forthcoming in Michael Kühler and Marcel Van Ackeren (eds),   
*The Limits of Moral Obligation* (Routledge, 2015)

**Demandingness, “Ought”, and Self-Shaping**

Garrett Cullity

A frequently encountered argument against demanding moral outlooks has this form:[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Demandingness Argument

OC. For any *A* and any *F*, *A* ought to *F* only if *A* can *F*.

SC. Pcannot meet standard of self-sacrifice S.

Therefore, it is not the case that Pought to meet standard S.

The thought is that when S is a standard of severe self-sacrifice, SC is true of most of us. To be able to meet such a standard, we would have to be drastically different from the way we actually are; so it is false that we ought to do so.

I evaluate this argument in what follows. Its “ought”-claims will be read as claims about what a person ought, all things considered to do.[[2]](#endnote-2) “Ought” will need further elucidation, as will “can”; and we will need to consider different possible substitutions for S. But we can start by looking briefly at the common arguments for OC.

1. Pointlessness and Unfairness

The two most common arguments for OC are that it is either (a) pointless or (b) unfairto subject a person to sanctions for not meeting a standard she cannot meet: pointless, because it cannot guide behaviour in a way that improves it; and unfair because it subjects her to a penalty she had no way of avoiding.[[3]](#endnote-3) The latter point is sometimes put like this: if morality required us to do what we cannot, that would be unfair, so there is a good reason for morality not to require that. However, that invites Nomy Arpaly’s objection: morality could only be unfair if it were itself a moral agent.[[4]](#endnote-4) So the unfairness argument is better expressed as follows. A standard I ought to meet is a standard I can properly be criticized for failing to meet. But it is unfair to criticize me for not doing what I could not have done. So I cannot properly be criticized for not meeting a standard I could not have complied with, and such a standard is not one I ought to meet.

These common arguments invite common objections. The pointlessness argument faces an objection from Truth. It may be true that a person ought to do something even if it is pointless for anyone to say it. Some counter-suggestible people are motivated to defy other people’s normative expectations: telling them they ought to meet a certain standard makes them want to break it, and attaching sanctions (such as blame) to breaking it motivates them to behave worse. Such facts obviously affect how we should interact with such people; but they do not falsify claims about what those people ought to do.

The unfairness argument provokes an objection from Self-Shaping. The practice of applying sanctions to you for failing to meet a given standard need not be unfair if your inability to meet it is your own fault. You can render yourself liable to those sanctions through being responsible for your own current inability to do better.

2. “Ought” and “Can”

To decide whether OC is defensible, however, we need to be more careful about just what it is claiming. “Ought” and “can” have different uses, generating different readings of OC. We need to distinguish these, examine the arguments in their support, and ask whether they are defensible against the objections just described. That will occupy §§3-8. Then we need to assess whether the defensible versions of OC yield a sound version of the Demandingness Argument. To do that, we will need to examine for which standards S and which uses of “cannot” SC is plausible.

I start by examining some of the different uses of “ought” and “can”, and the purposes they serve. In the next two sections, I mark these differences through the introduction of subscripts. This should be treated as a stipulated regimentation of the terms: it is intended to be compatible with either asserting or denying that “ought” and “can” literally have different senses in ordinary usage. Perhaps the words are ambiguous; or perhaps there is a background explanation of how sentences containing “ought” and “can” can express different propositions, although the words themselves are univocal (as there is with sentences containing indexical words like “I” and “here”).[[5]](#endnote-5) We do not need to take sides on that: what is important is that we equip ourselves to distinguish some different claims that might be made in asserting OC.

3. “Ought”

A first useful distinction is the one John Broome makes between owned and unowned “oughts”.[[6]](#endnote-6) A sentence contains an unowned “ought” when its content can be captured without loss by a sentence of the form, “It ought to be the case that…”. Using this criterion, one unowned “ought” is the predictive “ought” in “He ought to have reached Birdsville by now” – that is likely given the evidence. Another is the evaluative “oughtE” in, “He oughtE to get a medal” – ideally, he would get a medal. I give this a subscript as we will be meeting it again.

Contrasted with these, there are two main owned “oughts” that will concern us. One is the “oughtD” of decisive objective reasons. When I say, of a drink that contains poison, “You oughtD not to drink that,” I am telling you that there are reasons that count decisively against drinking it. These reasons are objective: they are given by the facts of the matter, independently of your evidential state. “OughtD” needs to work that way in order to be a vehicle for giving *advice*: we can use it to advise someone about an important reason of which she may have been unaware.

