1. Introduction

Opponents of 'ought implies can' (OIC) often proceed via cases and counterexamples; hypothetical situations are described in which one is unable to do what one intuitively ought to do.[1] I proceed differently. Below I offer six arguments against OIC via general principles; no cases. The arguments are presented in standard form, with defense generally limited to just one crucial premise or inference. Though each argument would suffice to refute OIC if sound, redundancy is always a failsafe.

2. The arguments

Arguments 2–6 concern moral content. Argument 1 targets the logical implication relation invoked by OIC. Call it *the argument from logical independence.*

1. The laws of physics are logically independent of the laws of morality.
2. So what is morally necessary is logically independent of what is physically possible.
3. If OIC then what is morally necessary logically depends on what is physically possible.
4. So OIC is false.

I take premise 1 as uncontroversial; that laws of physics logically depend on morality is implausible on its face. So the likely response resists 2, the thought being that even if physical laws are independent of moral laws, moral laws might still depend on physical laws-akin, perhaps, to the asymmetric dependence of biological or chemical laws on physical laws. But such dependence (if it exists) it is not generally thought to hold with logical necessity.

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[1] See especially Stocker (1981), Sinnott-Armstrong (1984), Howard-Snyder (1997), Heuer (2010), and Henne et al (2016). King (2017) makes a similar observation.

Suppose biological or chemical facts are reducible to physical facts, or that the former supervene on or are grounded by the latter. Still, the physical facts are not thought to *entail* or logically imply chemical or biological facts. More generally domains outside physics are thought logically independent of physics even if metaphysically or nomologically dependent. By claiming that ought *implies* can, however, the proponent of OIC claims that the moral and physical do stand in an entailment relation. So the proponent of OIC flouts this independent general principle regarding the logical independence of domains. And this creates an argumentative burden that goes beyond the usual defense of OIC via particular cases or intuition-based thought-experiments. For the proponent of OIC must also defend the general claim that distinct domains can stand in entailment relations after all, or else explain why the moral and physical enjoy a special or unique relationship.

Even granting the methodological point two objections are likely. One is proponents of 'a priori physicalism' do take physical facts to entail chemical and biological facts.[2] So certainly such a view must be on the table. Second, one might think I've got the direction wrong in any case. For proponents of OIC don't claim 'can implies ought'—that physical facts imply moral facts—but only that moral facts imply physical facts. So even if physical facts do not entail chemical or biological facts, such higher-level facts obtaining might be thought to imply their physical possibility, in which case OIC would fit the general pattern.

A single response rebuts both objections, however. First, note that the *a priori* physicalist must invoke physicalism as a closure principle for physical facts to entail higher-level facts. For if the anti-physicalist doctrines of emergentism or vitalism were true then chemical or biological facts would not be entailed by physical facts; instead, chemical or biological facts would be over and above physical facts. Assuming physicalism is contingent

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[2] See e.g. Chalmers and Jackson (2001), amongst other works by each independently.

shows that physical facts entailing higher-level facts is itself contingent (on physicalism). So this line of response effectively renders OIC as 'OIC only if physicalism'. Whatever the appeal of this weaker variant, it is not OIC as traditionally understood.

The logical possibility of emergentism and vitalism also handles the objection regarding the direction of entailment. For if chemical or biological facts *were* over and above physical facts, chemical or biological possibility would *not* entail physical possibility: there being chemical or biological occurrences that contravene what could occur were only physical laws operative is exactly what would obtain were chemical or biological facts over and above physical facts. So the entailment from higher-level facts to physical facts also requires the assumption of physicalism. Again assuming OIC should not require physicalism, moral and physical facts are logically independent.

The next five arguments against OIC target distinctively moral content. Of these the first is *the argument from imperfection*.

1. If OIC then anyone can fulfill every moral obligation he or she has.
2. If anyone can fulfill every moral obligation then anyone can be morally perfect.
3. So if OIC then anyone can be morally perfect.
4. No one can be morally perfect.
5. So OIC is false.

