



Original Articles

How “ought” exceeds but implies “can”: Description and encouragement in moral judgment



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ABSTRACT

This paper tests a theory about the relationship between two important topics in moral philosophy and psychology. One topic is the function of normative language, specifically claims that one “ought” to do something. Do these claims function to describe moral responsibilities, encourage specific behavior, or both? The other topic is the relationship between saying that one “ought” to do something and one’s ability to do it. In what respect, if any, does what one “ought” to do exceed what one “can” do? The theory tested here has two parts: (1) “ought” claims function to both describe responsibilities and encourage people to fulfill them (*the dual-function hypothesis*); (2) the two functions relate differently to ability, because the encouragement function is limited by the person’s ability, but the descriptive function is not (*the interaction hypothesis*). If this theory is correct, then in one respect “ought implies can” is false because people have responsibilities that exceed their abilities. But in another respect “ought implies can” is legitimate because it is not worthwhile to encourage people to do things that exceed their ability. Results from two behavioral experiments support the theory that “ought” exceeds but implies “can.” Results from a third experiment provide further evidence regarding an “ought” claim’s primary function and how contextual features can affect the interpretation of its functions.

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1. Introduction

Normative claims about what people “ought” to (or, more typically, “should”) do are common and important in human life. It is no surprise, then, that researchers in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, have studied them extensively. This paper deals with a topic at the intersection of two central theoretical questions regarding “ought” claims.

The first question concerns the relationship between what people *ought* to do and what they are *able* to do. One view is that if someone ought to do something, then he is able to do it (e.g. Kant, 2009 (1793); Moore, 1959). This view is so common in philosophy that it even has a slogan: “ought implies can.” The contrary view is that a person’s ability does not always constrain what he ought to do. This view does not have a slogan but one possibility is “ought exceeds can.” The second question concerns the linguistic function of “ought” claims. One theory is that “ought” claims (purport to) describe normative facts about an agent’s responsibilities or obligations. A natural corollary of this view is that (sincere) “ought” claims express beliefs or knowledge, which represent those normative facts (e.g. Boyd, 1988; Huemer, 2005; Mackie,

1977). Another theory is that “ought” claims function as encouragement toward certain behavior. A natural corollary of this view is that “ought” claims express an emotion, command, preference, or other mental state that is not truth-evaluable, but which would be satisfied by the agent acting in the indicated way (e.g. Carnap, 1937; Gibbard, 1990; Stevenson, 1937). A third, hybrid theory is that “ought” claims function to both describe responsibilities and encourage their fulfillment (e.g. Barker, 2000; Hare, 1952; Stevenson, 1944).

In contemporary discussions, these two questions are related in an interesting way. More specifically, the hybrid theory of the function of “ought” claims might help explain how “ought implies can” is both wrong and right. (As far as I am aware, Sinnott-Armstrong, 1984 contains the first authoritative statement of this sort of proposal; see also Pigden, 1990.) Briefly, “ought implies can” is false because *having a responsibility* does not entail being able to fulfill it, but it seems correct because *encouraging someone to fulfill a responsibility* suggests a commitment to their being able to fulfill it. We can partially unpack that brief statement as follows:

On theoretical and empirical grounds, it has been persuasively argued that “ought implies can” is false when “implies” is understood as *conceptual entailment*. On theoretical grounds, it is false because it is inconsistent with the logic of excuses and the felicity

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of some apologies, threatens to trivialize many moral obligations, has sustained fruitless debates, and falsely entails that disabled people lack full moral agency (for a review, see Buckwalter, *ms*). On empirical grounds, in a wide range of experimental studies, the vast majority of competent adult speakers attribute moral responsibilities in tandem with inability to fulfill them (Buckwalter & Turri, 2014; Buckwalter & Turri, 2015; Chituc, Henne, Sinnott-Armstrong, & De Brigard, 2016; Henne, Chituc, De Brigard, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2016; Mizrahi, 2015; Turri, 2015, 2016, 2017, *ms*). Some of the clearest and most widely studied cases involve promises (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1984). Promising generates a responsibility that is not preempted or canceled by inability to fulfill it. If you promise to deliver a package by 4 pm, then you have a responsibility to deliver the package by 4 pm. If it turns out that you are unable to deliver the package on time, you still have a responsibility to do so—you ought to do something that you cannot do. Note that this pertains to “ought” in the descriptive sense of having a responsibility. Consider, by contrast, its function to encourage behavior. It would typically be pointless to encourage you to, say, deliver the package by 4 pm if it is acknowledged that you cannot do so—as many commentators have noted, it defies expectations, seems linguistically odd, or is otherwise infelicitous (see Pigden, 1990 for a rewarding and informed review of sources dating back over 500 years).

