The thought is that Grice's Cooperative Principle requires 'can' to be conversationally implicated in cases of advice.

> The Cooperative Principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."[36]

We need to explain how we can understand each other in lots of cases where we don't explicitly say everything that we end up communicating. Grice posits the Cooperative Principle as an overarching rule to do this kind of explaining. So, to use his example:

> A: I'm out of petrol.
> B: There's a garage around the corner.
> > The garage is open and sells petrol.

Strictly speaking, B doesn't say that the garage is open or that it sells petrol. But B's conversational contribution wouldn't be helpful to A (i.e., cooperative) if the garage were closed or was only an auto body shop. So those facts are conversationally implicated. Similarly, Sinnott-Armstrong argues, we're not being cooperative conversational participants if we advise someone to do something she can't.

Sinnott-Armstrong cites the cancelability of 'can' as further evidence for his view. Someone could say to Brown, he writes: "'You still ought to meet Brown, but, since you can't, you ought to call him.'"[37] James Forrester, in defending the conversational implicature view, offers the reinforceability test.

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[35] For Sinnott-Armstrong, 'ought' used for deliberation is to be distinguished from what some have called the deliberative 'ought'. He presents deliberation as something that looks essentially like hypothetical reasoning.
[36] Grice (1989), 26.
[37] Sinnott-Armstrong (1984), 258.

> Suppose I say to a friend of mine, "You really ought to visit your sick old grandmother." […] [T]here seems nothing at all redundant in adding the statement, "You are perfectly able to do so, you know." Rather, the additional remark serves to reinforce the implicature.[38]

Both tests are meant to demonstrate that the implicated content isn't part of the meaning. If it were part of the meaning, it couldn't be canceled, and it wouldn't make sense to reinforce its truth (e.g., "My cat is on the mat, and it's definitely not off the mat.").

There are three small worries to have, and then two more serious ones. The smaller worries have to do with Sinnott-Armstrong's particular defense of the conversational implicature view. But his particular arguments might have problems without the view itself being wrong. With that in mind, I'll also present two arguments against the conversational implicature view as such, relying respectively on two hallmark tests for conversational implicature: calculability and cancelability.

To the small worries first. One problem is that much of what Sinnott-Armstrong says rests on certain substantive views about the nature of promises and promissory obligations. When can we promise? Can we make promises without knowing whether we'll be able to fulfill the promise, or if we know that we won't be able to? There are complexities surrounding the nature of promising that are apt to – or at least could reasonably be thought to – confuse Sinnott-Armstrong's cases, which all turn centrally on promissory obligations.

A second problem is that his cases introduce time-sensitivity (and not only that, but the time-sensitivity of modal verbs, which is especially complex). A defender of 'ought implies can' has two clear avenues of response. First, she might put her foot down and insist that, at 5:00, Adams really doesn't have any obligation to meet Brown at 6:00.[39] Sure, it could sound odd to say so, but there are plenty of explanations for its sounding odd. Maybe telling Adams, "You really ought to be here," at 6:00 expresses a purely evaluative attitude. Maybe it's useful to say so, even if it's not true. There are plenty of circumstantial reasons to give. (In fact, this response

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[38] Forrester (1989), 206.
[39] As Vranas (2007) and Streumer (2003) do.

is also available to the 'ought implies can' denier, though it would carry different background assumptions.) Alternatively, the 'ought implies can' defender can easily co-opt Sinnott-Armstrong's point. She can admit that Adams still has an obligation to meet Brown at 6:00, but argue that 'ought implies can' needs slight revising: to what we might dub an 'ought implies can-or-could have' principle. Anytime I say someone ought to do something, it's not that they *can right then* do it, but only that they could have done it. This principle of course needs refining, but it concedes Sinnott-Armstrong's example, while maintaining that 'ought implies can' is still fundamentally true.