A likely response is resisting premise 2 by distinguishing obligation-fulfillment from moral perfection- or, put another way, by claiming there is more to moral perfection than doing one's duty. But one must tread carefully here. Firstly, it is not just one but *all* of one's duties that are relevant. And if one has stringent or hard-to-reach obligations such as '*always* turn the other cheek', or '*never* participate in an economic system that uses people as mere means', then it is hard to see what else would be needed for perfection beyond fulfilling every such duty. If it's objected that an emotional component beyond (contractually-modeled) obligation is necessary for perfection, however, then one may simply consider it an

obligation to do one's duty joyfully or wholeheartedly, or with whatever feeling is thought necessary- in which case it would again be unclear what else perfection would require. So claiming there is more to perfection than obligation-fulfillment does not seem promising.

A more promising route also targets premise 2 (and, perhaps, 4), but via the concept of supererogation and/or satisficing. In particular one might think being perfect is supererogatory, and/or that one may permissibly satisfice, thereby fulfilling one's obligations without acting optimally. But one cannot simply assume supererogation exists, or that 'good enough' is really enough. For the problem here is that the motivation for distinguishing supererogation from obligation just is the thought that what's obligatory should be achievable, which, without independent evidence, risks begging the question for OIC.

Consider for example the common complaint that a Singer-style obligation to reduce oneself to marginal utility to save famine victims would be "too demanding". Yet what this complaint seems to amount to is just the claim that nothing should be obligatory beyond what is achievable, perhaps without much effort or inconvenience, such that one should not be blamed for failing to prevent (in Singer's case) what are conceded to be preventable harms. So according to this worry, even actions granted to be possible, and which would be good to do, outstrip what one ought to do. But this response appears more self-serving than independently motivated. By contrast, it is independently plausible that one should aim to do or be better than how one currently is. In fact, on such grounds many reject supererogation entirely, thinking instead that what is optimal is not optional but mandatory—in slogan form, 'what ought to be the case ought to be done', such that anything less than (attempting) the best is a moral failure—even if it remains (practically) out of reach.[3] Naturally, conclusively refuting supererogation is well beyond the scope of this paper (unless one is

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[3] Notable examples include Martin Luther, G.E. Moore, and possibly Singer (1972), as mentioned above. See Heyd (2016) for an overview of these and other sources.

willing to accept as decisive Jesus' injunction "be ye therefore perfect"; Matthew 5:48). Still,

and no matter the view's ultimate merits, the mere coherence of denying supererogation,

and/or the moral flawlessness of someone who merely satisfices, shows the achievability of

obligations is not simply a matter of logic or entailment, as OIC has it.

That said, an alternate version of the argument from imperfection works even if

premise 4—that no one can be perfect—is replaced with a weaker 4': someone is necessarily

not perfect.[4] This latter principle is also independently supported by the third argument

against OIC- *the argument from moral dilemmas.*

1. A genuine moral dilemma is one in which each choice precludes doing
   something one otherwise ought to do.
2. For a person to be morally perfect he or she cannot face a genuine moral
   dilemma.
3. But it is possible for someone to face a genuine moral dilemma.
4. Therefore, someone (who faces a moral dilemma) is necessarily not morally
   perfect.
5. If OIC then anyone can be morally perfect.
6. So OIC is false.

There has been some discussion on OIC and dilemmas, so I won't go into great

detail here.[5] Instead I'll simply defend premise 3 (the possibility of dilemmas), about which

one might be skeptical. Yet the skepticism is misguided. For the major moral theories cannot

rule out their existence. Consider the following.

1. Utilitarianism cannot rule out the possibility of all available options being
   suboptimal, harmful, or equally bad.
2. Kantian ethics cannot rule out the possibility of a situation in which each choice
   uses someone as a mere means to an end.
3. Virtue theorists explicitly defend the existence of dilemmas to argue against rule-
   based ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism, which according to
   virtue theorists would make moral decisions algorithmic.[6]
4. No other moral theory can rule out the possibility of moral dilemmas.