One hypothesis, then, is that “ought” statements can be interpreted as both descriptions of responsibilities and as encouragement toward their fulfillment. Their descriptive function is compatible with inability, but their encouragement function is not. When I describe you as having a responsibility to fulfill your promise, my remark is perfectly consistent with your being unable to do so. In this respect, “ought” exceeds “can.” But when I encourage you to fulfill your promise, the natural interpretation of my remark requires attributing to me the belief that you can do so. In this respect, “ought” implies “can.”

As noted above, this theory is not original with me. And while many contributors have recognized that empirical evidence is clearly relevant to understanding the function of linguistic expressions (e.g. Huemer, 2005; Pigden, 1990: 18), to date the empirical evidence has consisted principally of introspective and social observations. Introspective and social observation is a good place to start when studying familiar social activities, including the use of normative language. But we should not draw firm conclusions from reported patterns in a single researcher’s experience. The researcher’s experience might be idiosyncratic, or the researcher’s theoretical commitments might cause him or her to selectively keep track of, or misinterpret, observations. Similar remarks apply to a small group of researchers’ experience. One way to avoid these problems is to test observational claims against the judgments of a large sample of competent, theoretically-uncommitted language users experienced in the use of normative language. In this spirit, I conducted two experimental studies to begin rigorously testing the theory, described above, that “ought” exceeds but implies “can.”

More specifically, I conducted two experiments that begin testing two principal hypotheses implicated in the theory. The *dual-function hypothesis* states that “ought” claims have (at least) two functions: description and encouragement. The *interaction hypothesis* states that those two functions relate differently to an agent’s ability or inability to perform the relevant action. In the first experiment, participants read a story in which an agent promises to do something, and a speaker tells the agent that he “ought” to do what he promised. I manipulated whether the agent was able or unable to fulfill the promise. Participants recorded judgments about whether the speaker was describing an obligation that the agent had, whether the speaker was encouraging the agent to fulfill the obligation, and whether the agent was able to fulfill it. Three key

questions here are whether people actually do interpret the speaker as both describing and encouraging, whether the ability/inability manipulation affects people’s interpretation of those two speech acts, and whether the manipulation differentially affects the interpretation of description compared to encouragement.

In the second experiment, participants read a story about an agent who promises to do something. I manipulated the time at which the agent was no longer able to fulfill the promise. Participants then constructed timeline graphs to represent the time in the story during which several things were true. Among these things were whether the agent has a responsibility to fulfill the promise, whether it is worthwhile to encourage the agent to fulfill the promise, and whether the agent is able to do so. The key questions here are whether people represent responsibilities as outlasting the ability to fulfill them, and whether they think it is worthwhile to encourage someone to do something after he is no longer able to do it.

The results of such studies could potentially support several different conclusions. On one hand, the results could undermine the dual-function hypothesis by demonstrating that people interpret “ought” claims as describing responsibilities but not as encouraging their fulfillment, or vice versa. On another hand, the results could support the dual-function hypothesis but undermine the interaction hypothesis. That is, it could turn out that people interpret “ought” claims as both describing responsibilities and encouraging their fulfillment, but both functions are similarly affected by the manipulation of ability/inability. For instance, people might view inability as equally irrelevant to whether responsibilities exist and whether it is worthwhile to encourage their fulfillment. On yet another hand, the results could support both the dual-function hypothesis and the interaction hypothesis. In this case, people would view “ought” claims as having both functions but whereas inability is irrelevant to its descriptive function, it undercuts its encouragement function. It is only this combination of results that would strongly support the theory that “ought” exceeds but implies “can.”

I conducted one final experiment to provide further information regarding related theoretical issues about the function of normative language, in particular whether an “ought” claim has a primary function and how contextual features affect the interpretation of its functions. In this third experiment, participants again read a story about an agent who promises to do something and someone else remarks that this “ought” to be done. I manipulated whether the “ought” claim was made in the present or past tense, and whether it was addressed to the person who made the promise or to a third party. Participants recorded judgments about whether the speaker was describing a responsibility, encouraging its fulfillment, and casting blame. The key question here is whether any of the three functions is consistently present, thereby providing some evidence that it is a good candidate for an “ought” claim’s primary function.

2. Experiment 1

The purpose of this experiment is to investigate the potential for speakers of “ought” claims to be interpreted as *describing moral obligations* and as *encouraging certain behavior*, and whether the interpretation is affected by acknowledged ability or inability to produce the relevant outcome. Broadly speaking, one possible outcome is that there are no meaningful differences in an “ought” claim’s potential to function as a description or as encouragement. Both functions might always be attributed to speakers of “ought” claims, or the two functions might sometimes both be attributed and other times both denied. Another possibility is that the two

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