Notice that the facts that provide us with decisive reasons can include facts about what oughtE to be the case. It can be because I oughtE to know more about decision theory that I oughtD to read some decision theory textbooks.[[7]](#endnote-7)

“OughtD” needs to be contrasted with the “oughtR” of rationality. Suppose that, in a false alarm, you think your child has swallowed poison, but instead of calling an ambulance you waste time searching for first aid advice on the internet. Even if I know that there was actually no poisoning, I could sensibly complain, “You oughtR to have called an ambulance.” Here, I am not advising you about the decisive objective reasons – these actually favoured taking no medical action. Rather, I am evaluating the rationality of your response in the light of what you did believe, and what you had a justification for believing, about your reasons. The primary use of “oughtR” is not in advising, but in criticizing or commending.

Both “oughtD” and “oughtR” are owned. The content of the sentences that contain them is not fully captured by saying what ought to be the case. When I say that you oughtD or oughtR to do something, I am saying that there is a certain kind of onus on *you* to do it. A plausible view about the relationship between the two is this: “oughtR” expresses the evaluative standard to which we oughtD to hold each other in assessing the adequacy of our thinking about and responsiveness to our actual and apparent reasons.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, that view is not one I shall rely on in what follows.

The tense of “ought”-remarks needs careful handling. When we say “You ought to have *F*d”, we are not saying that you now have decisive reasons to have performed a past action, nor that rationality now requires that of you. Rather, we are saying that at some time in the past, it was then true that you ought to *F*.

4. “Can”

“Can”-sentences are also used to make different kinds of claims. Often, they invite a counterfactual conditional interpretation, where “can *F*” is equivalent to “would *F* if...”. When I warn you, “Your load can fall off when it is tied down like that,” I am saying that it won’t take much for it to fall off. It falls off in a range of nearby possible worlds. This is the “canP” of possibility: it comes in degrees of strength, corresponding to the closeness of the worlds in which the antecedent of the conditional is realized – that is, how big a change would need to be made to the way things are for the consequent to be true.

However, there are many uses of “can” – particularly those referring to the abilities of personal agents – for which a simple counterfactual conditional interpretation is implausible. No matter how quick you are at learning languages, it is not true that you can speak Urdu if you have not learnt it yet. You currently lack the competence, no matter how easily you could acquire it. And once you have that competence, you can speak Urdu, even if you happen to be gagged. When we say such things, we are using the “can” of competence.

The gagged Urdu-speaker possesses competence but has been deprived of the opportunity to exercise it: there are external constraints preventing its exercise. Now consider the opposite case. Having just been given a Mah-jong set for my birthday, I can now play Mah-jong with my family. You speak truly in saying that, although I have not learnt the rules yet. In doing so, you are using the “can” of opportunity.

A fourth “can” is the one we will be employing most often, so let us give it another subscript. This combines the previous two: it is the “canCO” of competence plus opportunity – the one being used when we say that you can speak Urdu only when you have learnt it and are ungagged. Notice that there are cases in which, although I cannotCO do something, it remains possible that I do it. Even if I know nothing about safecracking, I might still fluke the right combination of numbers and crack a safe. When a person canCO F, I shall say she has the abilityCO to F.

Fifth and last on my list is a less demanding “can”. If your computer meets the hardware requirements to run a word processing program, one way to express that is by saying that it can do word processing: that remark is correct, even before the program has been loaded. We sometimes use “can” to make corresponding claims about a person. If I have had my legs amputated and yours are intact, it would make sense to say that you can play ice hockey and I cannot, without implying that you have either the competence (you have not learnt how) or the opportunity. Call this the “canCap” of capacity. So understood, a capacity is a state of actually, and not just potentially, possessing characteristics that are necessary to acquire a competence. (I accept that ordinary talk of “capacities” ranges both more broadly and more narrowly than that.)[[9]](#endnote-9)

As with “oughts”, this gives us owned and unowned “cans”: “canP” is unowned, but the other four are owned. It canP be the case that I crack a safe even though I cannotCO crack safes.

5. AbilityCO and Control

Having made these distinctions, we canCO now ask for which “oughts” and “cans” OC is plausible. I shall argue that there are defensible versions of OC that relate “oughtD” to “canCO”. There are also plausible cognate claims relating “oughtR” to what you believe you canCO do.

The arguments for these claims develop the following idea. There is a connection between your abilitiesCO and what is subject to your control, and that connection is relevant to both your reasons and your rationality. It is relevant to your reasons, and hence to what you oughtD to do, because of the relationship between what is subject to your control and what could sensibly feature in deliberation. It is relevant to criticism of your rationality because of the relationship between what is subject to your control and what it makes sense to hold you accountable for having chosen.