Third, Sinnott-Armstrong seems to misapply the cancelability test: he argues that the 'can' implicature is cancelable in advising uses of 'ought implies can'. He demonstrates this by pointing out that an adviser could say something like "You ought to meet him, but since you can't, you ought to call him."[40] He argues that the first 'ought' is canceled. But on his view, the first 'ought' isn't used for advising at all anymore. It's the second 'ought' that becomes an advisory one. The first 'ought' becomes something else (perhaps a deliberative one, in Sinnott-Armstrong's terminology). So it's not that 'ought' claims given for the purpose of advice implicate corresponding, but cancelable, 'can' claims. It seems like, once "canceled", they're simply not used for advising anymore. It thus looks like the view should be that, when we use 'ought' to advise, 'can' is actually entailed.

Again, these three problems don't refute the conversational implicature view, but present problems for Sinnott-Armstrong's defense. I'll now present two problems for the conversational implicature view itself. There are three hallmarks of conversational implicatures: they're calculable, non-detachable, and cancelable (reinforceability is just the reverse side of the cancelability coin). I won't discuss non-detachability, but I'll argue that the 'ought' conversationally implies 'can' view fails both calculability and cancelability.

First, implicatures are calculable by combining what is said with the context in which it's said (plus the Cooperative Principle). Grice argues that this must be the case, since otherwise we wouldn't be able to figure out what people meant given what they in fact say, i.e., we wouldn't be able to figure out the implicature. But 'can' isn't always calculable from 'ought', even when it's used in advising. Take the original case: Adams goes to the theater to see a movie that starts 5:00. Suppose that at 4:59, Adams calls Joyce up and asks her for advice,

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[40] Sinnott-Armstrong (1984), 258.

and she says to him, "You really ought to meet Brown." If Sinnott-Armstrong is right, Adams' calculation will go like this:

> *Joyce just said I ought to meet Brown. Joyce is cooperative and wouldn't say something to me that wasn't relevant. So she must think that this information will help me figure out what to do. So she must think that I can meet Brown.*[41]

If Sinnott-Armstrong is right, Adams *must* make this calculation, where 'can' is implicated. But though this is, in a way, a fine calculation, it's not the *only* one available. Here are two alternatives:

> *Joyce just said I ought to meet Brown. Joyce is cooperative and wouldn't say something to me that wasn't relevant. So she must think that this information will help me figure out what to do. So she must think that I should factor in the fact that I ought to meet Brown in deciding what to do.*

Or…

> *… So she must think saying this to me will motivate me to do something that I wouldn't otherwise be sufficiently motivated to do.*

In other words, there are a bunch of ways that Adams might factor in Joyce's saying he ought to meet Brown: by getting a move on, even if he'll be there a little late, by calling Brown and canceling (possibly even *because he can't make it*), or by calling the meeting place (the restaurant or whatever it might be) and leaving a message for Brown. Adams may also understand that encouragement and exhortation often motivate people to do things that they wouldn't otherwise do. That's true even if we urge them to do things that we all know to be beyond their abilities (in the vein of Jesus's exhortation "Be ye therefore perfect").[42]

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[41] Cf. Blome-Tillman (2013).

[42] For such a view, see Pigden (1990), who also expresses sympathy for a restricted conversational implicature view, and Saka (2000), 100.

Sometimes we implicate multiple things, so why not think that these are all available calculations? When B tells A that a garage is around the corner, for example, B conversationally implicates both that the garage is open *and* that it sells petrol. This won't work in the above case, though. A statement cannot have contradictory implicatures, since then there wouldn't be a way to calculate what was meant based on what was said. So B cannot conversationally implicate both, say, that the garage is open and that it's closed. In the same way, when two calculations are available and incompatible, more needs to be said to arrive at one rather than the other (or we need further contextual information to determine which is the likelier implicature). This is the case with the above implicatures, where the first involves *can* in the calculation and the other two involve *cannot*.

