

Ought, Can, and Presupposition:  
A Reply to Kurthy and Lawford-  
Smith

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*Abstract*

I report the results of a follow-up study, designed to address concerns raised by Kurthy and Lawford-Smith in response to my original study on intuitions about moral obligation (ought) and ability (can). Like the results of the original study, the results of the follow-up study do not support the hypothesis that OIC is intuitive. The results of both studies suggest that OIC is probably not a principle of ordinary moral cognition. As I have argued in my paper, I take this to mean that OIC can no longer be taken as axiomatic. It must be argued for without appealing to intuitions.

I would like to thank Miklos Kurthy and Holly Lawford-Smith for writing a critical note in response to my paper about “Ought Implies Can” (i.e., if *S* ought to *A*, then *S* can *A*; henceforth OIC). As I understand it, Kurthy and Lawford-Smith have the following concerns about my experimental study:

1. Because ‘ought’ is ambiguous, and participants were not instructed to consider a particular sense of ‘ought’, they may have had in mind a sense of ‘ought’ that does not imply ‘can’, even though there may be other senses of ‘ought’ that do imply ‘can’.
2. Because of the within-subjects experimental design, and having given a low rating to the “can” question, participants might have thought that the ‘ought’ in the “ought” question is an optative ‘ought’ (as opposed to a moral, all-things-considered ‘ought’, which is the sense of ‘ought’ Kurthy and Lawford-Smith think does imply ‘can’).

Kurthy and Lawford-Smith helpfully suggest two ways to address their concerns. First, they say that the sense of ‘ought’ needs to be specified as a moral, all-things-considered ‘ought’, which is the sense of ‘ought’ Kurthy and Lawford-Smith think does imply ‘can’. Second, they recommend asking participants about the blameworthiness of the agents. So this is precisely what I did. That is, to address their concerns, I have conducted a follow-up study with a between-subjects experimental design. I have revised the “ought” question to make it clear that the ‘ought’ in question is a moral, all-things-considered ‘ought’ and I have added a question about the blameworthiness of the agent.

Before I report the results of this follow-up study, I would like to make a few clarifications. First, Kurthy and Lawford-Smith claim that I take the results of my experimental study as evidence that OIC is false. This, however, is a misinterpretation of my argument. The results of my experimental study do not show—nor do I take them to show—that OIC is false. Rather, the results show that OIC is not intuitive. In other words, the hypothesis I set out to test in my experimental study is not that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ but rather that OIC is intuitive, such that it is taken as axiomatic by many philosophers. As I explicitly state in my paper:

*If the truth of OIC is intuitive*, such that it is accepted by many philosophers as an axiom, then we would expect people to judge that agents who are unable to perform an action are not morally obligated to perform that action (p. 1; emphasis added).

The results of my experimental study, then, challenge the alleged intuitiveness of OIC and suggest that OIC is probably not a principle of ordinary moral cognition. I take this to mean that OIC can no longer be taken as axiomatic. It must be argued for without appealing to intuitions.

Second, I think it is not quite accurate to say, as Kurthy and Lawford-Smith do, that few, if any, philosophers “think that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ for every conceivable reading of ‘ought’” (p. 3). (Wedgwood 2013, p. 70), for instance, claims that “Every kind of ‘ought’ implies some kind of ‘can’.”

Third, Kurthy and Lawford-Smith think that the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ is entailment. They write:

it was not clear to us why Mizrahi went with presupposition as the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’. [...] Mizrahi dismisses entailment as ‘too strong’, without explanation. It’s true that there are innumerable counterexamples to that reading if we don’t restrict the ‘ought’. But we should restrict it (pp. 3-4).

As Kurthy and Lawford-Smith acknowledge, many philosophers think that the reason the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ is probably not entailment is that there are numerous counterexamples to “Ought *entails* Can” (Howard-Snyder 2013). Kurthy and Lawford-Smith rightly point out that entailment preserves contraposition. But it is precisely the contrapositive of “Ought *entails* Can” that opens OIC to counterexamples. For example, if ‘ought’ *entails* ‘can’, and thus ‘cannot’ *entails* ‘not-ought’, then it is not case that members of hiring committees ought to evaluate candidates without bias and prejudice, given that they cannot do so (see, e.g., Moss-Racusin et. al. 2012). If you think that members of hiring committees ought to evaluate candidates without prejudice and bias, then you have a counterexample to “Ought *entails* Can.” In support of entailment as the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’, Kurthy and Lawford-Smith say that “requiring persons to do what they cannot really would be *unfair, irrational, pointless*” (p. 4; emphasis added). But this is precisely what the *presupposition* interpretation of OIC says, not the *entailment* interpretation. That is, if ‘ought’ *entailed* ‘can’, and S cannot A, then it would necessarily follow that ‘S ought to A’ is *false*, not that it is *unfair* to say that S ought to A, or that it is *irrational* to believe that S ought to A, or that it is *pointless* to tell S that she ought to A. To say that it is unfair, irrational, or pointless to tell people that they ought to do something that they cannot do is to say that ‘ought’ *presupposes* ‘can’, not that ‘ought’ *entails* ‘can’. If *p* entails *q*, and *q* is false, then *p* is *false*, not merely unfair, irrational, or pointless. For this reason, Kurthy and Lawford-Smith did not provide an argument as to why the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ is entailment. Given that there are counterexamples against “Ought *entails* Can,” it is generally accepted that entailment is probably not the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’; it is too strong a relation (Howard-Snyder (2013)). Now, let me report the results of the follow-up study. For this follow-up study, 123 participants (74 men, 49 women; ages 18-57) were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were tested online using Qualtrics survey software, and compensated \$0.15 for approximately five minutes of their time. Since there was no significant

difference in the original study between the vignettes in which the agent is the student Nancy and the vignettes in which the agent is Professor Smith, I used only one vignette in the follow-up study. All participants, then, received the following vignette:

At the end of class, Sid approaches Professor Smith to ask a question. Professor Smith tells Sid that he has to go teach another class now but promises to meet with Sid during office hours later that day. As it turns out, however, Professor Smith gets locked in his classroom before he is able to make it to his office. After waiting for thirty minutes and realizing that Professor Smith doesn't show up, Sid leaves the office without meeting Professor Smith.

