A brief note on the ambiguity of ‘ought’. Reply to Moti Mizrahi’s ‘Ought, Can and Presupposition: An Experimental Study’.

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Abstract

Moti Mizrahi provides experimental evidence according to which subjects judge that a person ought to Φ even when she cannot Φ. He takes his results to constitute a falsification of the alleged intuitiveness of the ‘Ought Implies Can’ principle. We point out that in the light of the fact that (a) ‘ought’ is multiply ambiguous, that (b) only a restricted set of readings of ‘ought’ will be relevant to the principle, and that (c) he did not instruct his subjects appropriately – or otherwise ensure that in their ‘ought’ judgements they applied the relevant concept(s) – Mizrahi’s conclusions appear premature. We suggest two ways in which the experimental design could be adjusted or supplemented. First, Mizrahi could instruct (or prime) subjects to read the ‘ought’ question in a particular way. Second, he could complement his experiment by asking follow-up questions aimed at uncovering the implications for blame of subjects’ judgements. Once these adjustments are applied, an experiment with a similar outcome would be more significant.
Moti Mizrahi provides experimental evidence showing subjects to judge that a person ought to Φ even when she cannot Φ. He takes this to show that the principle that ‘ought implies can’ – widely held to be about as close to axiomatic as it gets in moral philosophy – is false, at least on a reading in which the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ is presupposition.

The vignettes Mizrahi gives subjects describe a student/professor missing a lunch/office meeting, either because they forget about it, or because they’re locked in a dorm/classroom. Subjects are asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement 'Nancy/Professor Smith can/ought to keep her/his lunch/office appointment with Sid' on a 5-point scale (emphasis in original). The problem, of course, is that ‘ought’ is multiply ambiguous, so it’s not clear whether subjects’ judging that a person ought even when they cannot falsifies ‘ought implies can’, unless the principle is assumed to hold for all possible readings of ought (see discussion in Lawford-Smith 2010, Sec. 4.2 - 4.2.5). Mizrahi himself stipulates in advance that it is not: he claims to be following the literature in taking the ought in ‘ought implies can’ to be moral/deontic, non-‘optative’, and all-things-considered rather than prima facie (see discussion in Sec. 1). This means that ‘ought implies can’ would be falsified only if competent language users judged that Nancy/Professor Smith ought moral, non-optative, all-things-considered to Φ even when she/he cannot Φ. (A similar story can be told about the ambiguity of ’can’).

But there is nothing in the experiment to instruct subjects to take the ‘ought’ in that way. Furthermore, there’s nothing to instruct them not to take it in other potentially problematic ways. Consider for just a moment all the ways in which subjects might be reading the ‘ought’. As Mizrahi himself permits as consistent usages of ‘ought’, subjects might be using a prudential, epistemic, or aesthetic ‘ought’, or an ‘optative’ ought, or a prima facie ought. In addition, those who use ‘ought’ in the same way they use ‘reason’ might simply mean that Nancy/Professor Smith has a reason to keep her appointment – which she/he presumably does. Those with rule-based moral systems (arguably most of the population of the world) might be reading ‘ought’ to express that there’s a rule in favour of keeping appointments, or keeping one’s word. Some might read the ‘ought’ as backward-looking rather than forward-looking, to express that Nancy/Professor Smith is culpable for being unable to keep the appointment, and therefore an appropriate subject of blame or disapprobation (after all, subjects are not told how the student/professor came to be locked in the dorm/classroom). James Ward Smith distinguishes between five different senses of ‘ought’: prediction, requirement, urging, wishing, and advising (Smith 1961, pp. 363–365). John Broome distinguishes owned from unowned ‘oughts’ (Broome 2013). Peter Vranas identifies ‘oughts’ that express a judgement about a person’s actions (Vranas 2007). There are ‘oughts’ in ideal theory, and ‘oughts’ in non-ideal theory, and these will depend in turn on how the distinction
between those types of theorizing is drawn. A standard distinction there is between action-guiding ‘oughts’ and evaluative ‘oughts’, where the former tell a person what she ought to do, and the latter make a claim about how the world ought to be. There is little reason to think that evaluative ‘oughts’ need be constrained by ‘can’; we might for example use these to express the desirability of collective action in a situation in which agents are as yet uncoordinated and therefore cannot act collectively.

A more specific worry concerns the structure of the experiment. Given that ‘ought’ is ambiguous, and that subjects were not instructed (or primed) to understand it in a specific way, how likely is it that they understood it in the way Mizrahi himself stipulated at the start of his paper? We think unlikely. First, each subject responded to both a question about ‘ought’ and a question about ‘can’. This might have led subjects to believe that the answers should be different. Having given a negative answer to the ‘can’ question, subjects might then view the next question as an opportunity to express their beliefs about, e.g., what ought ideally to have happened. To put it simply, if the principle that ‘ought implies can’ is intuitively true (with the relevant interpretation of both ‘ought’ and ‘can’), then the two variables of interest (i.e. the responses to the ‘can’ and the ‘ought’ questions) are not independent. Consequently (again, if the principle is intuitively true) it would be counterintuitive for subjects to understand the ‘ought’ in the relevant way – judging that ‘cannot’ would push them toward a different interpretation of ‘ought’ that is consistent with that judgement. For example, they might then interpret the statement ‘Professor Smith ought to keep his office appointment with Sid’ as a statement about what ideally ought to be the case. But under such an interpretation, it would not be surprising that ‘can’ judgements do not constrain ‘ought’ judgements. This leaves us unable to differentiate between two diametrically opposing conclusions. Do the data show that the principle is not intuitively accepted, or do they show the opposite?