On to the second problem: the failure of cancelability.[43] Cancelability is relatively familiar, but it's worth going over the details. When something is conversationally implicated, it's not part of the meaning of what we say, nor is it even entailed by what's said. Because it's not entailed, we can say the opposite of the thing implicated without speaking a contradiction. For example, if you tell me that you're out of gas, I might respond and tell you that there's a garage around the corner. I conversationally implicate that the garage is open and sells gas. But I could also say, "There's a garage on the next street over, but unfortunately it's not open." Here, I haven't said anything to contradict myself. On the other hand, if I said, "There's a garage on the next street over, but it's on this street," I say something patently self-contradictory. That's because the garage's being on the next street *entails* that it's not on this street.

If the conversational implicature view is right, then 'can' is often associated with 'ought', but it's cancelable. Furthermore, I take such a view to hold that the relationship is generalized, rather than particularized, conversational implicature. Particularized conversational implicature, Grice says, requires special features of the context to get the implicature. A generalized conversational implicature, by contrast, is one in which "the use of a certain form of words in an utterance would normally (in the absence of special circumstances) carry such-and-such an implicature."[44] For example, if someone says, "I went to a birthday party," it's conversationally implicated that it's not *her own* birthday party. Similarly, if someone says, "He went to the café or to the library,"

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[43] I'm not the first to remark on this conclusion (see Streumer (2003) and Driver (2011)), but I present wholly different arguments to its effect.
[44] Grice (1989), 37.

it's implicated that he didn't do both. It looks like the conversational implicature view of 'ought implies can', then, is more specifically a *generalized* conversational implicature view, since we don't need special contextual clues to get us from *S ought to φ* to *S can φ.*

Now, we can remain agnostic about whether *some* 'can' claims are cancelable. Maybe they are. It doesn't sound contradictory or conceptually confused to say things like, "I know I ought to, but I just can't." However, if the conversational implicature view is to hold, *all* 'can' claims must be cancelable. Otherwise, the implicated content would be, in some cases, part of the meaning. The likeliest explanation, if that turned out to be right, would be that we have different 'ought's, some of which entail, and some of which merely conversationally implicate, the corresponding 'can's.[45],[46]

Even if we restrict our discussion to 'ought' used for advising purposes, as Sinnott-Armstrong wants us to do, there are lots of cases where the alleged 'can' implicature is not cancelable.[47] Take three typical instances of the relationship between 'ought' and 'can':

(6)   Adviser: You ought to save that drowning child.

      Denier: I can't – the child is fifty miles away.

Here, B's statement is thought to *entail* that it's false that Denier ought to save the child. Similarly for (7) and (8).

(7)   Adviser: You ought to open a window.

      Denier: I can't – there aren't any windows.

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[45] This is in effect what happens when authors defending 'ought implies can' distinguish ideal or predictive 'ought's from moral, deontic ones.

[46] This is Streumer's view. He argues that Sinnott-Armstrong is actually committed to a view on which 'ought' *only sometimes* conversationally implicates 'can', and that sometimes 'ought' actually does imply 'can'. I'm not sure that Sinnott-Armstrong is committed to such a view, even if it might be better able to deal with some of these cases.

[47] Driver's example is "I promise to x, even if I can't" (192). Thus, the obligation you incur by promising isn't cancelable. This isn't a knock-down example, though, for two reasons. First, something more complicated might be going on once we introduce promising (e.g., the relationship between promising, intending, and believed ability). Second, it's not a case of advising.

Thus it's false that Denier ought to open one.

(8)   Adviser: You ought to call the police.

Denier: I can't – I don't have a phone.

Thus it's false that Denier ought to call them.

Sinnott-Armstrong preemptively defends his view against cases like these, but his defense is ultimately unconvincing. He introduces Chang, a friend who is advising Adams. If Adams tells Chang he can't meet Brown, Sinnott-Armstrong argues, then she will withdraw *but not deny* her claim that he ought to meet Brown. He takes this to show that "Chang withdraws her judgment not because it's false but only because it cannot serve the purpose of advising."[48] Sometimes, this is true. We often refrain from saying true things because they wouldn't be helpful. But I don't think this is true for all of the cases that Sinnott-Armstrong needs.

