



Blame, not ability, impacts moral “ought” judgments for impossible actions: Toward an empirical refutation of “ought” implies “can”



Vladimir Chituc^{a,*}, Paul Henne^b, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong^{b,c,d,e}, Felipe De Brigard^{b,c,e}

^a Duke University, Social Science Research Institute, Durham, NC, USA

^b Duke University, Department of Philosophy, Durham, NC, USA

^c Duke University, Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, USA

^d Duke University, The Kenan Institute for Ethics, USA

^e Duke Institute for Brain Sciences, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 July 2015

Revised 12 January 2016

Accepted 18 January 2016

Keywords:

Ability

Blame

Excuse validation

Experimental philosophy

Obligation

Ought implies can

ABSTRACT

Recently, psychologists have explored moral concepts including obligation, blame, and ability. While little empirical work has studied the relationships among these concepts, philosophers have widely assumed such a relationship in the principle that “ought” implies “can,” which states that if someone ought to do something, then they must be able to do it. The cognitive underpinnings of these concepts are tested in the three experiments reported here. In Experiment 1, most participants judge that an agent ought to keep a promise that he is unable to keep, but only when he is to blame for the inability. Experiment 2 shows that such “ought” judgments correlate with judgments of blame, rather than with judgments of the agent’s ability. Experiment 3 replicates these findings for moral “ought” judgments and finds that they do not hold for nonmoral “ought” judgments, such as what someone ought to do to fulfill their desires. These results together show that folk moral judgments do not conform to a widely assumed philosophical principle that “ought” implies “can.” Instead, judgments of blame play a modulatory role in some judgments of obligation.

© 2016 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Moral psychologists have recently explored a host of moral concepts. Some have studied how people think about moral obligations (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Greene, 2007; Greene et al., 2009), while others have studied how we ascribe abilities (Alicke, 2000; Phillips & Knobe, 2009), responsibility (Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003, 2003; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995), and blame (e.g. Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). While some work has explored the relationship between, for example, ability and blame (Alicke, 2000; Phillips & Knobe, 2009), no work has explored the relationship between obligation and these other concepts.

Philosophers, however, have claimed such a fundamental relationship between at least two of these concepts when they endorse the principle that “ought” implies “can,” which claims that someone must be able to do whatever it is that they ought to do (Kant, 1787/1933:473; Moore, 1922:317; Parfit, 1984:15; Sidgwick, 1884:33). A promising way to begin exploring the

relationship between these moral concepts is to test empirical predictions that may follow from discussions in moral philosophy.

Many philosophers have argued that the principle that “ought” implies “can” is true not only universally, but also necessarily, analytically, or conceptually (Vranas, 2007:171; Zimmerman, 1996:79). In other words, “ought” is supposed to imply “can” by virtue of the concepts expressed by the words “ought” and “can,” just as “bachelor” implies “male” by virtue of the concepts expressed by the words “bachelor” and “male.”

There is some reason, however, to be skeptical of such a relationship between “ought” and “can” in moral judgment, and some philosophers, who make empirical predictions of their own, reject this principle. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong (1984, 1985) argues that “ought” does not necessarily, analytically, or conceptually imply “can.” Rather, it only suggests “can” in contexts where “ought” judgments are used to advise rather than to blame agents—if we were giving advice to a friend, then our advice would be useless if our friend could not do what we advise. In other contexts, such as when we are laying blame (e.g. “Where are you? You ought to be here by now!”), there is no implication from “ought” to “can.”

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: vladimir.chituc@duke.edu (V. Chituc).

This disagreement yields two competing hypotheses. If “ought” analytically or conceptually implies “can,” as most philosophers assume, then participants should deny that the agent “ought” to do something if they learn that the agent can’t do it, just as they would deny that Alex is a bachelor if they learn that Alex is a woman. Put more formally:

H1. Participants will deny that an agent ought to do something that the agent can’t do, regardless of whether the agent is to blame for the inability.

In contrast, if the skeptics are right, then:

H2. Participants will judge that an agent ought to do something that the agent can’t do when the agent is to blame for the inability.

Some recent empirical work speaks against **H1** and in favor of **H2**. Buckwalter and Turri (2015) provide evidence that participants sometimes make judgments that do not accord with the principle that “ought” implies “can,” but they do not explore the cognitive underpinnings of these judgments or the relationship between the relevant concepts. In some cases, for example, Buckwalter and Turri show that participants ascribe obligation without blame, as well as obligation without ability, but do not experimentally manipulate these factors to test the relationship between them.