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[4] That is, instead of the general claim that nobody can be morally perfect, the revised claim says of
someone in a particular scenario that necessarily that someone is not perfect.
[5] See Sinnott-Armstrong (1988), Jacquette (1991), and Hart (1998) on OIC and dilemmas. Murdoch
(1970, p. 62) discusses moral perfection in a related context.
[6] See especially Hursthouse (1996) and Annas (2004).

5.   Therefore a moral dilemma is possible (according to the major moral theories). Still, proponents of these theories might resist. For instance, the Kantian might suggest the appearance of dilemma is an illusion, one that is dispelled by recognizing priority relations between perfect and imperfect duties, say. But this presupposes the dilemma is due to a conflict between acts of different types (e.g. perfect and imperfect duties), which is unnecessary. Instead, dilemmas can be generated simply by taking something otherwise *ultima facie* justified and duplicating the scenario that led to it—coarse examples include two runaway trolleys or two drowning children—or by constructing a scenario in which one of only two choices uses someone as a mere means, after which one replaces the non-mere-means option with a duplicate of the other. One would thereby be equally obliged in incompatible directions, with no possibility of fulfillment or satisfaction.

A similar response also diffuses a possible objection from the utilitarian, who might insist her system cannot yield moral dilemmas: if two acts have equal and greatest utility, the thought goes, then doing either is right, and one may be left undone. But this is not so, simply because doing both would create even more utility. To insist that one ought not to do both because one cannot—or to stipulate that OIC is a built-in constraint on the principle of utility itself—again risks begging the question. Put another way, although one can certainly choose to restrict or index a version of OIC to mean, in effect, 'out of the range of actions possible for an agent, what ought that agent to do?', doing so shields OIC from substantive debate by establishing it by definitional or axiomatic fiat (more on which shortly).

Nor can other major theories rule out moral dilemmas. As mentioned, virtue theorists explicitly defend the existence of dilemmas (as opportunities for mature non-algorithmic moral judgment). Nor is there reason to think contractarians can generate a guarantee that saves OIC. If anything, contracts seem to generate cases in which OIC fails,

insofar as agreeing to a contract incurs an obligation which may (eventually) be impossible to meet. Whether any other moral theory can rule out dilemmas remains to be seen.

Having defended the possibility of dilemmas I take *the argument from moral dilemmas* to be sound. That said, I grant that the divine command theory might have a unique way out: for if God were to construct the universe so as to ensure that nobody faces a dilemma, the problem may be avoided. Yet the following speaks against that possibility, and provides the fourth argument against OIC. Call it *the argument from non-design.*

1. Moral dilemmas are not logically impossible (they contain no contradiction).
2. For moral dilemmas to not be metaphysically possible, all metaphysically possible worlds must be such that none contain moral dilemmas.
3. Some metaphysically possible worlds contain moral dilemmas unless all metaphysically possible worlds are designed in such a way as to avoid the possibility of moral dilemmas.
4. So only if, necessarily, God exists and designs all possible worlds in such a way as to avoid moral dilemmas are moral dilemmas metaphysically impossible.
5. God does not necessarily exist, and/or it is not the case that God designs all possible worlds in such a way as to avoid moral dilemmas.
6. So some possible worlds contain moral dilemmas.
7. So moral dilemmas are metaphysically possible.
8. If OIC moral dilemmas are not metaphysically possible.
9. So OIC is false.

Naturally 5 may be the crux. Though space precludes a substantive defense, I'll simply note that atheists won't need the first disjunct defended, and even theists will likely resist thinking God restricts or determines the scope of possibility. All the more reason, then, to think dilemmas possible and OIC false.

Nonetheless, the idea of a world designed with moral achievability in mind connects up with the fifth argument- *the argument from historical context.*

1. OIC is a Kantian claim.[7]
2. Kant defends OIC in tandem with three other theses: the perfectibility of the soul, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God.