Setting aside 'ought implies can' for the moment, let's look at advising situations where the statement used to advise clearly does become false (i.e., what Sinnott-Armstrong thinks *doesn't* happen in the Chang case). While he's right that such a statement is often withdrawn without being explicitly denied, that's often just because it would be awkward to explicitly deny it. Take the following conversation, for example:

(9)   Adviser: You ought to call the police.

Denier: My friend already did. They're on their way.

Thus it's false that Denier ought to call them.

It's false that B ought to call the police because they've already been called. Here, Adviser might respond in different ways:

Adviser: Well I guess it's not true that you ought to call the police.

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[48] Sinnott-Armstrong (1984), 257.

Or…

Adviser: Is there anything else we can do in the meantime?

Adviser responding in the first way would be completely bizarre. Not because it's false, but because it's annoyingly unhelpful. It would be much more natural for Adviser to offer something like the second response. There is, therefore, no reason to think that the earlier cases are cases where the 'ought' claim is withdrawn but remains true.

Maybe Sinnott-Armstrong is right about one thing. He makes the point that saying true things is sometimes unhelpful ("cannot serve the purpose of advising"). He adds, however, that the true thing Chang refrains from saying is that Adams ought, nevertheless, to meet Brown. But maybe the true thing Chang refrains from saying is that it's no longer the case that Adams ought to meet Brown. At least in many other 'ought implies can' cases, like (6)–(8), this seems evident. In such cases, it's clear that the 'can' claims are not cancelable. They actually undermine the truth of the 'ought' claims. But even so, it might be conversationally bizarre to *say* so. So, while we are probably looking at conversational implicature, it's not the implicature that Sinnott-Armstrong wants.

There's a possible snag here that I'd like to head off. Generalized conversational implicatures are implicatures that hold by default, i.e., absent special circumstances. So the statement, "He went to the café or to the library," implicates that he didn't do both, but it wouldn't have that implicature if we were in an elementary logic class. "I went to a birthday party," implicates that it wasn't my birthday party, but it wouldn't (at least debatably) if we were playing a guessing game. Maybe the cases where the 'can' implicature doesn't seem to hold – e.g., cases where it isn't cancelable – are special circumstances. This is obviously difficult to adjudicate, but these cases don't seem to have any special contextual feature in common. The thing they seem to have in

common is that one party genuinely cannot perform the act in question, and that seems to get rid of any obligation to do so.[49]

In this section, I've argued against the conversational implicature view of 'ought implies can' on the grounds that 'can' claims need not be calculable or cancelable. In fact, Sinnott-Armstrong hasn't given us any reason to think that *in general* they are cancelable, but at most that they sometimes are. Here, we can see one crucial point from the previous section resurfacing, namely, the importance of the contrapositive or reverse entailment.[50] If 'ought' conversationally implicated 'can', how would we make sense of the central place of 'cannot implies not-ought'? Conversational implicatures, even generalized ones, don't give us anything like contrapositives, and this is a serious problem for the view.

Take, for example, the following pairs:

(10)   "There's a garage around the corner."

        > The garage is open and sells petrol.

(10a)   "The garage isn't open and doesn't sell petrol."

        >? There's not a garage around the corner.

(11)   "I went to a birthday party yesterday."

        > I didn't go to my (own) birthday party.

(11a)   "I went to my birthday party yesterday."

        >? I didn't go to a birthday party yesterday.

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[49] Again, it's worth noting that 'ought implies can' deniers can help themselves to such a response as well; it's just that the account of why these seem to be so closely linked will be more nuanced. See the penultimate paragraph of presupposition section.

[50] Southwood suggests a similar point in his (2013), 10fn.2.

