

Ability and ethics

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1 Ability and ethics

There are many putative connections between ability and ethics. A standard claim is that *ought implies can*:

$$\Box \forall \varphi : O_s \varphi \rightarrow A_s \varphi$$

That claim has been explored, possibly to excess.

Blumberg is interested in related questions around the general question

if S is unable to X, what is the status of Xing in S's moral economy?

He points out this has two natural parts:

- **Obligation:** If S is unable to φ , is S obligated to φ ?

$$\neg A_s \varphi \rightarrow O_s \varphi$$

- **Permission:** If S is unable to φ , is S permitted to φ ?

$$\neg A_s \varphi \rightarrow P_s \varphi$$

If *ought implies can*, then Obligation is plausibly always false, since then $\neg A_s \varphi$ entails $\neg O_s \varphi$.

But that would be compatible with the truth of Permission. Blumberg argues Permission is neither always true nor always false.

Confusing set-up. I think the questions he wants to ask are: (i) is it always true that when the antecedent is true, so is the consequent? (ii) is it always true that when the antecedent is true, the consequent is false?

2 Permission is always false

Does $\neg A_s \varphi$ imply $\neg P_s \varphi$? I.e., does inability imply lack of permission?

$$\neg A_s \varphi \rightarrow \neg P_s \varphi$$

$$P_s \varphi \rightarrow A_s \varphi$$

2.1 Worries from natural language

- (1) a. You may take a week off anytime this year to go the Bahamas.
b. ??That's not true! I'm not able to go to the Bahamas, I was banned for life after my last trip.

- (2) *Bill and Charlie are on a cruise ship when the weather turns stormy. They get washed out to sea and will drown if they are not rescued. Ann is the only person on board who is able to help them. However, it is common knowledge that she only has one lifesaver available to her. So, Ann can save exactly one of Bill or Charlie; she is unable to save both.*
- a. Ann is permitted to save both Bill and Charlie.
 - b. Ann is not permitted to save both Bill and Charlie.
 - c. It is morally wrong for Ann to save both Bill and Charlie.

(2-b)–(2-c) certainly don't seem to follow from the vignette; whereas (2-a) seems true.

Likewise, we can't infer from the fact that you're unable to cure cancer that you aren't permitted to do so.

If we could, given a connection between inability and compulsion, the following would be valid:

- (3) a. If Ann is compelled to gamble, then she ought to gamble.
 b. If serial killers are compelled to murder people, then serial killers ought to murder people.

2.2 Conflict with *Control*

Given plausible assumptions about P and O , we'd have

$$\text{Ability Excluded Middle : } A_s\varphi \vee A_s\neg\varphi$$

Since $O_s\varphi$ is true, so $P_s\varphi$ is so $A_s\varphi$ is. Or $\neg O_s\varphi$, so $P_s\neg\varphi$, so $A_s\neg\varphi$.

I suggest that although not every notion of agentive ability carries [a control] constraint, *the ability concept which interacts with obligations and permissions... does*. To motivate this, consider denials of ability. Suppose that shortly after noon you order Ann to hit the northern/southern half of the field. It would be perfectly acceptable for her to respond by saying 'I can't! (I don't know how)', and not be forced to hedge by saying 'I'm not sure if I can'. Moreover, [the Kenny argument]

- (4) *Ann is given the opportunity to push a button which she knows will launch a rocket. She also knows that if the rocket is launched, it will land within a square field far from her location. The field is divided into two halves: the northern half and the southern half. At noon, she pushes the button, and the rocket is launched. Shortly after noon, she is given a joystick whose movements influence the rocket's path. However, she has no idea (i) where exactly the rocket is heading, or (ii) how the joystick's movements impact the flight of the rocket, and has no means of finding out this information. Shortly after noon:*
- a. Ann is able to hit the northern half of the field.

- b. Ann is able to hit the southern half of the field.
 - c. Ann is able to hit the northern half of the field or Ann is able to hit the southern half of the field.
- (5) *Bill is suffering from a deadly disease and is trapped in the northern half of the field; the rocket is carrying a cure for the disease.*
- a. Ann has an obligation to/ought to/has to hit the northern half of the field.
 - b. Ann has an obligation to/ought to/has to save Bill's life.
 - c. Ann might have an obligation to hit the northern half of the field
 - d. Ann might have an obligation to save Bill's life.
 - e. What is the chance that Ann has an obligation to hit the northern half of the field?
 - f. What is the chance that Ann has an obligation to save Bill's life?

'I submit that [these] are all false.' Sort of inclined to agree but this makes me think the question is not about ability but about control!

3 Always yes

$$\neg A_s \varphi \rightarrow P_s \varphi$$

I mean, pretty weird; who would have thought? But the converse makes it look a bit better:

$$OICN: O_s \varphi \rightarrow A_s \neg \varphi$$

You might think that obligation only comes into play when you have a *two-way ability* vis-a-vis the preajcent.

Again it seems implausible:

- (6) You are obligated to not commit genocide (whether or not you have the means to do so).

Given *OICN*, *Weakening* implies *Compulsion*:

$$\text{Weakening: } (O_s \varphi \wedge O_s \psi) \rightarrow O_s (\varphi \vee \psi)$$

$$\text{Compulsion: } \neg A_s \neg (\varphi \vee \psi) \rightarrow (\neg O_s \varphi \vee \neg O_s \psi)$$

i.e. if you have to do a disjunction, then you're not obligated to do both disjuncts. But consider:

- (7) *The town where Charlie lives contains two charitable clubs: Club A provides food for people in need, and Club B cares for rescued animals. When Charlie turns 13, she can choose to join Club A, Club B, or both*

clubs. If she makes no choice, then she will automatically be admitted to either Club A or Club B, at random (this happens to all 13-year-olds in the town). Joining both clubs would be best.

