

## 'OUGHT' CONVERSATIONALLY IMPLIES 'CAN'

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The principle that 'ought' implies 'can' is often taken for granted in discussions of determinism, moral dilemmas, and other areas of practical reasoning. Yet the principle is seldom discussed critically or in detail.

A complete discussion would include analyses of the controversial terms 'ought' and 'can', but I need not here undertake such enterprises. Any plausible analyses which do not beg the question are compatible with what I have to say, except where noted.<sup>1</sup>

My focus will be on the relation between the terms 'ought' and 'can'. The relation is supposed to be an implication, but there are many kinds of implication. I will discuss three kinds of implication, although even finer distinctions could, of course, be drawn.<sup>2</sup>

The three kinds of implication are entailment, presupposition, and conversational implication. As I use the terms, entailment and presupposition are *semantic*, or concern the truth conditions of what is said. In contrast, conversational implication is *pragmatic*, or concerns the effects of saying what is said.

Which kind of implication holds between 'ought' and 'can' affects the truth value of a judgment that an agent ought to do something the agent cannot do.<sup>3</sup> If 'ought' entails 'can', and an

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<sup>1</sup>If 'ought' is univocal, then, although my examples use 'ought' in moral contexts, my arguments can be extended to other contexts. Also, if 'ought' has the same meaning in every context, then 'ought' does not semantically imply 'can' unless it does so in every context. But in an evaluative context, for example, someone can truthfully say, 'Everyone ought to be beautiful', even though some people cannot make themselves, much less everyone, beautiful. Nonetheless, my arguments in the text do not depend on an analysis of 'ought' as univocal. Regarding 'can', I need to say only that I am not using 'can' to cover all that an agent logically can do, so my arguments do not apply to the claim that 'ought' implies 'logically can'.

<sup>2</sup>The three interpretations which I discuss are linguistic, but one could claim that it is a contingent moral truth or is necessary but not analytic that, if an agent ought to do an act, then the agent can do the act (cf. fn. 7). Also, one might claim that the relation between 'ought' and 'can' is some kind of pragmatic presupposition, but I discuss only semantic presupposition.

<sup>3</sup>I am using 'true' and 'false' in a way which is compatible with both realism and anti-realism in ethics.

agent cannot do an act, then it is *false* that the agent ought to do the act. If 'ought' presupposes 'can', and the agent cannot do the act, then it is *neither true or false* that the agent ought to do the act. If 'ought' conversationally implies 'can', and the agent cannot do the act, then it might be *true* that the agent ought to do the act.

I will argue that the relation between 'ought' and 'can' is not a semantic entailment or presupposition but is sometimes a pragmatic conversational implication. I will begin by discussing three mistakes which commonly lead people to claim that 'ought' entails or presupposes 'can'.

### I. THREE COMMON MISTAKES

First, 'ought' is supposed to entail or presuppose 'can', because, when agents know they cannot do what they ought to do, they often ask what they ought to do instead. For example, if a bride cannot get to her wedding, then she ought at least to let someone know and to excuse her absence. However, the fact that she ought to do such *other* acts does not change the fact that she ought to go to her wedding. On the contrary, if that were not first true, she would have nothing to excuse. Excuses are distinguished from justifications in that to justify an act is to show that it is right, whereas to excuse an act is to admit that it is wrong but to deny responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Excuses are then appropriate only for what ought not to have been done.

Another common argument is that we do not blame agents for failing to do acts which they could not do, so it is not true that the agents ought to have done the acts. No such conclusion follows. The premise is about *agents*, but the conclusion is about *acts*. It is possible that an act ought to be done even though the agent would not be blameworthy for failing to do it. Furthermore, the premise is false. We do blame agents for failing to do what they could not do if it is their own fault that they could not do it. For example, we

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses" in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 176. Similar considerations apply to apologies which are not mere formalities uttered for extraneous purposes, etc.

blame drunk drivers for not avoiding wrecks which they could not avoid because they got themselves drunk. Similar mistakes occur in arguments concerning when an agent is condemnable, punishable, etc.