In pursuing this idea, I impose a restriction on the discussion that follows. The application of the “ought”/“can” principles I go on to defend is restricted to responses that are subject to your control. So they do not apply to all the responses you oughtD or oughtR to make. There are things you oughtD to feel sad about, because facts about them give you reasons for sadness; and things you oughtR to feel sad about, because of the apparent facts.[[10]](#endnote-10) But for most of us (skilled actors aside), sadness is not subject to our control, so we cannotCO feel sad. The question of which “ought”/“can” principles apply to responses like that is not one I address here.

6. The Argument from Deliberation

Versions of OC governing the “oughtD” of decisive reasons are supported by an Argument from Deliberation with two main premises. The first concerns the aim of deliberation: your deliberation essentially has the aim of determining your exercise of control over what you will do. Without that aim a process would not qualify as deliberation. If you are whiling away the time by considering the reasons for and against an action, without thereby aiming to decide whether you will do it, you are not deliberating. Moreover, determining that you do something as the result of weighing up the reasons for and against it can still fall short of deliberating about whether to do it, when what you do is not subject to your control. For example, you might think it would be a good thing to trip over accidentally, and consequently put yourself into a distracting situation that causes you to do so; but that would not count as deliberating about whether to trip over accidentally – only about whether to put yourself into the distracting situation. These do seem to me correct observations about orthodox usage of the English word “deliberation”: it is more than just the weighing of reasons, but weighing them with the aim of determining your exercise of control over what you will do. However, its orthodoxy does not especially matter: it can be treated as a stipulation about the reference of “deliberation” in this argument.

The second premise concerns the relationship between deliberation about an action, so understood, and the objective reasons for and against it. The reasons there are for (or against) an action are the facts that are worthy of featuring in deliberation about whether to perform it. That is not to say that I oughtE or oughtD or oughtR to deliberate about those reasons: perhaps it is so obvious what I oughtD to do that I oughtE not to deliberate at all. The claim that reasons are “worthy” of featuring in deliberation is the claim that they bear the same relation to deliberation that praiseworthy actions bear to praise. Just as praising a praiseworthy action may be unnecessary or unhelpful, so too deliberating about a reason may be unnecessary or unhelpful.[[11]](#endnote-11)

This claim could be developed in different ways. One would be by maintaining that the   
-worthiness relation is a conceptual primitive, and that reasons for action can be *analysed* as deliberation-worthy facts. That suggestion, in treating the concept of deliberation as more basic than that of a reason, seems implausible to me. The premise I appeal to is much more modest: it claims only that the distinction between reasons and non-reasons coincides with the distinction between the facts that are and are not deliberation-worthy. This accounts for the difference between the good features of an action that are reasons for it and those that are not. If a gesture I could perform would be graceful, or skilful, or cause no pain, then those would be good features of that possible action; but (unless there is already something else to be said for it) they fall short of reasons to perform it. To be a reason, a fact must count in favour of *doing* the action in question – and for that, it must be a fact about the action that is worthy of featuring in deliberation about whether to do it.

Given these premises, the Argument from Deliberation proceeds as follows. Suppose you lack either the competence or the opportunity to F: you cannotCO F. Then F-ing is not now subject to your control. If so, the question whether to F now is not deliberation-worthy, since deliberation essentially has the aim of determining your exercise of control over what you will do. But if the question whether to F now is not deliberation-worthy, then no fact is worthy of featuring in deliberation about whether to F now. So there are no reasons for you to F now, and consequently no decisive reasons for you to F now; so it is not the case that you oughtD to F now. Therefore,

OC1. *A* oughtD to *F* now only if *A* canCO *F*.

This argument concerns what you canCO do, not what you have evidence that you canCO do. If you have evidence that you canCO F, then it may be rational to believe that you canCO F, and rational to deliberate about whether to F now. But reasons are not the facts that you oughtR to include in deliberation. They are the deliberation-worthy facts. And actions that you are only apparently ableCO to perform are not really actions about which there are any deliberation-worthy facts, any more than a vile action that appears noble is really praiseworthy, even if it oughtR to be praised.

Now consider my present deliberation about future action. Suppose I cannotCO sing “Danny Boy”, since I do not know the words or tune. That need not stop me from deliberating about whether to sing it at my father’s 75th birthday party next month, provided I canCO learn it by then. Singing “Danny Boy” next month *is* currently subject to my control, as long as there are things I canCO now do to acquire the abilityCO to sing it then. That is the relevant condition on whether I now have reasons to perform some action later. So, when *t* is some future time:

OC2. *A* oughtD to *F* at *t* only if *A* canCO acquire or retain the abilityCO to *F* at *t*.