Here, (10) and (11) are clear conversational implicatures. But (10a) and (11a), the candidate contrapositives, are not. If B says that the garage isn't open and doesn't sell petrol, B by no means conversationally implicates that there's no garage around the corner. (In fact, saying that the garage isn't open and doesn't sell petrol presupposes, on the contrary, that there *is* a garage, though it says nothing about its location.) Similarly, (12a) fails. If I went to my birthday party yesterday, that entails that I went to *a* birthday party yesterday. Not only do we fail to get contrapositives, we fail spectacularly.

Structurally, though, we would need this in order to capture 'ought implies can' not only as a conditional but also as a contrapositive. In other words, we want both of the following implicatures:

(12)   "She ought to save the drowning child."

> She can save the drowning child.

(12a)   "She cannot save the drowning child."

>? It's not true that she ought to save the drowning child.

But even if we grant that 'ought' conversationally implicates 'can', i.e., implicatures like (13), we certainly don't get 'cannot' conversationally implicates 'not-ought', i.e., implicatures like (13a). We would have to explain that in a completely different way. Thus the conversational implicature view, like the presupposition view, ultimately fails to take seriously the fact that our paradigm appeals to 'ought implies can' are *not* appeals to the straightforward conditional, but appeals to the contrapositive, 'cannot implies not-ought'.

The point, then, is twofold. First, neither the presupposition nor the entailment view can explain both the conditional and contrapositive uses of 'ought implies can'. Second, such views actually make the conditional the central phenomenon to be explained, when really we more often deploy 'ought implies can' as 'cannot implies not-ought'. Thus, if we had to pick which of the two forms was central, we should pick the latter.

Nor is this a shallow or merely contingent problem. This is a deep feature of any pragmatic view of 'ought implies can'. Any view that ties 'can' claims to their corresponding 'ought' claims only pragmatically

cannot explain why we rely so heavily on 'cannot implies not-ought' *precisely because they are pragmatic views*. These are views about what's left in the background or assumed when we say that people ought to do certain things. But one of the foremost features – if not the single foremost feature – of 'ought implies can' is that our most common and most paradigmatic appeals to it are actually appeals to 'cannot implies not-ought'. Pragmatic accounts at best cannot explain why this should be so, and at worst entail that the contrapositive is meaningless, false, or unproductive.

4.   The deep problem: moral thought and deliberation

I have so far been assessing these views based on whether 'ought' and 'can' claims meet the criteria for presupposition and conversational implicature. Instead of leaning heavily on particular counterexamples, I've argued that these views don't meet the structural requirements of their preferred analysis. I've argued against the presupposition view on the grounds that 'ought' and 'can' claims fail embedding tests (of which negation was the most extensively discussed); therefore, the relationship between them can't be presupposition. I've argued against the conversational implicature view on the grounds that 'ought' and 'can' claims fail to be calculable and cancelable; therefore, the relationship between them can't be conversational implicature. I also argued that the failure of the negation test and the failure of cancelability are linked to our frequent use of the contrapositive 'cannot implies not-ought'. But this final section will be dedicated to a deeper problem, and one that discredits any pragmatic view at all. Even if they perfectly captured all of our communication about 'ought's, such views would still be too weak. They cannot explain one vitally important feature of 'ought implies can': that we use 'ought implies can' in thought as well as in word.

'Ought implies can' doesn't carry force only in conversational contexts. It carries deliberative force as well. The point of any pragmatic account is to explain how we successfully communicate things that aren't explicitly said. A pragmatic account is thus fundamentally about interpersonal communication. But it would be a mistake to think that we use 'ought implies can' exclusively interpersonally. We appeal to it in our thought as

well. We can identify the same patterns in how our beliefs about what we ought to do get excused or negated by inability.