Furthermore, existing work suggests that judgments of blame may impact “ought” judgments. *Blame validation* (Alicke, 1992, 2000, 2008; see also De Brigard, Mandelbaum, & Ripley, 2009), for example, is a process in which a motivation to blame can increase judgments of ability and responsibility—suggesting that when someone is blameworthy, participants may respond by exaggerating their obligations to hold them accountable. Subsequently, Turri and Blouw (2015) describe a related process called *excuse validation*, where a motivation to withhold blame leads participants to deny that a rule has been broken—suggesting that when someone is blameless for a transgression, participants may respond by downplaying their obligations to protect them from censure.

We present three experiments to adjudicate between hypotheses **H1** and **H2** and explore underlying cognitive processes. Experiment 1 investigates differences among *ought* judgments by experimentally manipulating blame. Experiment 2 explores the relationship among judgments of *ought*, *can*, and *blame* in a correlational design, while attempting to parse whether blame validation or excuse validation best explains the results from Experiment 1. Experiment 3 examines judgments of *ought*, *can*, and *blame* directly by experimentally manipulating all three variables. Together, these experiments allow us to adjudicate between **H1** and **H2**, test empirical assumptions that underlie the philosophical principle that “ought” implies “can,” and provide evidence to explore the relationships among obligation and other moral concepts.

2. Experiment 1

We manipulated blame across two vignettes where an agent is unable to keep a promise. Participants rated how much the agent in each vignette ought to keep the promise.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

82 participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk and paid \$0.30 for completing the survey. Three participants were excluded after failing an attention check, leaving a total of 79 participants (38 female, $M_{age} = 31$, $SD_{age} = 10.08$).

2.1.2. Design, materials, and procedure

Participants read two vignettes adapted from Sinnott-Armstrong (1984) in a within-subjects design. The text of each vignette was as follows (the first paragraph is constant across the two conditions):

Adams promises to meet his friend Brown for lunch at noon today. It takes Adams thirty minutes to drive from his house to the place where they plan to eat lunch together.

Low blame: Adams leaves his house at eleven thirty. However, fifteen minutes after leaving, Adams car breaks down unexpectedly. Because his car is not working at that time, Adams cannot meet his friend Brown at noon, as he promised.

High blame: Adams decides that he does not want to have lunch with Brown after all, so he stays at his house until eleven forty-five. Because of where he is at that time, Adams cannot meet his friend Brown at noon, as he promised.

Following each vignette, we asked participants “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: At eleven forty-five, it is still true that Adams ought to meet Brown at noon.” Participants answered on a scale from -50 (completely disagree) to 50 (completely agree), with 0 being “neither agree nor disagree.” We also asked them to explain their answer. At the end of the study, we collected demographic information and administered an attention check.

2.2. Results and discussion

Participants were more likely to say that an agent ought to keep a promise they can’t keep in the *high blame* condition ($M = 8.90$, $SD = 39.16$) than in the *low blame* condition ($M = -17.84$, $SD = 33.31$), $t(79) = -4.62$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.74$. Importantly, the judgments in the *high blame* condition were significantly above the midpoint, $t(79) = 2.03$, $p = 0.045$, $d = 0.65$. On the whole, 31% of participants in the *low blame* condition and 60% of subjects in the *high blame* condition gave answers above the midpoint. To check for order effects, we compared the ratings of participants who read *low blame* first ($n = 42$) and *high blame* first. There were no significant order effects for whether participants read *low blame* first ($M = -22.05$, $SD = 32.89$) or second ($M = -13.18$, $SD = 33.59$; $p = .24$) or *high blame* first ($M = 9.57$, $SD = 40.96$) or second ($M = 8.16$, $SD = 37.61$; $p = .87$).

These results support **H2** over **H1**. In fact, some of the participants outright rejected **H1** in their explanations: e.g., “Brown is still going to be waiting for him at noon. Adams won’t be ABLE to but he still OUGHT to” (capitals in participant response). As argued in the introduction, no one with the relevant concepts of “ought” and “can” should talk like this if “ought” analytically or conceptually implies “can.”

Some critics of experimental work in philosophy reply that participants are making judgments in poor epistemic conditions (Williamson, 2010), and some researchers have found that improving epistemic conditions attenuates certain effects by, for instance, letting participants read contrasting vignettes (e.g. Pinillos, Smith, Nair, Marchetto, & Mun, 2011). However, the lack of order effects in our within-subjects design suggests that our findings are robust.

In free response explaining their judgments, some participants provided alternative actions that Adams should have done instead, such as calling his friend. Proponents of the principle that “ought” implies “can” may also argue that participants were not saying that Adams should meet his friend at noon, but claiming that Adams should still meet his friend, even if he’s late. To rule out alternative explanations and to test **H1** using a correlational method, we conducted Experiment 2 with a modified vignette.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7286204>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7286204>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)