7. The Argument from Criticism

Now let us turn to the “ought” of rationality: “oughtR”. This is used to express an evaluative standard – a standard for criticism. Do any standards of criticism imply “can”?

In general, true negative judgement does not imply the abilityCO to have avoided that for which one is negatively judged. This includes negative judgements about a person’s rationality. If my thinking is muddled and fallacious, then my rationality is in those respects defective – I am in those ways a bad thinker – whether or not I have or had the abilityCO to be any better. Whether I am bad in some respect and whether I couldCO have avoided being bad in that respect are two different questions. This applies to my having a bad will, too: malicious or cruel attitudes towards other people are bad, whether or not I couldCO – or even couldCap – have avoided having them.

However, for some kinds of performance, what a person couldCO have avoided *is* relevant to assessing them against a relevant evaluative standard. This is true of your exercise of the power of choice – the power you exercise when you choose one option over another. Choosing an option does not guarantee that you succeed in implementing it, nor even that you canCO implement it. You might choose to go to Melbourne for the weekend, without realizing that the airport has been closed down. But what does seem essential to choice is that (like deliberation) it has a certain aim: this time, the aim of realizing the chosen option. A state of resolving upon an option – say, by judging it best – cannot amount to choosing it unless in resolving upon it you are aiming to bring it about.

Suppose, then, that F is a type of action that seems obviously unavailable to you, so that you believe with good justification that you cannotCO F. You accordingly exclude F from consideration and choose to do something else instead. How should we evaluate the rationality of your choice? There may, of course, be something defective about your having chosen the option you have arrived at. But could there be anything defective about your *not having chosen F*? This might be regrettable, if F is in fact (despite the evidence) something you couldCO have done and is highly desirable in some way. Then that is bad luck. But in not choosing F, there is nothing defective about the rationality of your exercise of the power of choice. On the contrary, it would have been irrational to choose to do what you justifiedly believe you cannotCO do.[[12]](#endnote-12) Since choice essentially involves aiming to realize what you have chosen, the only way of choosing to do something you justifiedly believe you cannotCO do would be by thinking that in resolving upon it you will bring it about by fluke. And that is irrational. Therefore, the only way for your choosing F to be rationally non-defective is if you do not justifiedly believe you cannotCO F. So we have:

OB1. *A* oughtR to choose to *F* now only if *A* does not justifiedly believe that *A* cannotCO *F* now.

And, drawing on the earlier treatment of future-directed action, the partner principle governing that is:

OB2. *A* oughtR to choose to *F* at *t* only if *A* does not justifiedly believe that *A* cannotCO acquire or retain the abilityCO to *F* at *t*.

These are not versions of OC, since they do not say that “ought” implies “can”. But they are closely related cognate principles: they say that, when it is used to evaluate the rationality of choice, “oughtR” implies the absence of justified beliefs about “cannotCO”.

Now consider another case. Suppose it is obvious that you cannotCO F, but F is so outlandish that the question of whether you canCO F or not has not crossed your mind. Then you do not believe that you cannotCO F, so you do not meet the conditions in OB1-2. However, it would still be irrational for you to choose F. Once the question whether to F occurs to you, it would be irrational not to believe that you cannotCO F. And if you *do* believe that you cannotCO F then it would as before be irrational to think you will bring about F by fluke. So in these conditions, too, choosing F would be rationally defective. This gives us the broader pair of principles:

OB3. *A* oughtR to choose to *F* now only if it is not the case that *A* both (a) has a justification for believing that *A* cannotCO *F* now, and (b) does not believe that *A* canCO *F* now.

OB4. *A* oughtR to choose to *F* at future time *t* only if it is not the case that *A* both (a) has a justification for believing that *A* cannotCO acquire or retain the abilityCO to *F* at *t*, and (b) does not believe that *A* canCO *F* at *t*.

OB3-4 are more general principles that subsume OB1-2. OB3-4 each give a pair of conditions that block an oughtR-judgement; OB1-2 each specify one particular way of meeting those conditions.

OB3-4 state necessary conditions for it to be the case that you oughtR to choose *F* – that is, for your not choosing *F* to be rationally defective. If so, the conditions they state are necessary conditions for the blameworthiness of not choosing *F*. After all, your exercise of the power of choice can only be blameworthy if it is bad. Blame clearly goes beyond mere negative judgement; but all of the diverging accounts of how it does so agree that it includes a judgement of badness. And your not choosing *F* must meet the conditions in OB3-4 in order to be bad.