Finally, saying that agents ought to do what they cannot do is often claimed to be pointless and therefore not true. This argument is not valid. The premise concerns the *point* or *purpose* of saying something, but the conclusion concerns the *truth* of what is said. What is said might be true even when saying so could not serve any purpose. Furthermore, the premise is false, since it is not always pointless to say that agents ought to do what they cannot do. Saying this might be pointless as advice, and in contexts where 'ought' is followed by a present tense infinitive and the agents are addressed, it might seem that the purpose of saying what the agents ought to do is always to advise them to do it.<sup>5</sup> However, 'ought' can be used for different purposes in different contexts. For example, the purpose of saying that agents ought to have done what they did not do is not to advise them to do it, for they have already missed the chance. Nonetheless, such uses of 'ought' with a past tense infinitive might serve *another* purpose, such as to blame the agents.<sup>6</sup> And it might be justifiable to blame agents for not doing what they could not do if it is their fault that they could not do it. Thus, this argument, like the previous two, fails to show that 'ought' entails or presupposes 'can'.

## II. AGAINST ENTAILMENT

So far I have only criticized arguments for the claims that 'ought' entails or presupposes 'can'. I will now argue directly against those claims. Many arguments could be given against the claim that 'ought' entails 'can'. I ought not to laugh at my boss's new haircut, but I can't help myself. Instead of multiplying such counterexam-

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 56; although Hare refers not to advice but to prescriptions and practical questions.

<sup>6</sup>The fact that 'ought' is used for a different *purpose* in such examples is no reason to believe that it is used in a different *sense* than that in which it is supposed to entail or presuppose 'can'.

ples, I will confine my discussion to one kind.<sup>7</sup> It shows that, if 'ought' entailed 'can', an agent could escape having to do something simply by making himself unable to do it.

Suppose Adams promises at noon to meet Brown at 6:00 p.m. but then goes to a movie at 5:00 p.m. Adams knows that, if he goes to the movie, he will not be able to meet Brown on time. But he goes anyway, simply because he wants to see the movie. The theater is 65 minutes from the meeting place, so by 5:00 it is too late for Adams to keep his promise. Consequently, if 'ought' entailed 'can', it would not be true at 5:00 that Adams ought to meet Brown. Similarly, if Adams is still at the theater at 6:00, he cannot then meet Brown on time. Consequently, if 'ought' entailed 'can', it would not be true at 6:00 that Adams ought to meet Brown.

However, these implications are counterintuitive. If Adams calls Brown from the theater at 6:00, it would be natural for Brown to say, "Where are you? You ought to be here (by now)," even though Brown knows Adams cannot be there. Brown's statement seems true, because Adams did promise, the appointment was never mutually cancelled, and the obligation is not overridden. Thus, there is no reason to deny Brown's statement except to save the claim that 'ought' entails 'can', and that reason would beg the question. Furthermore, if Adams calls at 5:00 and tells Brown that he is at the theater, Brown might respond, "Why haven't you left yet? You ought to meet me in an hour, and it takes more than an hour to get here from the theater." Again, Brown's statement seems natural and true, and there is no reason to deny it except to save the claim that 'ought' entails 'can'. Therefore, we must give up the claim that 'ought' entails 'can'.

Some opponents have responded to different arguments by claiming that the agent ought to do the act until but not after the time when he no longer can do what he ought to do.<sup>8</sup> It would then

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Alan White, *Modal Thinking* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 149. Such examples also refute the claims that it is a contingent moral truth or is necessary but not analytic that, if an agent ought to do an act, then the agent can do the act (cf. fn. 2).

<sup>8</sup>Cf. H. S. Goldman, "Dated Rightness and Moral Imperfection," *The Philosophical Review*, 85 (1976), pp. 449–487; and R. Thomason, "Deontic Logic and the Role of Freedom in Moral Deliberation," *New Studies in Deontic Logic*, ed. R. Hilpinen (Boston: D. Reidel, 1981), p. 180.

be true until but not after 4:55 that Adams ought to meet Brown. However, I argued that at 5:00 and even at 6:00 it is still true that Adams ought to meet Brown. Thus, my arguments cannot be avoided by restricting the times when the agent ought to do the act.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, suppose Adams knows at noon that his car will not be available, so he will not be able to meet Brown at 6:00. Nonetheless, in order to lead Brown astray, Adams promises at noon to meet Brown at 6:00. In this example, there is no time when Adams can meet Brown as promised. Thus, if 'ought' entailed 'can', Adams *never* ought to meet Brown.