One could argue in response that the greater ‘ought’ ratings for the ‘forget’ condition indicate that the ‘ought’ in the experiment is an all-things-considered moral ‘ought’ (the one Mizrahi intends), since presumably subjects – being sensitive to the severity of the wrongdoing – would judge forgetting to be more of a culpable offense than being locked in a room. The problem with this argument is that it presupposes that the ‘ought’ judgements in the two conditions can be compared. This is so only if they are of the same kind (it makes little sense to compare shoe size with IQ scores), yet this is exactly what we have no evidence for, mainly due to the between-subjects design with respect to scenario type (that is, the subjects in the forget condition were not the same as the subjects in the locked-in condition).¹

¹Additionally, it is worth noting that even if the ‘ought’ in the ‘forget’ condition alone happens to have been understood by subjects as intended by Mizrahi, a further problem is that in this sce-
Two potential remedies to the defects in the experiment, stemming from the ambiguity of ‘ought’, could be made in follow-up experiments. The first would be to either explicitly clarify the sense of ‘ought’ in a second round, briefing subjects first to rule out non-moral, non-all-things-considered, and optative ‘oughts’ (and perhaps many others, as described above), or to prime subjects using a method that is independently established to make the relevant reading more likely. Very few moral philosophers (we don’t know of any) think that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ for every conceivable reading of ‘ought’. So the trick would be to isolate the best candidates – which we think are the action-guiding, all-things-considered ‘oughts’ – and control for experimental subjects’ exclusive use of these. If those experiments revealed judgements of ought-even-when-cannot, that would certainly be interesting and surprising. The second would be to run follow-up experiments testing the implications of subjects’ judgements that Nancy/Professor Smith ought to keep her/his appointment even when she/he cannot. Do they think that blame or disapprobation would be appropriate? Do they think Nancy/Professor Smith ought to feel agent-regret? If subjects judge blame to be inappropriate, that might tell us that the ‘ought’ was prima facie, or expressive of a general rule, or merely evaluative. The suggested adjustments could be combined in one experimental design, in which the instructed/primed responses would be followed up by the appropriate questions about blame and responsibility.

It might be worth pointing out that the suggested adjustments (if done appropriately) would dissipate all the worries expressed above. There would be no need to use a within-subjects design with respect to scenario type, since, again, the relevant meanings would be fixed and, therefore, the ratings would be comparable across scenarios.

Finally, as regards philosophical assumptions, it was not clear to us why Mizrahi went with presupposition as the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’. The principle-behind-the-principle that ‘ought implies can’ is its contraposition: ‘not-can-implies-not-ought’, or less awkwardly, if it’s not the case that a person can Φ then it’s not the case that she ought to Φ (Collingridge 1977, p. 349). The only relation that preserves contraposition is entailment, in particular semantic entailment. Mizrahi dismisses entailment as ‘too strong’, without explanation. It’s true that there are innumerable counterexamples to that reading if we don’t restrict the ‘ought’. But we should restrict it; as we’ve just seen, it’s multiply-ambiguous. There’s plausibly some restriction on which semantic entailment would be preserved – at least, this seems a hypothesis worth testing. On such a restricted reading, requiring persons to do what they cannot really would be unfair, irrational, pointless: in other words, the agent’s inability is unlikely to be of the appropriate kind. In particular, the fact that Nancy/Professor Smith forgot about the meeting is unlikely to be considered to constitute a legitimate reason for their not being present at their respective appointments (though the extent to which this particular judgement is intuitive and prevalent is an open empirical question).
such a restriction is charitable to the spirit of the principle that ‘ought implies can’, which holds about as much consensus as it is possible to get in a discipline characterized by disagreement (nicely articulated in Wolff 2011, Ch. 1).

In summary, it is not at all surprising that subjects judge ought-even-when-cannot without any restriction to the ‘ought’. No one thinks that ‘all oughts imply can’. On the other hand, it would be trivial to claim that ‘the oughts that imply can imply can’. We could make the principle true in many different ways: by holding fixed a particular reading of ought; by fixing different readings of ‘ought’ to differentially restricted readings of ‘can’, e.g. fixing the evaluative ought to nomological possibility, the action-guiding ought to ability-plus-opportunity (Vranas 2007); by manipulating the relation between the ‘ought’ and the ‘can’. All of this needs to be made explicit before simple vignettes can be taken to have falsified the general principle.
References