Now let us turn from the choices you oughtR to make to the actions you oughtR to perform. As we have noted, actions and choices are distinct; and an action can be bad even if choosing it is not. However, in evaluating the *rationality* of an action, we are not just asking whether there is some respect in which the action is bad: we are evaluating its quality as a response to what you believed, and what you had a justification for believing, about your reasons. That makes the rationality of your action dependent on whether it is rational for you to choose it in the light of the reasons that were apparent to you. It would be too strong to say that you oughtR to F only if you oughtR to choose F. You can do what you oughtR unthinkingly, and hence without having chosen it in preference to other alternatives. But you oughtR to F only if it is not irrational to choose it. And we have seen what that requires. If you have a justification for believing that you cannotCO F and do not believe that you canCO, then it *is* irrational to choose it.

That gives us one necessary condition on what you oughtR to do: the same condition as OB3 places on what you oughtR to choose. Another necessary condition is illustrated by the following example. Suppose you falsely believe that you canCO crack safes; actually, you cannotCO. Someone’s life needs to be saved by cracking a safe, but you are indifferent and do nothing. Then it is clear that you oughtR to have chosen to crack the safe, given what you believed. But oughtR you to have cracked it? We need more information before we can answer that. Suppose that the combination number on the safe is actually your birthday, and that is the number you would have used if you had chosen to crack it. If you had chosen as you oughtR and had tried to do what you chose, you would (flukily) have cracked the safe. Then your not having cracked it is due to a rational defect, so you oughtR to have done so. But if, on the contrary, you would not have cracked it had you tried, then you would not have cracked it even if you had been rationally flawless, so it is not the case that you oughtR to have cracked it (although you still oughtR to have chosen to crack it).

Thus, what you oughtR to do depends on two factors: what you oughtR to choose; and whether, if you try to do what you oughtR to choose, you will do it. So the principles we arrive at for present and future action are these:

OB5. *A* oughtR to *F* now only if (a) *A* does not both have a justification for believing that *A* cannotCO *F* and not believe that *A* canCO *F* and (b) *A* would *F* nowif *A* tried.

OB6. *A* oughtR to *F* at *t* only if (a) *A* does not both have a justification for believing that *A* cannotCO acquire or retain the abilityCO to *F* at *t* and not believe that *A* canCO *F* at *t* and (b) *A* would *F* at *t* if *A* tried.

How about past action? That is handled as described in §3. It is now true that *A* oughtR (to have *F*d at *t*) if and only if it was true at *t* that *A* oughtR (to have *F*d). Once a rational defect, always a rational defect.

8. “Ought” implies “Can” What?

Several defensible “ought”/“can” principles have been identified: OC1-2 and OB1-6. The Arguments from Deliberation and Criticism for these principles do not appeal to either pointlessness or unfairness. So they avoid the objections to the standard arguments for OC we met in §1.

In arguing for these principles, I have so far been considering substitutions for *F* that are act-types. However, those are only the first of a range of possible substitutions to consider, including:

(i) a certain act-type on a given occasion

(ii) having performed a particular act(-type) on a given occasion

(iii) always performing an act of a certain type on occasions of a given kind

(iv) having a policy

(v) always following a policy

(vi) having a certain set of priorities

(vii) having a certain set of concerns[[13]](#endnote-13)

(viii) having a certain feeling on a given occasion

(ix) having a virtue: being a certain way.

Our principles apply only to responses that are subject to our control, and hence are candidates for guidance by a competence, and governance by deliberation and choice. So they apply to responses (i)-(vi), but not (vii)-(ix).

When applying OC1-2 and OB1-6, we need to pay careful attention to which substitution for *F* is being proposed. Consider this example of Ulrike Heuer’s: as the hour of the department meeting approaches, you lock yourself in your office and throw away the key.[[14]](#endnote-14) Now you cannotCO attend the meeting. Suppose you ring your mother to ask for advice. According to OC1, if she advises you that you oughtD to get to the meeting, she says something false. However – moving from substitution (i) to (ii) – it remains true that you oughtD to have gone to the meeting, since that was something you couldCO have done (by not locking yourself in your office). Now suppose your colleagues phone you to offer you criticism, not advice. They speak falsely if they say that you oughtR to get yourself to the meeting, or that you oughtR to choose to be at the meeting: since you justifiedly believe that you cannotCO be there, OB1-2 block the second claim, and OB5-6 block the first. However, none of that stops it from being true that you oughtR to have chosen to attend the meeting and to have got yourself there, given what was true of you before you locked yourself in. Moreover, if your colleagues express their criticism by exclaiming, “You oughtR to be at the meeting!”, then none of our “ought”/“can” principles stands in the way. You can be criticized for your location, since that is the result of your rationally defective choice and action.