This is counterintuitive. If 'ought' entailed 'can', then whether Adams promises to meet Brown would make no difference at all to whether he ought to meet Brown. However, his promise *does* make such a difference. If Adams makes no promise, he has nothing to excuse. But if he makes a promise, an excuse is owed or at least not inappropriate.<sup>10</sup> This is not merely because he has an *obligation* to keep his promise but because he *ought* to keep it. Adams's obligation is not cancelled or overridden, so there is no reason to deny that he ought to fulfill his obligation except that he cannot fulfill it and that begs the question. Also, Adams owes an excuse not merely for *making* the promise. He has no excuse for that. The excuse is owed for not *keeping* the promise. Indeed, if it were not first true that Adams ought to keep the promise, then there would be no reason why Adams ought not to make the promise. Furthermore, if Adams's car becomes available, so he can meet Brown, then Adams

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<sup>9</sup>An opponent who wants to allow that Adams ought until 6:00 p.m. to meet Brown can claim that 'ought' entails (or presupposes) 'could have'. Cf. R. Thomason, "Deontic Logic as Founded on Tense Logic," *New Studies in Deontic Logic*, p. 175. However, such a principle is too weak. It allows that, if Adams plans to meet Brown, but his car is stolen, so he cannot meet Brown, then he still ought to meet Brown, since Adams could have parked where the car would not have been stolen. But it is not Adams's fault that he cannot meet Brown, so most advocates of 'ought' entails 'can' would want to deny that after his car is stolen Adams ought to meet Brown. The opponent might counter that the agent must also *know* what is necessary and sufficient to do what ought to be done. Adams does not know that parking elsewhere is necessary for him to meet Brown. However, such qualifications are not acceptable to many advocates of 'ought' entails 'can', and the resulting principle is still vulnerable to my second objection.

<sup>10</sup>Similar considerations apply to some apologies, etc., (cf. fn. 4.)

ought to meet Brown. But it would be at least odd for this to become true if Adams never ought to meet Brown before his car becomes available. For such reasons, there is no escape from denying that 'ought' entails 'can'.

Two other responses apply to any counterexample. First, an opponent might grant that *one* sense of 'ought' does not entail 'can', but claim that *another* sense of 'ought' might still entail 'can'. However, such multiplication of senses avoids the issue and is not justified. It begs the question to argue that 'ought' must have two such senses, because it sometimes entails 'can' and sometimes does not. A simpler view is that 'ought' never really entails 'can' but only seems to entail 'can' in contexts where it conversationally implies 'can'. I will develop that view below.

Another response is that 'cannot' is sometimes a reason for denying 'ought'. The fact that Jones is tied to a chair is a reason for denying that Jones ought to get the police. However, I have not argued that 'cannot' is *never* a reason for denying 'ought'. My arguments leave open the possibility that 'cannot' sometimes excludes 'ought' because of a substantive moral truth that some kinds of moral judgments with 'ought' are not true when the agent cannot do the act. But even if some such limited material conditional is justified, the above counterexamples still show that 'ought' does not universally imply, much less entail, 'can'.

### III. AGAINST PRESUPPOSITION

Several philosophers admit that the relation between 'ought' and 'can' is not entailment but claim that it is the weaker but still semantic relation of presupposition.<sup>11</sup> However, this claim is subject not only to the above counterexample but also to problems peculiar to itself. If 'ought' presupposed 'can', then it could *never* be false that an agent ought to do what cannot be done. But it *can* be false. If there is no reason for Smith to jump over the moon, then it is false that Smith ought to do so, since it would not be true even if Smith could jump that high.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Cf. R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>12</sup>More technically, the point is that internal negation preserves presupposition, but the internal negation of 'ought' can be true when the agent cannot do the act. A similar argument uses the premise that presuppositions are preserved by internal conditionals such as 'If I ought to jump over the moon, then I can do so'.