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[7] Although others (perhaps including pre-Kantian thinkers) endorsed OIC, the typical attribution is to *The Critique of Pure Reason* A807/B835. See Stern (2004) for other supporting passages.

3. The kingdom of ends is a divinely ordained realm in which immortal and morally perfect agents are perpetually capable of fulfilling moral obligations.
4. No moral dilemma is possible in the kingdom of ends.
5. In this context/given these assumptions OIC may well be true.
6. Without these three postulates, however—the perfectibility of the soul, sufficient time to achieve it (forever), and the divinely established harmony of the moral and agentive—OIC loses the supporting context in which it was initially defended.
7. Philosophers who reject the perfectibility and immortality of the soul, and the existence of God, should reject OIC.

A *prima facie* reason to be skeptical is that others have found OIC plausible without (explicitly) considering the Kantian context. While this may be so, it doesn't show that Kantian postulates aren't doing important underlying work. For as just argued, without God to design the world accordingly, general principles I've defended entail that OIC is false, including for the reason that moral imperfection may be unavoidable. So in an oblique way this suggests the intuition that makes OIC plausible—even without *explicitly* invoking Kant—just is the Kantian assumption that the soul (or person) is perfectible.

That said, the obvious objection here is that for those who find OIC plausible, what motivates is simply the intuition that in certain cases it seems unreasonable to assign blame beyond what is possible for an agent. But what justifies this intuition? The underlying idea seems to be that an action isn't obligatory unless it's achievable- i.e., 'cannot implies ought not'. But if one's justification for *this* claim isn't simply that moral obligations or perfection should be achievable—claims I have already rejected—what else the justification could be is unclear. Now, perhaps one might think citing cases in which 'cannot' seems to imply 'ought not' does not need further justification. But cases and intuitions are simply not enough here- not only for the usual reason that many will have countervailing intuitions, but because invoking only case-specific intuitions fails to address the broader methodological approach I have also defended, which requires attention to general principles.

A likely response to this challenge is invoking the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, the thought being that theses about God and soul (and, perhaps, entailment relations between domains) can be kept on the theoretical side, while OIC can be supported independently as a feature of practical reason. But in so doing one must be careful to not trivialize OIC (a worry I raised earlier). For if the concern is what an agent ought to do in a practical reasoning scenario, certainly a natural starting point is asking 'of all the actions the agent could possibly perform, which, if any, ought the agent to choose?'. But of course such a question only ranges over what is physically possible for the agent, rendering OIC trivially true. So to be a substantive principle worthy of debate, OIC cannot be interpreted as a domain-restricted thesis starting from what's possible for an agent from the point of view of practical reason- even if it's often useful to do so.

Sixth, and lastly, is *the argument from analogies to other relevant areas of philosophical interest.*

1. OIC is analogous to truth-implies-knowability and truth-implies-provability: each takes a human ability (knowing, proving, acting) to be entailed by an objective phenomenon (truth, obligation).
2. Truth-implies-knowability is false (we might be "cosmic frogs", i.e., just as frogs are constitutively unable to know truths that we know, so too might we be constitutively unable to know truths a higher being might understand).
3. Truth-implies-provability is false (e.g. Gödel 1931).
4. So OIC is false.

One skeptical might think "direction of fit" upsets the analogy and weakens the inference: whereas belief and knowledge aim to fit the world, the idea goes, desire and obligation aim to bring the world to them. But if desires and oughts are subjective or constructs, such that the question of what one ought to do is restricted or indexed to what is antecedently possible for the subjective or constructing agent, then OIC is again trivialized. If, however, objectivity is built into obligation as it plausibly is for truth, then it must be thought separate from what we can know or achieve, for the same (or analogous) reasons. Put another way, amongst the reasons to think truth does not imply knowability or provability is there being a

logical gap between the objectivity of truth and our ability to know or establish it. So, if

obligation is similarly objective, it stands to reason that we should expect to see the same

logical gap between objective obligation, and what we, as moral subjects, are able to do.[8]

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