9. The Application to SC

We are now equipped to return to the Demandingness Argument. The “ought”/“can” principles OC1-2 and OB1-6 are all available to serve as its first premise. Now let us turn to its second:

SC. Pcannot meet standard of self-sacrifice S.

For which “cans”, and which standards S, is SC true?

Let us begin by asking this: which standards of self-sacrifice canCap we meet? The answer depends on what kind of thing we take “meeting a standard of self-sacrifice” to be. It could refer to any of the items (i)-(ix) on our list. If it is an individual, one-off action – (i) or (ii) – then the answer is pretty straightforward. I do currently have, and have had in the past, the capacity to give away everything I own. But – turning to (iii) and (v) – couldCap I continually perform actions of the same kind, working hard to accumulate material resources for the benefit of others, and spending on myself only what was necessary to maximize that benefit? That is harder to say. As it stands, it is surely credible that sustaining the motivation to live in that way would be beyond me. But that is a comment about what I possess the competence to do, and not whether I have the capacity to acquire that competence. What makes the latter question difficult to answer is the difficulty of knowing what stable policies (iv), priorities (vi) and concerns (vii) I have the capacity to sustain. No doubt, this varies from one individual to another. However, the psychological literature does suggest that for most of us, there are techniques of psychological conditioning – brainwashing – which, if expertly deployed, would weaken our personal attachments to make us much more committed to the service of others, as political or religious converts frequently are.[[15]](#endnote-15)

This suggests that most of us canCap meet a much more demanding standard of self-sacrifice than we actually do, for any of the available kinds of thing (i)-(ix) that “meeting a standard of self-sacrifice” might be. That is, the standard

S1: being as self-sacrificing as you canCap

is one that we are far from meeting.

However, plausibly, I cannotCO meet S1. To do that, I would have to be brainwashed. Therefore, according to OC1 it is not the case that I oughtD to meet S1 now. And if (as is plausible) I justifiedly believe that I cannotCO meet S1 now, then according to OB1 and OB5 it is not the case that I oughtR to choose to meet S1 now, or to meet it now.

Now consider an even more demanding standard:

S2: being as self-sacrificing as you canCap acquire the capacity to be.

To see the difference, consider this analogy. I may not now have the capacity to be a traditional pearl diver, because my lung volume is too small. But maybe there are actions I have the capacity to perform that would increase my lung volume. So I canCap increase my lung volume, and if so, then even though I currently cannotCap be a pearl diver, I canCap acquire the capacity to be one. In the same way, there may be activities that I canCap perform that would increase my capacity for self-sacrifice. Perhaps my capacity to be conditioned into more self-sacrificing attitudes is currently limited: I may not be suggestible enough for certain brainwashing techniques to work on me. But there may be things I canCap do to make myself more suggestible. So S2 is a more demanding level of sacrifice than S1.

If so, it is obvious that what we said about S1 applies equally to S2: since I cannotCO meet S2, it is not the case that I oughtD to meet it now; and since I justifiedly believe that I cannotCO meet S2, it is not the case that I oughtR to choose to meet it now, or to meet it now.

However, the same is true of many moral limitations. Suppose I am an insensitive person: I fail to notice when others are upset or frustrated, talk about myself rather than taking an interest in them, embarrass shy people by putting them on the spot, and so on. That is a particular form of moral incompetence. And since I lack the relevant form of competence, there are certain things which, ideally, I would do but which I lack decisive reasons to do. I oughtE to see how tiresome and difficult my clumsy remarks are, but it is not the case that I oughtD to see this, since I cannotCO. Nor oughtR I to make more sensitive responses, if it is obvious to me that I cannotCO. However, even if all that is true, that does not imply that my insensitivity is not something I oughtD to do anything about. On the contrary: since I oughtE not to be insensitive, I oughtD and oughtR to do what will conduce to becoming more sensitive than I am.

In many circumstances, that last step will be plausible; but not all.[[16]](#endnote-16) Whether I oughtD to do what will conduce to becoming more sensitive depends on all of the reasons for and against. There might be decisive reasons for doing something else instead. Perhaps working on my moral character will distract me from running the country, and that would be catastrophic enough to outweigh the progress I am likely to make in self-reform. But the important point for our purposes is that making this step is not blocked by any application of OC1-2 or OB1-6.

Given this, we need to consider a parallel line of thought in relation to self-sacrifice. According to some moral outlooks, the more self-sacrificing a person is, the better. My inabilityCO to meet either S1 or S2 does not stop it from being the case that, as those moral outlooks claim, I oughtE to meet (not just S1, but) S2. Ideally, I would be as self-sacrificing as I canCap acquire the capacity to be. So I oughtD and oughtR to do my best to get closer than I am to meeting S2.