An opponent might respond by denying that Smith *ought not* to jump over the moon. However, this denial does not imply that it is not false that Smith *ought* to jump over the moon, since it might be false both that he ought and that he ought not to jump over the moon. Some such confusion of 'ought not' with 'false that ought' probably explains the mistake of claiming that 'ought' presupposes 'can'.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. FOR CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATION

Having shown that 'ought' neither entails nor presupposes 'can', I will now argue that 'ought' does conversationally imply 'can'. The notion of a conversational implication was developed by H. Paul Grice. Grice first introduces what he calls "the cooperative principle." It reads:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.<sup>14</sup>

The conditions of following the cooperative principle are specified further by the conversational maxims. The relevant maxim for my purposes is the maxim of relation, which says simply "Be relevant."<sup>15</sup> Grice defines conversational implications in terms of the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims:

A man who, by (in when) saying (or making as if to say) that *p* has implicated that *q*, may be said to have conversationally implicated that *q*, *provided that*: (1) he is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the cooperative principle; (2) the supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that *q*, is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say *p* (or doing so in *those* terms) consistent

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<sup>13</sup>More technically, 'ought not' is not the internal negation of 'ought', because both 'ought' and 'ought not' are false, when all of their presuppositions are true, if the judged act is neutral. The internal negation of 'ought' instead is the judgment that it is false that the agent ought to do the act, since that judgment is true if and only if the nonnegated judgment is false, and false if and only if the nonnegated judgment is true.

<sup>14</sup>H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," *The Logic of Grammar*, ed. D. Davidson and G. Harman (Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1975), p. 67.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

with this presumption; and (3) that the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) *is* required.<sup>16</sup>

Roughly, saying *p* conversationally implies *q* when saying *p* for a certain purpose cannot be explained except by supposing that the speaker thinks that *q* and thinks that the hearer can figure out that the speaker thinks that *q*, etc. For example, if someone asks where a gas station is and gets the response, 'Around the corner', then, assuming its purpose is to help the questioner find gas, the response cannot be explained except by supposing that the respondent thinks that the station around the corner might be open and thinks that the questioner can figure out that he thinks this, etc.

Grice provides several tests of whether such a relation holds. First, "the presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out."<sup>17</sup> It can be worked out if the hearer can give an argument from the fact that the speaker said that *p* to the fact that the speaker thinks that *q*, etc. Such arguments must use the cooperative principle and its maxims, the conventional meaning of the words used to say that *p*, and certain supposedly shared background knowledge. Second, "a generalized conversational implicature can be cancelled in a particular case."<sup>18</sup> A conversational implication can be canceled if a speaker does not contradict himself when he says that *p* and implies that he does not believe that *q*. Grice provides other tests, but they need not detain us here.<sup>19</sup>

Before we can apply these tests to a particular type of judgment, we must determine its accepted purpose or purposes. Sometimes a single type of judgment is used for different purposes in different contexts, and the conversational implications of such utterances might vary along with their purposes. For example, an utterance of 'My husband is either in the kitchen or in the bedroom' for the purpose of helping the listener find the speaker's husband conver-

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69. This test distinguishes conversational from conventional implications.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

sationally implies that the speaker does not know in which room her husband is. In contrast, an utterance of the same disjunction for the purpose of playing a guessing game does not imply such ignorance.

In order to test whether 'ought' conversationally implies 'can', we must determine the purposes of utterances using 'ought'. This task is complicated, since 'ought' can be used for many purposes. 'Ought' can be used to advise present acts or to blame an agent for past acts or to deliberate about the future.

This list of purposes is neither exhaustive nor exclusive nor precise, but I need to discuss only these three purposes. I will argue that 'ought' implies 'can' relative to some of these purposes but not others.