After receiving this vignette, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following three statements and were asked to indicate their level of agreement:

Taking into consideration all the facts about this case, Professor Smith can keep his promise to meet with Sid.

Taking into consideration all the facts about this case, Professor Smith ought to keep his promise to meet with Sid.

Taking into consideration all the facts about this case, Professor Smith is to blame for failing to keep his promise to meet with Sid.

In accordance with Kurthy and Lawford-Smith's suggestions, the phrase 'taking into consideration all the facts about this case' is supposed to capture the sense of the all-things-considered 'ought'. In addition, the statements are now explicitly about keeping a promise, which is undoubtedly a moral notion. Participants rated these statements on a scale from 1 (= Strongly Disagree) to 5 (= Strongly Agree). The means of the participants' responses are displayed in Figure 1.

The data were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA. There was a significant effect of question,  $F(1,22) = 21.56$ ,  $p < .001$ . Tukey's post-hoc tests showed lower ratings for the "can" question ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) than the "ought" question ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $p < .001$ , and the "blame" question ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ),  $p = .037$ .

Accordingly, I did as Kurthy and Lawford-Smith have suggested, i.e., I prompted participants to consider the sense of 'ought' that Kurthy and Lawford-Smith think does imply 'can', namely, the all-things-considered, moral 'ought', and I added a "blame" question in a between-subjects experimental design, and yet the results of the follow-up study align with the results of the original study. As in the original study, ratings for the "ought" question are significantly higher than those for

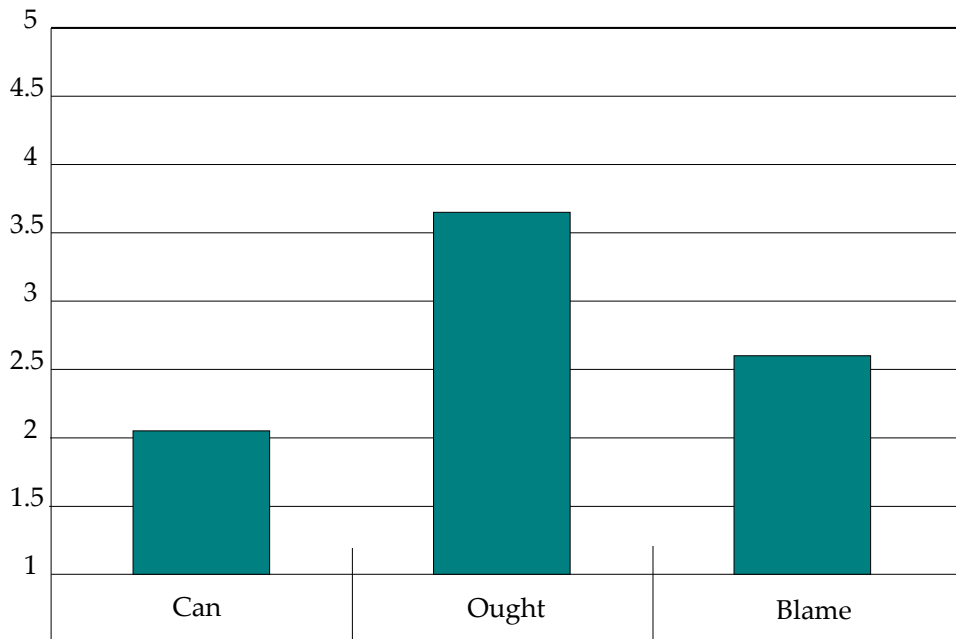


Figure 1: Mean ratings of the “can,” “ought,” and “blame” questions.

the “can” question. Moreover, the higher ratings for the “blame” question compared to the “can” question are not what we would expect if OIC were intuitive. Indeed, the fact that the level of agreement for the “blame” question is considerably lower than the one for the “ought” question, even though both of those are still significantly higher than the level of agreement for the “can” question, suggests that blameworthiness and moral obligation may not be as closely related as Kurthy and Lawford-Smith suspect. This is just a suggestion, however, and further studies are needed to test any (a)symmetries between ability, blameworthiness, and moral obligation.

To sum up, the results of the original study and the follow-up study do not support the hypothesis that OIC is intuitive. Instead, the results of both studies suggest that OIC is probably not a principle of ordinary moral cognition. As I have argued in my paper, I take this to mean that OIC can no longer be taken as axiomatic. It must be argued for without appealing to intuitions. If there is some sense of ‘ought’ that does imply ‘can’, as Kurthy and Lawford-Smith suspect, then that sense of ‘ought’ must be specified and then *shown* (rather than simply assumed) to be related to some sense of ‘can’ by entailment, presupposition, or implicature.

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