Suppose Nicole is teaching a discussion-based class. Everyone in the class speaks up a lot, except one very quiet student. She thinks to herself, this student really ought to speak up more. He does himself and everyone else a disservice by not contributing! Not only that, it seems like he's always passing notes with the student sitting next to him. How incredibly rude! She eventually discovers that this student is mute. Those notes? That was him occasionally asking comprehension questions to the student sitting next to him. Of course she no longer thinks he ought to speak up more. In fact, she is mortified that she ever thought he ought to.

Now imagine that Clark is completely deluded about his abilities. He thinks he (like a more famous, fictional Clark) can fly faster than speeding bullets. He's spending some time at target practice with friends, when he sees someone aim toward the central light in the ceiling. Suspecting something fishy, he thinks to himself he ought to go catch that bullet – now's the time to exercise those powers. Fly, Clark! But nothing happens. The light is shot, and as the glass falls to the floor, Clark realizes that he never had any superpowers. Deflated, he now thinks to himself, "I really thought that I should have stopped the bullet, but I guess I was wrong."

What these cases make clear is that 'ought implies can' operates in our moral thinking. Nicole doesn't simply withdraw her initial judgment because she thinks that, while it's true, it's inappropriate to *say* (or to think). She withdraws it because she thinks it's false, and what's more, she feels terrible that she ever thought it was true. Clark, too, clearly disavows his previous judgment. The crux is that they aren't attempting to communicate their thoughts with other people, so pragmatics has no opportunity to step in. There must be some deeper connection between 'ought' and 'can' that a pragmatic account is simply not in position to explain.

It might appear that the presupposition view has an advantage in trying to explain such cases. After all, it seems like one could think to oneself "My cat is on the mat," and in doing so take for granted that one has a cat. To see why this strategy fails, another feature of presupposition is important, namely accommodation. Presupposition accommodation happens when a presupposition is *introduced* into discourse by the presupposing

statement.[51] For example, when I say to you, "The sun is shining and there's not a cloud in the sky," we both take for granted that the sky is blue. This, however, isn't presupposed by the sentence I've said. (Recall earlier examples: I assume all sorts of things in conversations, including the stability of the gravitational constant and so forth.) One thing that is presupposed by the sentence is that there is a unique and contextually salient sun. Presupposition accommodation can happen if I say to you, for example, "My cat is on the mat," when we've recently met and you didn't know I had a cat. Because my having a cat a perfectly reasonable admission into the discourse, we normally allow such presuppositions to enter the set of background facts without batting an eye.

Not only does presupposition accommodation not in fact arise in one's individual thought or deliberation, it *cannot*. If I think to myself "My cat is on the mat," of course I in a sense take for granted that I have a cat. But I do not and cannot use that thought to *introduce* the claim that I have a cat. When I think about my cat being on the mat, I already know I have a cat.

The weak Stalnakerian account may seem to avoid this problem because of its reliance on context sets. When I think to myself "My cat is on the mat," the context set for this thought must contain worlds at which I have a cat. To see any problems, we have to take a step back and survey the fuller account. Recall that his account is a thoroughly pragmatic one, and as such, presupposition is fundamentally about speakers and hearers. We determine and assess presuppositions based on facts about speakers' beliefs and intentions. His rough characterization of presupposition is:

> A proposition P is a pragmatic presupposition of a speaker in a given context just in case the speaker assumes or believes that P, assumes or believes that his addressee assumes or believes that P, and assumes or believes that his addressee recognizes that he is making these assumptions, or has these beliefs.[52]

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[51] How accommodation works is admittedly a matter of debate, but we need not sort this debate out here. It is a widely agreed upon and acknowledged phenomenon that accompanies presuppositions, and that is sufficient for present purposes.
[52] Stalnaker (1999b), 49.

By his own admission, this is too rough to be a definition or analysis. But it is clear from this passage that, whatever precisely Stalnaker has in mind, presupposition will not be something that makes sense when there isn't a speaker-hearer distinction – that is, it is not something that makes sense in deliberation. This is because, as he says elsewhere, pragmatics is about us narrowing the sets of worlds we take each other to be talking about, for conversational ease and efficiency.[53] But nothing like this needs to happen when we deliberate to ourselves. We already know which worlds we take to be in the context set, and we don't need to help ourselves by informing ourselves that one or the other world isn't in the context set.