First, consider advising. Suppose Adams goes to the movie knowing that, if he goes, he won't be able to keep his appointment with Brown at 6:00 p.m. At 5:55 he repents, but it is too late to meet Brown on time. Adams then asks Chang for moral advice. Adams asks, "What ought I to do?" Chang replies, "You ought to meet Brown at 6:00 p.m. just as you promised." This reply is odd because Adams cannot follow Chang's advice, so Chang's utterance cannot serve the purpose of advising. The purpose of advising is not merely to do an illocutionary or speech act of advising. Instead, the purpose of advising is the intended effect or perlocutionary force of an act of advising. Such intended effects can vary, but in some standard contexts, the intended effect cannot occur unless the advisee follows the advice. Hence, assuming Chang has such a purpose and is following the cooperative principle, we cannot explain Chang's advice except by supposing that Chang thinks somehow that Adams can meet Brown at 6:00 p.m. and that Chang thinks that Adams can figure out that she thinks this, etc. Thus, according to Grice's first test, Chang's use of 'ought' conversationally implies 'can'.

An opponent might object that, if Adams responds to Chang by saying, "I can't do that," Chang will *withdraw* her previous judgment. However, she will *not deny* it. She will not say, "Then it is not true that you ought to meet Brown." Nor will Adams deny Chang's judgment. This suggests that Chang withdraws her judgment not because it is false but only because it cannot serve the purpose of advising.

Furthermore, the implication passes Grice's test of cancelability. Suppose Chang says, "You still ought to meet Brown, but, since you can't, you ought to call him." If 'ought' entailed 'can', this would be self-contradictory, but it is not. Chang is clearly invoking a secondary obligation without denying the primary one, so the implication can be explicitly canceled. Since this case has no relevant peculiarities, I conclude that 'ought' generally conversationally implies 'can' when 'ought' is used for the purpose of advising.

Next, consider blaming. Suppose Adams goes to the movie but plans to leave early and meet Brown as he promised. Unfortunately, Adams's car is stolen. Adams calls Brown at 6:00 p.m. and says, "I can't meet you on time." Before Adams can say that his car was stolen, Brown blames him by saying, "You really ought to be here. I missed a great opportunity in order to meet you, and it's your fault." Brown's utterance with 'ought' does not imply that Adams can be there or keep his promise. Brown does not think that Adams can do either, for Adams just told him otherwise. Hence, we cannot explain Brown's blaming Adams except by supposing that Brown thinks that it is Adams's own fault that he cannot be there. Otherwise, Adams would not be blameworthy, and some standard purposes or intended effects of blaming will not occur unless the agent is blameworthy. Thus, according to Grice's first test, 'ought' conversationally implies 'can or culpably cannot' when 'ought' is used to blame an agent.

Suppose Adams responds to Brown's blame by saying "I planned to meet you, but my car was stolen." Brown might withdraw his judgment that Adams ought to be there. However, this withdrawal is not due to falsity but to the inability of the judgment to serve the purpose of blaming.

Furthermore, this implication passes Grice's test of cancelability. Brown does not contradict himself if he says "You still ought to be here, but it's not your fault that you can't, so I don't blame you." Since this case has no relevant peculiarities, I conclude that 'ought' generally conversationally implies 'can or culpably cannot' when 'ought' is used to blame an agent.

Finally, if 'ought' only conversationally implies 'can', then some purpose might provide a context in which the implication is absent in general. This is precisely the case with deliberating. Suppose

Adams tells Davis that he is going to promise to meet Brown even though he will not be able to meet him. Davis then argues, "You ought not to promise to meet Brown, since, if you (now) promise to meet him, then (it will be the case that) you ought to meet him, but you will not be able to meet him." Davis's second use of 'ought' does not conversationally imply even 'can or culpably cannot'. Davis does not think that it will be the case that Adams can or culpably cannot meet Brown. Such thoughts need not be supposed in order to explain why Davis says what she says for the purpose of deliberating, which here is to minimize future failures to do what ought to be done. Also, if Adams responds that it will not be his fault that he cannot meet Brown, then Davis will not withdraw, much less deny, what she said. Such uses of 'ought' are admittedly imbedded within both a conditional and the future tense, and such contexts are not expected to preserve conversational implications. Nonetheless, the point is that 'ought' can be used in contexts where it does not conversationally imply even 'can or culpably cannot'.