What would be involved in doing that? Consider the diving analogy again. Faced with my current limitations, there are three kinds of activity I canCO engage in to improve my deep-diving performance. One is (a) toget in the water repeatedly and dive as deep as I canCO. The second is (b) to have lessons on diving technique, in order to improve my abilityCO to dive deeply. And the third is (c) to work with an exercise physiologist on increasing my lung volume, muscle strength and so on, in order to improve my capacity to dive deeply. Since I have limited resources of time and money, these three activities are in competition. But if I am single-mindedly devoted to maximizing my deep-diving performance then it is clear what I need to do. I need to work as hard as I canCO on the combination of (a), (b) and (c) that will produce the best diving performance. Of course, it will be hard to know exactly what that combination is: refining that is part of the hard work I will need to do, through a process of trial and error.

The corresponding point applies to self-sacrifice.[[17]](#endnote-17) If I oughtE to meet S2, then here is a further standard of self-sacrifice for me to consider:

S3: working as hard as I canCO to achieve the combination of

(a) being self-sacrificing,

(b) improving my abilityCO for self-sacrifice and

(c) improving my capacity for self-sacrifice

that will produce the greatest overall self-sacrifice.

Again, it is hard to know exactly what that combination is: but testing that through experimentation would be part of the hard work of meeting S3.

The claim that we both oughtD and oughtR to meet S3 is not blocked by any of our “ought”/“can” principles. Since S3 is a standard I canCO meet, OC1-2 provide no obstacle to its being the case that I oughtD to meet S3, both now and in the future. And since there is no justification for believing that I cannotCO meet S3, OB1-6 provide no obstacle to its being the case that I oughtR to choose to meet S3, and to meet it. This does leave open the possibility that, given the amount of progress I am likely to make in applying myself to S3, and the strong reasons I have to do other things instead, I oughtD to do those other things. That might still block an inference from the claim that I oughtE to meet S2 to the claim that I oughtD and oughtR to meet S3. But no application of OC1-2 or OB1-6 blocks that inference.

10. Self-Shaping and the Demandingness Argument

We have found that there are “oughts”, “cans” and standards of self-sacrifice S for which the Demandingness Argument is sound. But despite that, what it achieves is limited, since it does not apply to S3. The fact that you now cannotCO be extremely self-sacrificing does not stop it from being the case that you both oughtD and oughtR to keep working to maximize your level of self-sacrifice, since you canCO still do that.

In a way, this vindicates the point behind the objection from Self-Shaping. When we first met this in §1, it was an objection to the attempted defence of OC that appeals to the unfairness of subjecting a person to sanctions for failing to meet a standard she cannot meet. The objection from Self-Shaping is that this need not be unfair when her inability to meet it is her own fault. So stated, this objection can be avoided if no premise concerning unfairness is required for the defence of OC1-2 or OB1-6.[[18]](#endnote-18) However, it remains true that my inabilityCO to meet a given standard leaves it open that I oughtD and oughtR to have acted in a way that would have rendered me ableCO to meet it, and that I oughtD and oughtR to act to improve that abilityCO in future. This itself, we have seen, can be used to formulate a further standard that I canCO now meet – namely, S3 – which is therefore unchallenged by the Demandingness Argument.

*Ought*D we to meet S3? To answer that, we would need to assess the comparative strengths of all the reasons for and against. If the only way of meeting S3 were by getting yourself brainwashed, then that would be obnoxious in various ways. It would involve an assault on your agency, and the destruction of your receptiveness to many valuable things. Having said that, it is not obvious that the only ways of meeting S3 would be similarly obnoxious, nor whether their obnoxiousness is sufficient to make it the case that, all things considered, you oughtD not to meet S3. The argument here does not settle such questions. What it shows is this: if you oughtD not to meet S3, the reason for that would have to come from a source other than the Demandingness Argument.

11. Conclusion

Could a requirement of severe self-sacrifice be one we ought to comply with, all things considered? The Demandingness Argument fails to show that the answer to that question is No, using either “oughtD” of decisive reasons or the “oughtR” of rationality. Although it is not the case that we either oughtD or oughtR to meet a certain standard of self-sacrifice if we are obviously unableco to meet it, that does not prevent it from being the case that, however self-sacrificing we have been so far, we both oughtD and oughtR to work to be more so.