Now, it's possible that our thoughts are structured in some language-like way; I don't mean to take a stand on that issue. But even if that's so, it's completely implausible that our thoughts would also be regulated by *pragmatic* constraints, and so pragmatics-based views of 'ought implies can' must be missing something important. Furthermore, it's not plausible that there are just two separate principles at work: one governing our speech patterns and another governing our thought patterns. The phenomena manifest in fundamentally the same ways, so there's no reason to think that we have one 'ought'-in-speech principle and an independent 'ought'-in-thought principle.

I'm sympathetic to the aim of the pragmatic views of 'ought implies can'. Such views attempt to explain why the principle seems so intuitive while facing apparent counterexamples. While pragmatic views come close, they fall short of this aim. They can't explain what's so intuitive about 'ought implies can', since part of what makes it an appealing principle is its role in moral thought and deliberation. A pragmatic account is, at the end of the day, an explanation of how communicators get on the same page with each other. But we don't need an explanation of how we get on the same page with ourselves.

Earlier I pointed out that pragmatic views focus on the conditional at the expense of the actually more central contrapositive uses of 'ought implies can'. In that vein, the attack of the final section is that pragmatic views also focus on the interpersonal phenomena at the expense of the deliberative phenomena. It may even be true that the deliberative phenomena are more central. If, for example, we had an account of the deliberative 'ought implies can' phenomena, we would be in good position to explain its manifestations in interpersonal

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[53] See Stalnaker (1999a), esp. 34-40, in addition related remarks throughout Stalnaker (1999b).

interactions. Pragmatic views, then, take what we might call an outside-in approach, i.e., an approach that starts from the linguistic and interpersonal phenomena and tries to extrapolate the rest. As such, they start at a disadvantage because it's not clear how to make pragmatics bear in anything but a superficial way on deliberation and thought. I thus suspect that, at least where 'ought implies can' is concerned, an inside-out approach would offer a more fitting account.

Incidentally, one might be tempted by a related thought, that 'ought implies can' is intuitive as a principle governing the metaphysics of obligation, not merely a principle governing our obligation *talk*. So pragmatics can't explain 'ought implies can'. I think this kind of point need not actually worry the defender of a pragmatic view, or at least not to the extent that the mental phenomena should. Defenders of the pragmatic views discussed above are well aware that 'ought implies can' sometimes looks like a metaphysical principle governing obligation. Their arguments are meant to show that this kind of a view is mistaken, and it's meant to show *why* it's mistaken. Embodied in a pragmatic view of 'ought implies can' is a kind of error theory about the metaphysical connection between 'ought' and 'can'. It *seems* like there's a deep link there, but we explain that link by pointing out that whenever we're *talking* about obligation, we link them. In other words, the systematic account of our 'ought' talk explains our systematic mistake.

The final argument I've presented against pragmatic views isn't susceptible to this kind of deflationary response. Pragmatic views aren't aimed at giving an error theory for our moral thinking and our practical reasoning in general. If they were, they'd be in pretty bad shape, for the reasons presented in this section. But the failure to accommodate the role that 'ought implies can' clearly plays in moral thinking is a serious weakness of such views.

The same point can be brought out by noticing that 'ought implies can' is often advertised as a conceptual truth. A pragmatic account, however, can't explain 'ought implies can' if it's a conceptual principle, and adverting to our moral thought and deliberation is a way of getting at this. The role our 'ought' concept plays is not just a pragmatic (or perhaps even linguistic) one. It's much deeper than that: it's conceptual, so any truths about what we ought to do will manifest in both our speech and our thought. Maybe we should adopt an error

theory of why 'ought implies can' seems to play the role it does, but defenders of pragmatic accounts will be

hard pressed to offer it.

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