In sum, 'ought' has different conversational implications when it is used for different purposes. The purposes and implications can be diagrammed as follows:

<u>purposes</u>	<u>implications</u>
1. advising	'can'
2. blaming	'can or culpably cannot'
3. deliberating	neither of the above

This variety of conversational implications does not imply various senses of 'ought', but the cases where 'ought' does conversationally imply 'can' explain why 'ought' sometimes seems to entail or presuppose 'can' but really does not.

### V. THREE APPLICATIONS

My conclusions illuminate several traditional problems concerning practical reasoning. Common solutions to these problems are often supported by arguments which depend on a premise that 'ought' entails or presupposes 'can'. By showing why such arguments are unsound, my conclusions open up new approaches to the traditional problems.

For example, some philosophers give the following argument that determinism is incompatible with judgments using 'ought':<sup>20</sup> if an agent is determined to do an act, then the agent cannot do otherwise. If the agent cannot do otherwise, then it is not true that the agent ought to do otherwise. Therefore, if determinism is true, then an agent never ought to do other than she does. Some compatibilists have responded that an agent can do what she is determined not to do. Regardless of its merits, this response is not necessary to avoid the above conclusion, unless 'ought' entails or presupposes 'can'. Since 'ought' at most conversationally implies 'can', it can be true that an agent ought to do what she cannot do and is determined not to do, even if saying so cannot serve purposes such as advising. This does not show that determinism is compatible with moral responsibility and blameworthiness. Nonetheless, it does refute the above argument that determinism is incompatible with judgments using 'ought'.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, philosophers have argued that moral dilemmas are impossible because, if an agent ought to do each of two acts, then the agent ought to do both acts, but in a moral dilemma it is not the case that the agent ought to do both, since the agent cannot do both.<sup>22</sup> Some defenders of moral dilemmas have denied that 'ought to do each' implies 'ought to do both'.<sup>23</sup> However, this denial is not necessary unless 'ought' entails or presupposes 'can'. Since 'ought' at most conversationally implies 'can', it can be true that an agent ought to do both acts, even though saying so cannot serve purposes such as advising, and the agents are not blameworthy unless they got themselves into the dilemma. Consequently, the

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<sup>20</sup>For example, C. A. Campbell, "Is 'Free Will' a Pseudo-Problem?" *Mind*, 60 (1951), p. 451.

<sup>21</sup>If there is a substantive moral truth that some kinds of moral judgments with 'ought' are excluded by 'cannot', then those kinds of moral judgments might be incompatible with determinism. But determinism would still not exclude all judgments with 'ought'. Similar comments apply also to the following applications.

<sup>22</sup>For example, Terrance McConnell, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1978), p. 271.

<sup>23</sup>For example, Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 181ff.; Bas van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command," *Journal of Philosophy*, 70 (1973), pp. 12–13 and 15, and Ruth Marcus, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency," *Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (1980), p. 134.

argument from 'ought' implies 'can' fails to prove that moral dilemmas are impossible.

Finally, the claim that 'ought' implies 'can' is a premise in the following argument for moral relativism:<sup>24</sup> if an agent is indoctrinated into Icient culture, then the agent cannot conceive of caring for her children after the age of three, so she cannot care for them. If she cannot care for them, then it is not true that she ought to care for them. But parents in our culture ought to care for their children well beyond the age of three. Therefore, whether or not parents ought to care for their children is relative to the culture. One might respond simply that parents in the other culture can and thus ought to care for their children. However, many anthropologists feel, with some reason, that this response is harsh and underestimates the force of cultural indoctrination. A better response is that, since 'ought' at most conversationally implies 'can', even Icient parents ought to care for their children, but there is no point in saying so to their faces, and they are not blameworthy for not doing so. Thus, one can recognize the relevance of culture without admitting moral relativism.

Much more could be said about such issues. I hope only to have outlined some reasons why it is important to realize that 'ought' does not entail or presuppose 'can' but only conversationally implies it when used for some purposes.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Such an argument is explicit in John Ladd, "The Issue of Relativism," *Monist*, 47 (1963), pp. 607–608; and implicit in Bernard Williams, "The Truth in Relativism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 75 (1974–75), pp. 222ff. The example of the Ik comes from Colin Turnbull, *The Mountain People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 135ff.

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