This leaves it open that there is a good argument why (some parts of) morality cannot be extremely demanding.[[19]](#endnote-19) But it will have to come from elsewhere than an appeal to the principle that “ought” implies “can”.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Word count:

Text: 6,942

Notes: 636

Refs: 165

Total: 7,743

**Notes**

1. See e.g.Griffin 1996, 87-92; Cottingham 1991, 801, 816; Mackie 1977, 131-4; Flanagan 1991, Ch.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Read this way, the argument supports a disjunction. Either (if morality itself makes such claims) a requirement to meet standard S is not part of morality, or (if it does not) we ought not, all things considered, to conform with that part of morality. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Howard-Snyder 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Arpaly 2006, 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. On the issue concerning “can”, see Cross 1986, 53-7. On “ought”, see Price 2008, Ch.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Broome 2013, Section 2.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is not in general the case that when X oughtE to be true of me, I oughtD to act to make X true of me. But I leave it open here what needs to be added to truths of the first kind in order to produce truths of the second. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I defend a more detailed “standard-fixing” account of the relationship between reasons and rationality in Cullity 2008, Section VII. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. You would not be misspeaking in saying either that a normal newborn infant has the capacity to learn to speak – in virtue of having a potential that will be actualized in the course of normal development – or that the gagged Urdu-speaker lacks the capacity to answer a question in Urdu. Following the regimentation in the text, however, the infant canCap acquire the capacity to learn to speak, and even a gagged non-Urdu-speaker has the capacity to speak Urdu, provided she has the cognitive wherewithal to learn it. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “OughtD” is only a vehicle for giving advice when the response you oughtD to make is subject to your control. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This allows for cases in which deliberating about a reason will make it disappear. A trait of yours can be praiseworthy even though an evil demon will extinguish it as soon as anyone tries to praise it. Likewise, the fact that you will enjoy the surprise party at my house can be an objective reason to go, even though were you to deliberate about it, the surprise and hence the enjoyment would disappear. The enjoyment remains deliberation-worthy, although you oughtD not to deliberate about it. And I speak truly when I say, “You oughtD to come to my place tomorrow.” (For the example, see Schroeder 2007, 165.) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. As Michael Kühler points out to me, it could be rational to *try* to do what you justifiedly believe you cannotCO do – for example, if you are trying to prove to someone else that you are unableCO to do it. But that is not yet a case in which it would be rational to choose to do it – only one in which it would be rational to choose to try. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. (vi) and (vii) are different, because you could make A a higher practical priority than B without having a greater concern for A than B. If my job is to check the stores and yours is to check the seaworthiness of the vessel, then I might make checking the stores a higher priority, while having a greater concern for the seaworthiness of the vessel. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Heuer 2010, 237-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Taylor 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See note 7 above. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. There is this difference: “maximizing my diving performance” is producing the deepest single dive; maximizing my overall self-sacrifice is producing the greatest aggregate sacrifice. But three corresponding kinds of activity need to be combined in either case. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The arguments of Sections 6 and 7 appeal to no premise concerning unfairness. The Argument from Criticism does support the claim that when you obviously cannotCO F, judging that you oughtR to choose F is unfair. But the judgement is unfair because it is false, not false because it is unfair. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. I defend a qualified claim of that form in Cullity 2004, Part II. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For helpful comments, I am grateful to Antony Eagle, Paul Formosa, Andrew Gleeson, Katrina Hutchinson, Jeanette Kennett, Michael Kühler, Catriona Mackenzie, James Morauta, Greg O’Hair and Jon Opie.

    **References**

    Arpaly, Nomy (2006): *Merit, Meaning, and Human Bondage*,Princeton: Princeton University Press.

    Broome, John (2013): *Rationality through Reasoning*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

    Cottingham, John (1991): "The Ethics of Self-Concern," in: *Ethics* 101, 798-817.

    Cross, Charles B. (1986): “ ‘Can’ and the Logic of Ability,” in: *Philosophical Studies* 50, 53-64.

    Cullity, Garrett (2004): *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

    Cullity, Garrett (2008): “Decisions, Reasons and Rationality,” in: *Ethics* 119, 57-95.

    Flanagan, Owen (1991): *Varieties of Moral Personality*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

    Griffin, James (1996): *Value Judgement*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

    Heuer, Ulrike (2010): “**Reasons and Impossibility,” in:**  Philosophical Studies 147, 235-46.

    Howard-Snyder, Frances (2013): “Ought Implies Can,” in: LaFollette (2013).

    LaFollette, Hugh (ed.) (2013): The International Encyclopedia of Ethics, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

    Mackie, J. L. (1977): *Ethics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

    Price, A. W. (2008): *Contextuality in Practical Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

    Schroeder, Mark (2007): Slaves of the Passions, New York: Oxford University Press.

    Taylor, Kathleen (2004): *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)