- a. Charlie is compelled to join at least one of the following: Club A or Club B.
- b. Charlie ought to join Club A.
- c. Charlie ought to join Club B.

I'm sort of confused about the dialectical force of this, vs. the judgment about whether Charlie is obligated to join a club.

4 Sometimes

On this view, there are φ, ψ such that

$$\neg A_s \varphi \wedge P_s \varphi$$

$$\neg A_s \psi \wedge \neg P_s \psi$$

- (8) *Bill and Charlie are on a cruise ship when the weather turns stormy. They get washed out to sea and will drown if they are not rescued. Ann is the only person on board who is able to help them. However, it is common knowledge that she only has one lifesaver available to her. So, Ann can save exactly one of Bill or Charlie, but not both.*
 - a. Ann is permitted to save both Bill and Charlie.
 - b. Ann is not permitted to blow up the cruise ship and kill everyone on board.

Or:

- (9)
 - a. You are permitted to cure cancer.
 - b. You are not permitted to commit genocide.

Difference: How can pairs like this differ in their moral status even if you can't do either one?

- (10) *George, an evil neurosurgeon, can manipulate Jones's brain in such a way that will ensure that Jones kills Smith. George observes Jones and will only intervene if Jones is about to decide not to kill Smith (Frankfurt, 1969).*
 - a. Jones ought to refrain from killing Smith (even though he is unable to refrain).

Why is this a good question—as opposed to questions like ‘How can two actions both involve cats while one is permissible and one is not?’

This is a counterexample to OIC, hence also to Obligation being always false. But Obligation is not always true either: these seem obviously false.

- (11) a. I ought to snap my fingers and thereby end all suffering in the universe.
 b. You ought to travel back in time and prevent the crusades.

Graham, 2011.

Streumer 2007.

So we have a parallel question about OIC/Obligation: why are some actions such that you can't perform either, but you're obligated to do one but not the other?

Graham 2011: some fundamental moral principles are ability entailing, others aren't:

principles demanding that things be done in certain situations—so-called “positive principles”—are ability-entailing; while principles forbidding that things be done in certain situations—so-called “negative principles”—are not ability-entailing.

But this doesn't explain why e.g. you are permitted to cure cancer but not to commit genocide.

4.1 Counterfactual permission

the answer to Difference is tied to what agents do in counterfactual situations. For instance, if you were to cure cancer, then this would be a good outcome; and if you were to commit genocide, then this would be a (very) bad outcome. These counterfactual scenarios appear to be relevant for determining what your actual permissions are.

On the face of this, it doesn't account for the contrasts above.

moral notions are evaluated relative to a background domain of possibilities. I propose that the connection between permission and counterfactuality should be articulated in terms of requirements on the background domain. To put the idea roughly: it only makes sense to ask whether S is permitted to X if the most counterfactually similar possibilities where S Xes are included in the domain.

Counterfactual permission:

- $O_s\varphi$ is defined relative to $\langle w, B, \geq \rangle$ only if $\text{sim}(w, \varphi(S)) \subseteq B$.
- If defined, true iff $\exists w' \in \text{BEST}(B, \geq) \cap \llbracket \varphi(S) \rrbracket$

First, we want to explain the contrast between (21a) and (21b) (repeated from above):

- (12) a. Ann is permitted to save both Bill and Charlie.
 b. Ann is permitted to blow up the cruise ship and kill everyone on board.

It is natural to assume that in most normal contexts, the modal base B against which these claims are evaluated does not include worlds where Ann does the impossible, e.g. save both Bill and Charlie or blow up the

ship. ...Given that B does not contain worlds where Ann either saves both Bill and Charlie or blows up the ship, counterfactual permission predicts that both [(12-a)] and [(12-b)] should be undefined, or suffer from presupposition failure. However, it is well known that presuppositions can be accommodated. ...I submit that the counterfactual condition on claims of permission is, in general, very easy to accommodate.

But then one comes out true one false.

- why treat this as a presupposition?

(13) You are not permitted to cure cancer.

is obviously not true either, which is *prima facie* evidence for a presupposition. On the other hand you might also think (13) should also have a true, local accommodation reading.

- Should we also place this condition on claims of obligation? KB says no, based on the felicity of (14):

(14) Ann doesn't have to save exactly two people, but she does have to save exactly one.

I'm not sure: doesn't (14) mean the same as (15)?

(15) Ann may refrain from saving exactly two people, but she can't refrain from saving exactly one.

- KB argued that insofar as permission and ability are connected, it's via a notion of ability involving control; but the constraint he has suggested is about performance, not (control-involving) ability. So it's not obvious it helps with the rocket case.

In sum:

We can think of ability facts as something like a default constraint on B... This provides us with a more robust answer to Difference: in many cases, where X and Y form an inability-permission pair for S, S is permitted to X because Xing is at least as good as anything that S is able to do, and S is not permitted to Y because Ying is worse than anything that S is able to do.

Interestingly, the idea that ability forms something like an interpretational default on permission claims has analogues in other areas of philosophical semantics, namely recent work on bouletic attitudes [where a default assumption is that your "want" worlds are compatible with what you believe (Grano and Phillips-Brown, 2022)]

But this sort of trivializes the constraint; what is the evidence for it? Why don't we say she is permitted to cure cancer?

and speaks against achieving a similar result via a Diversity condition